

## Sheep Spread the Shepherd's Care

✠ For lives of service (6:1-9)

✠ For new life power and grace (7:2a, 51-60)

In the name of Jesus, our good and gracious Shepherd, dearly loved sheep of His pasture:

If you've been in the city too long, a sheep pen can be an malodorous experience. That means it stinks. Once I helped a friend during lambing season which kept us in the shed too long. The nearly toxic odor of ammonia from the afterbirth, chapped my baby face like a major windburn. It's hard to imagine any good coming from smelly sheep. But in wintertime Minnesota we find lots of warm, wooly reasons to be glad shepherds raise sheep. In fact, one who wrote the classic devotional, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, details how land can be refreshed by well tended sheep. Philip Keller says they always leave behind a blessing – as in, ***“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life”*** (Psalm 23:6).

Though our Good Shepherd has ascended into heaven, He still cares for His sheep and lambs. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we want to see how Jesus continued to guide and protect His little flock of early Christians. Outsiders may aim destructive anger against the sheep. Yet **Sheep Spread the Shepherd's Care** in ways truly helpful to others. We look first as **the Shepherd's Care...**

✠ For lives of service (6:1-9)

One of the things that convinces me the Bible is true is how it does not sugar coat real problems of real people. Already in the Book of Acts, we find cultural differences threatening the flock. Most of us can put up with a little abuse. But one thing we cannot stand is mistreatment or neglect of our mother or grandmother. It's not pretty when sheep are butting heads. ***“The Grecian Jews...complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”***

A pastor's natural instinct is to overload his schedule, then wonder why he has no time to study God's Word, pray and take care of his own family. But the Lord's Apostles saw their work to anoint the sheep's heads with the oil of the Holy Spirit in Word and sacraments. They needed to delegate other duties. The Twelve called a meeting and told the laymen, ***“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”*** No politics, just service for soul and body.

The seven deacons, or councilmen, we might say, were elected by the men to serve the women, then presented ***“to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.”*** And what great results we always find when we give God's Word and prayer top priority in order to feed Jesus' sheep and lambs. ***“The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”*** The Word of God blessed deep into their community.

This past week I saw another example of why we elect men to serve as leaders in the Christ-like, self-sacrificing way of our Lord Jesus. **The Shepherd's Care** frees our sisters in Christ to bloom in living color with the fragrance of His love. As I wheeled one of our nursing home sisters into the room of another WELS member, I noticed she was holding some cards. She said they were from grandchildren, and maybe a few were. But the return address on one envelope said, “New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church” in Shoreview. The diligent hands of our sisters are busy, dear brothers. How about yours?

I like the way WELS woman Kathy Wendland describes the attitude of a Christian woman with leadership skills. She does not even realize she's leading other women. She's like a mother bustling about the house not hearing the pitter patter of tiny feet behind her. But when she stops for a moment,

they all run into her. Margaret Thatcher, England's famous Prime Minister, had one of the best quotes on this. She said, "Leadership is like a lady. If you have to tell someone you are, you aren't."

Stephen was one of seven men elected to serve. And serve he did as ***"a man full of God's grace and power, [who] did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."*** God was confirming His Word in ways no one could miss. But his fellow Jews did not like it, especially not those from foreign lands. False witnesses were coached to stir up the people and synagogue rulers to charge Stephen with two crimes punishable by death: speaking against the temple and against the Law of Moses.

**Sheep Spread the Shepherd's Care – For lives of service**, but don't expect that to be any more popular than a herd of sheep in your living room. God's ways are not our ways. You and I prove that whenever we complain about trouble or hardship as if God does not know what He's doing. We want sunshine every day. But without snow and rain, "Oh, if only this drought would end!" "If only we could solve global warming!" We're too much like sheep who love to wander the same paths into ruts where we lie down lazy and roll belly up. Cast down with dirty wool on our backs, we can't roll over and will soon die in the blazing sun unless the Good Shepherd finds us in time. It's here in the mud of life we learn the powerful, loving **Shepherd's Care**. In the dark valleys we hear His loving voice soothing us through the lips and lives of His people. Even in the shadows **Sheep Spread the Shepherd's Care...**

### ✠ **For new life power and grace (7:2a, 51-60)**

In a long Chapter 7 of Acts, Stephen holds nothing back. He makes his defense on well known Israelite history that proved the Jews themselves rejected Moses and God's Law. Stephen concludes with this searing condemnation of their hypocrisy: ***"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."*** Literally, "You have not guarded and treasured God's Word."

The same could be said of us. Our natural born neck is stiff with pride. Our hearts and ears are godless with selfish pleasure. We resist the Holy Spirit's efforts to get us into Bible class, move us to read our Bible, help us use God's Word in our daily lives. Would our future pastors and teachers be suffering under huge student loans if we in the WELS loved God's sure, prophetic Word the way we ought? Our sins of neglect for widows, for our church and family duties make us guilty for the death of Christ, ***the Righteous One***. By our self-centered lives we ***"betrayed and murdered him."*** While we brag about God's Word in its truth and purity, do we guard this treasure in lives of service?

Instead of picking up stones we ought to lower our eyes like the tax collector in the temple who would not even look up to heaven, ***"but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"*** (Luke 18:13 NIV) God is so forgiving, He had Stephen leave behind a blessing of **new life power and grace** for those who snuffed out his life under a pile of rocks. Stephen was enabled to look into heaven and see the glory of God, that is, ***"Jesus standing at the right hand of God"*** where He intercedes day and night for us sinners. ***While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.*** No matter how great our guilt has been, Jesus does not hold a single sin against us, not even murder, not even helping like Saul watching their coats and consenting to his death.

In such **new life power and grace** I ask myself the same question and reach the same conclusion as hymn writer Isaac Watts: <sup>2</sup> *Must I be carried to the skies On flowery beds of ease While others fought to win the prize And sailed through bloody seas?...<sup>4</sup> Sure I must fight if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord! I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy Word.<sup>5</sup> Thy saints in all this glorious war Shall conquer though they die; They see the triumph from afar With faith's discerning eye.<sup>6</sup> When that illustrious Day shall rise And all Thine armies shine In robes of victory through the skies, The glory shall be Thine.*" (TLH 445) Glorify Thy name, O good and gentle Shepherd! Amen.