

Epiphany 4 C, February 2, 2025

“Unity in the Spirit”

Read: Ephesians 4: 1 - 6 and/or Memorize: Ephesians 4: 3 NIV

Before I start, a few people have questioned me about this sermon being on Groundhog’s Day and wondering if this means I’ll keep repeating it as in Bill Murry’s picture by the same name. Let me be clear and concise: NO!

Now on to the real thing. I’ve never done this before, so thanks for being part of my learning curve. Of course, as I said, this is my one and only. So, sink or swim, we’re all in this together.

I've been mulling and praying and thinking about this sermon for a number of weeks. I was installed as the pastor of Good Shepherd on July 22, 1973. I had been ordained in May and this was my first call. I need to start at the beginning if I’m preaching a sermon for the end. But, before I go, any farther and I forget to say this, I just want to say to you that you are the best congregation I've ever served as a pastor!

My former wife and I moved from St. Louis Missouri to Canandaigua in the early part of July 1973. At that time, I had spent my first two years of college at Bronxville NY; the second two years were in Fort Wayne, IN. Then I went to seminary in St. Louis, MO for two years; my third year of Sem was in Indiana as a student pastor. Then, I return to St. Louis for my final year of Seminary. After graduation, I was ordained and moved to Canandaigua for my first call. So, in eight years, I had moved six times.

Moving just about every other year, had been ingrained in me. As my former wife and I were coming to Canandaigua, we had to come through Rochester and they were building this new road called 490. I remarked to her that I wondered if they would complete the road before we moved again?

There was another issue that led us to wonder how long we might be here. This congregation had experienced a split about two years earlier. More than half the congregation left with the former pastor to create a new congregation, not of the Lutheran persuasion. There had been a lot of hurt and anger before his departure.

When I met with my district president on call day, he explained that the two prior pastors of the congregation had left under less than desirable circumstances. It was not healthy and he wanted to see that ended. He explained that that would be my challenge.

The first pastor had been strongly encouraged to take a call he received. The second resigned because he believed differently than Lutheran teachings. According to some, many people were coming here, but it was no longer a Lutheran congregation. On his last Sunday, he announced that he no longer believed that infant baptism was proper and he was leaving to start a true Christian congregation. He invited all who believed as he did to follow him.

There were serious questions if the congregation would survive. The district president informed me that the district had decided to supplement my salary to help the congregation. The call documents stated that my salary would be \$7,200 for my first year of service. The district said they would provide a whopping \$1,200 to help them do that.

He also informed me that at the end of that year there would be no additional funds. We either made it or we didn't on our own after that. I have to confess between that and the constant moving we had done; we did not unpack our boxes for the first couple of years. We didn't own much furniture so we stacked them in our living room. We were all going to learn what it means that Jesus builds His church.

As I said, there were lots of hurting people. The danger is that hurting people hurt people. There were basically three groups in the congregation. A group people recently returned, who had been disenfranchised by the previous pastor. They had been very hurt by him. A second group of people had supported the pastor in many ways, but now believed he was wrong in what he was doing. These two groups were at odds with each other. Finally, there was a third group of people who just wanted to be the church.

The Board of Elders consisted of three men and they perfectly reflected the divided congregation. Here I was a new pastor, with little experience, being called to lead this congregation. Oddly enough, it was a tragedy that gave me an insight into the true nature of Good Shepherd.

Jack Schoonmaker, was the elder from that group that just wanted to be the church. Everybody talked to Jack and loved him. He was about 39 years old, had a wife and four children, aged from six years old to about 13 or 14. He had had cancer, but had been told he was cured.

In November of 1973, Jack was taken to the hospital and diagnosed with cancer again. He was moved to Highland Hospital and put on a striker frame. For those who don't know what that is, it's a bed that rotated the patient from lying on his belly to lying on his back by going around this big circular frame.

About the same time, some families returned to us who had left with the prior pastor. The Board of Elders had determined a process for returning, but there were people who were unhappy about that process. They did not want any of these people to return. With all of my five months of experience, I drove up to Rochester to talk with Jack, who was lying face down, in that Stryker frame. I explained that there were people telling me they disagreed with the decision of the elders and that we should change our decision.

I asked this man, whom I barely knew, what he thought we should do. He said we had talked and prayed and made our decision. If the congregation wasn't happy with it, they should replace all of us. He asked if I was willing to face that possibility? I didn't see too much of an alternative, so I said yes. I talked to the other elders and we all agreed. Luckily, that put that issue to rest.

Thirty-nine days after he went into the hospital, Jack died. What happened after that was truly a miracle. All those people who were angry with each other, all of a sudden started helping Jack's family. They loved him dearly and they knew his family needed help. They helped them for many years following his death.

Jack's wife, Cathy would become one of my best friends and a confidant. That tragedy revealed to me who Good Shepherd really was. I wish I could tell you that solved all the issues, but it would take about 10 years and another tragedy to finally resolve the hurts that had been here.

The second tragedy involved my family. About a year after it happened, my wife left me. The Board of Elders and I worked out a plan for a sabbatical at Children's Hospital in Buffalo to see how I would function. As the vote to approve that sabbatical came, one of the elders said that he had heard that people would be leaving if I returned in September. There would be a congregational vote, overwhelmingly calling for my return in September. Five families would resign because of that decision.

In the aftermath of that situation, we have experienced almost 41 years of relative peace in the congregation. What do I mean by that? I mean we've disagreed with each at times, but we've not done it disagreeably. God has helped us to learn how to be open and honest with each other, building each other up rather than tearing each other down. I've watched with joy and celebration as we've taken on many challenges and accomplished them. We've been able to bless many, many people throughout these years.

I have no doubt that Good Shepherd will continue to be that congregation that welcomes people in the name of Jesus Christ, and commissions them to be "Everyday disciples: Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" How do you do that? The same way you have been doing it for all

these years. You help people develop a relationship with Jesus Christ, while continuing to develop your own relationship with Jesus.

Our shepherd is Jesus Christ. I am His under-shepherd, but there are many more under-shepherds. I know that God is preparing someone to be the pastor of Good Shepherd. I don't know when that's going to happen, but I know it's going to happen. The interesting thing is, in our journey together, you have learned to be the ministers of Good Shepherd.

I know of very few congregations who have developed the skill to the level you have achieved. You have been doing it for years. God has been preparing you for this day and for the day when you will welcome our next pastor. I have faith in you because I have faith in Jesus. He promises that He will never leave or forsake His people.

Leaders of this congregation have been working on how we're going to move forward in this time. Is everything in place and every "I" dotted and every "T" crossed? No. We have not had a pastoral vacancy in 51 years. Very few of us know what it's like. That could make us really anxious, but I hope you remember that Jesus is always here. He says, "Lay your cares on Me."

What we all want to remember is that we're taking this journey together. Those who lead need your support, encouragement, prayers and service. We'll come through this as a stronger congregation, if we will work at it together.

Remember these words of Saint Paul to some people whom he loved just as you are loved by me: "Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future." We are not wandering because we have been unfaithful. We are moving forward with faith in Jesus Christ.

How do you do that? By keeping yourselves united in the Spirit and binding yourselves in unity with peace. Jesus challenges us "to love one another as He has loved us." When we stay united in the Spirit and maintain the bond of unity with peace, while standing on the promises of Jesus and loving one another, we will be moving into that future with hope. It's not relying on ourselves. It's placing ourselves exactly where we need be, in the power and love of Jesus Christ, which comes to us by the Spirit.

Be faithful my friends to Jesus, to each other, to His mission of being "Everyday disciples: Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" When you are faithful to His mission, you know exactly who is leading you and who is with you. You know that He will never leave you or forsake you. Jesus made that promise. He always keeps His promises.

Count me in: Will you seek to be faithful to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all your doings as a part of Good Shepherd.