

Dear Members of God's Flock,

As I sat down to write this sermon, I began to think of awkward conversations. For example, there is an awkward conversation when you must tell someone their personal hygiene needs improvement. It is awkward when a teacher or school administrator tells parents that their child must repeat a grade. Perhaps one of the most awkward moments of all when you talk to your young teenager how children are brought into the world. You are probably ready to put your hands and say, "Pastor that's enough. Please stop."

I am thinking about awkward conversations because I am covering what some people would consider an awkward subject. We are going to talk about false teachers and false doctrine. Why today? It is an important topic and St. Paul brings it up.

He speaks to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. He is visiting them for the last time. The "elders" at that time were the equivalent of our pastors. He is speaking with them to warn and encourage them. Their work is to protect God's flock. They can do this because of the Good Shepherd who has called them to be shepherds. We look to Jesus as we hear St. Paul talking about a pastor's ministry. We remember that **The Good Shepherd Protects his Flock.**

1. By appointing spiritual shepherds.

Jesus protects his flock by appointing spiritual shepherds. He had called and trained his apostles to be spiritual shepherds or pastors.

A. St. Paul directs these shepherds, "**Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.**" (28)

1. Shepherds in Bible times would sit out in the fields and watch over their flocks. Typically, pastors do not sit outside and watch their members. We teach and apply God's word. Notice that Paul says that the pastor is to watch out for himself. He too needs to feed on God's word.

2. Did you know that if you have a computer and a little cash you too can be a pastor? Diplomas are not hard to get. That however does not qualify you to be a pastor. The apostle reminds the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit

has made them a spiritual overseer. This happens today when two or three gather in Jesus' name and prayerfully extend a divine call to a man to be their pastor. He becomes the pastor when he accepts the call to feed God's sheep. B. The work that pastors do is important because the people are important to God. St. Paul says, **"Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."** (28b)

1. Most people look to belong to a group. There is comfort and safety in numbers. The ultimate group to belong to is God's people, his church. When we belong to God we are blessed for time and eternity.

2. We didn't always belong to God's church. St. Peter writes in his first letter, **"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."** (1 Peter 2) We received mercy in that Paul says God bought us with his own blood. St. Paul had been a persecutor of Jesus' church. Jesus had died on the cross to take away his terrible sins. So, Paul reminds these pastors that God's Son did this for all of us. Our sins have been wiped out in the divine blood of Jesus. We are now precious to the Lord.

2. By warning us about wolves.

It is because we are all precious to God that he sends out a warning through his pastors. "Watch out for the wolves!"

A. The apostle predicts that when he is gone, spiritual wolves will come in and try to devour God's people. What does this mean?

1. Danger referred to here is spiritual. The wolves equal false teachers. There were different false teachings being introduced into various churches. The one teaching that was consistent was that a person could only be saved when they kept certain rules and lived the correct way. We call this work-righteousness. It is false because Jesus' work is the only thing that could save us. Jesus lived perfectly in our place under God's law. He suffered and died giving up his perfect blood. If we believe that we must do our part, we will end up in hell. This is the danger that the false teachers introduce.

2. St. Paul warns that these wolves will not only come from outside the church, but also from within.

At pastors' conferences and at the District Convention, the District President of the WELS AZ/CA will give a report on his work over the past months. It doesn't happen every time, but at times he will report that a pastor

is no longer in the ministry, because after sitting down and discussing Scripture, he was found to be a false teacher. When pastors are ordained and installed, they promise to faithfully teach the Scriptures. When someone turns from Scripture they are not allowed to continue in one of our churches.

Never-the-less, St. Paul says that the false teachers will be successful in drawing away disciples after them. Some people are deceived by the errors of the false teachers and become their disciples.

B. Therefore, the apostle says, **“Be on your guard!”** Pastors and their flocks must be vigilant watching for false teachers and their teachings.

1. How will we be on our guard? Again, the apostle says, **“Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”** (31) We know Paul’s ministry was all about getting people to know God’s word. We watch for wolves and protect ourselves by knowing and believing the word of God. Remember it was in a letter to these same Ephesian Christians that he talked about God’s word being a sword. (Ephesians 6) We still need that sword today.

2. So I will continue to warn you from God’s word about spiritual wolves and their false teachings. St. Paul mentions doing it frequently for three years. I believe this is because there were people who didn’t think false teachers were much of a danger. He continued to teach and warn during those years. If a pastor cares for you, he is going to regularly instruct and warn you. This is Jesus’ way of protecting his flock.

3. By giving the word of his grace.

In verse 32, the apostle is coming to the end of his speech. He knows he will not see them again and that they are going to have their battles. So he commits their wellbeing to God and to the Gospel. Jesus protects his flock through words of warning, but also through the word of his grace.

A. What is the “word of grace”?

1. It is message that God’s Son cares so much about the church that he will not let her be destroyed.

It is the message that tells us that as we fight against Satan, Jesus will cause us to stand firm.

It is the message that tells us that as we struggle against sin, we have forgiveness in the body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine in Holy Communion.

It is the message that as we face death, we are still God's children because we have been washed in the waters of Holy Baptism.

B. St. Paul indicates that this word is powerful because he says, **“which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”** As we hear of Jesus' love, it builds up our faith. This keeps us close to Jesus. Ultimately it gives us an inheritance with all God's people. God's' people will be going to heaven someday. That is where you and I are going. So we want to continue in the word of his grace and not listen to the spiritual wolves whose words can only bring destruction.

Conclusion: Pastor Fred Casmer of Paradise Valley Lutheran Church in Phoenix was called home to heaven. He had a gift for leading pastors and warning people based on God's word. He will be missed. However, the Lord is always providing pastors and leaders for his church. A new generation will arise to take care of the flock. Jesus promises. Don't be surprised when we warn and instruct. We are doing what we are called to do. We don't just warn, we build you up through God's Word and Sacraments. This helps you. In doing this, the Good Shepherd is protecting his flock. Amen.

Acts 20:28-32 (NIV 2011)

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God,[a] which he bought with his own blood.[b] 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

32 “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.