

#785 A Life and Ministry Shaped by the Good Shepherd

We're happy to share with you this week a sermon we received recently from Bishop Marcus C. Lohrmann. Marcus is bishop of the ELCA's Northwestern Ohio Synod, and his writing has appeared numerous times in this space—most recently in [Thursday Theology #773](#).

Marcus preached this sermon last month, at the funeral of one of his mentors, the Rev. Dr. Arthur H. Strege, who founded the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Hazelwood, Missouri, in the late 1950's. In an e-mail, Marcus explains,

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd was the congregation where I did “field work” in my first two years of seminary (1972-74). It so happened that I attended the [1973] New Orleans Convention where the Concordia Seminary Faculty Majority was condemned as “holding doctrine not to be tolerated in the church of God.” In the presence of my personal distress, Pastor Strege wrote me a letter in which he pointed out that what happened in New Orleans was not finally what the church was about, that I had gifts for ministry, and should pursue developing them. As I finished a two-year internship with Pastor Harry Huxhold, Our Redeemer, Indianapolis, Pastor Strege wrote me a letter inviting me to work on a contract basis in youth ministry, evangelism, and stewardship while I finished coursework at Seminex. In the Spring of 1977, he asked me if I would be open to being called as Assistant Pastor. The congregation, still a member of the LC-MS, then voted to call me as pastor even though I was “an uncertified Seminex grad.” Several years later Pastor Strege and Good Shepherd voted to leave the LC-MS and to join the Association of Evangelical

Lutheran Churches in America. I would serve at Good Shepherd until the summer of 1989....This pastor was one who “blessed” me and, by word and example, taught me much about what it is to be a shepherd fashioned by “The Good Shepherd.”

As you’ll see, Marcus’s sermon delves more deeply into the role that the Good Shepherd played in Pastor Strege’s life and ministry.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team.

A Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the Funeral of the Rev. Dr. Arthur H. Strege

The Text: Gospel of St. John, the 10th and 11th chapters.

Theme: A Life and Ministry Shaped by the Good Shepherd

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Hazelwood, Missouri

May 4, 2013

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In my early days as a pastor, Pastor Strege—like you, I did not call him anything other than Pastor Strege until I left ministry at Good Shepherd—said to me, “Marcus, you need to get more stories into your sermons, and not so much theology.” And I replied, “Pastor Strege, I haven’t lived long enough to know any stories!”

Today, we have stories. I am so grateful to the family for sharing some of those stories. Those stories reflect sides of

Pastor Strege that we didn't always see. I had the privilege of getting in on some of them. It was in the Strege household that I learned to enjoy syrup over grilled cheese sandwiches. You kind of grow into it! We have stories. Last evening at the funeral home there were lots of stories being told, lots of memories—enhanced by video, enhanced by photographs—stories by the hundred about Dad, Grandpa, Pastor, and friend. Since I learned about his death, I have rehearsed many stories in my own mind. This is a time when we recall with deep gratitude, and with some tears, the privilege of being among those who were shaped by this man's faith and life. Today I have deep gratitude for him and, in my case, also for this dear congregation that he so much loved.

As those stories are being told there is a common theme that surfaces over and over again. That theme would be the story of the Good Shepherd—a story that captivated, I'll go to his baptismal name, Arthur, when he and his brother, Paul, were but babies and claimed in the baptismal water—a story in which they were nurtured in their household by their pastor father, who died when they were much too young with the result that the family had to struggle to make it as a family. But this is a story that claimed them and that possessed them, so much so that both of them could not do otherwise than to become “shepherds” modeled after that Good Shepherd. Shaped by that story brother Art entered the seminary. Would you believe it, his doctoral work was in the area of the New Testament, and specifically on the Gospel of John? You wonder from where the theme of the Good Shepherd comes? It comes from the Gospel of John.

Pastor Strege's doctoral thesis was on the idea of glory in the Gospel of John. What he learned was that the understanding of glory has everything to do with the Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for his flock.” This was the story around which he and Lucy wrapped their life. When I think of Pastor Strege I think

of one who loved his wife and his family deeply and profoundly. But he also loved the people of God who were a part of this congregation. He himself knew what it meant to live life under the forgiveness of sins. Over the years I heard him urge you repent. The urging was done with authority, because there is a lot at stake. But we get to repent because the voice of this Good Shepherd says this is "the way to have life and to have it in abundance." To have this One is to have everything. Not to have this One, not to have the One who laid down his life for his sheep, is to have nothing at all. This is the story that Pastor Strege used to shape his life and his ministry. He was one who knew the voice of the Good Shepherd, one who knew the gift of the forgiveness of sins. Who wouldn't know that, as a husband and as a father and as a pastor? He knew that he lived and served "by the forgiveness of sins," and so he commended that word to those whom he was called to serve. This is one whose story was wrapped around the story of the Good Shepherd.

Did you know that the word "pastor" is linked to the word "shepherd?" Pastor Strege was one whose shepherding was modeled after the Good Shepherd. Here again you can tell the stories. The stories in which you sat in those pews and you heard that good news proclaimed to you again. In his sermons he would echo the question Jesus asked of Mary and Martha when he referred to himself as "the resurrection and the life." The question was and is, "Do you believe this?" By the power of the Holy Spirit you were enabled to trust yourself to that word again. Pastor Strege was with you as you and your kids had water splashed over them, joining them to Jesus' death and resurrection. I like the line that "the only death we should be afraid of is the death we don't need to be afraid of because Jesus has gone there ahead of us." Pastor Strege was one who knew what it was to seek out the lost. No one cared more deeply about you than your own pastor, who ached for you in your brokenness, who ached for you in your

sorrows, who delighted with you in your joys, who was grateful to be your pastor.

But he was one who in the course of his ministry also would learn what it means to trust that word of promise when everything else seems to be not a word to be trusted, when everything else would invite disbelief. I recall him telling me the story of the death of a child. Some of you will know that story better than I. He said "I'll never forget going there with that family and doing that funeral and then coming home to my own daughter's embrace." He ached for you in your sorrows, he rejoiced with you in your joys.

He was one who knew and had an ear attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd even when other voices would bid him to listen to something else. He was one who understood that all the stories of scripture were told, to use the words of the Gospel of John, "in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that believing you may have life in his name." That's the story that holds us together—there is none other. He trusted himself to that story no matter the cost. That is what it means to be caught up by the One who is the Good Shepherd. He loved you. He cared for you. He prayed for you. He chewed on his fingers because of you. He got acid in the belly because of you. But he knew that was his calling, because he was one who was called and sent by the Good Shepherd.

Then came other hard days. It was an incredible occasion—I might call it a "God incident"—when my wife Heidi and I were visiting in St. Louis when he and Lucy were going to the doctor to inquire concerning Lucy's illness. I arrived at his home right as they returned from the doctor's office. He shared with me Lucy's diagnosis of Alzheimer's. He said "Now we'll see what a good and gracious Lord is going to do with us." You knew Pastor Strege as a person of strength. One of you once told me, "When

Pastor Strege came into the room when I was in the hospital, it was like God was there." It was because he was strong-strong in person and strong in faith. He evoked the words of promise. The Holy Spirit used him to persuade faith. But here is the other side of faith: it keeps quenching anything in us that would trust in ourselves. In the Gospel of John there is this fascinating story when Jesus says to Peter, who had denied him three times, "Peter, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Then Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my sheep, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." Jesus continues with these haunting words: "When you were young you would go where you want to go, but when you are old you will be bound and taken where you do not want to go." I suspect that in those latter years, in some of that pain, Art and Lucy were taken to places they did not want to go-places which might have seemed to be places of deep darkness. But there was another One they knew who had gone to these dark places before them, another One who had prayed, "Father, if it be your will let this cup pass from me; but, not my will but yours be done." There would be another shepherd, namely, St. Paul, who would say, "I have learned that in my weakness Christ strengthens me." When we have nothing to offer, no strength, no authority, what we trust again is the voice of the Good Shepherd who says, "I know my own. I am the Good Shepherd and I know my own and they hear my voice, and no one is going to snatch them from my grasp-not the vulnerabilities of aging, not Alzheimer's, not a brain tumor, no, none of that will snatch you from my grasp."

The word that he commended to you is the word in weakness that he needed to trust.

That word 'glory' in the Gospel of John points to the gracious manifestation of God in the word made flesh in Jesus. John reminds us of how God's glory will be revealed in Jesus' words: "I when I am lifted up on the cross I will draw all people to

myself." This glory is revealed in Jesus' resurrection and the ascension, in his gift of peace, in the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, and in the sending of his disciples then and now. And in these latter days the glory of God was revealed to Art through this community—in the community of Christ that echoed back to him the words that he had offered to you, the words of the glory of God manifested again in weakness: "Yes. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

In a few moments we get to gather at the Table. We get to celebrate the One whose promise is that those who receive that gift of bread will not perish. Glory manifested one more time. That's the glory that sends us out today as people who still hear the voice of our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This shepherd, our brother, Art, has completed his journey, has entered that gift of eternal rest for which we praise God with all our hearts. But guess what: you are not there yet, and neither am I. Your task is to embody in your person that word of the Good Shepherd. You and I are still being sent out to share the good news of this One who laid down his life for us and for the world. The risen Lord still blesses us, in the midst of all those things that make us fearful, with the gift of his peace, the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, the gift of forgiveness, and the ability to offer that to others. He still sends us out until we receive also that final rest, that final glory with Art and Lucy, with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Amen.