

The United States has just finished a tumultuous election, and the leadership there is just starting to figure out its way. British Columbia is about to go through an election. We all know about the last Alberta election, which I think surprised everyone with the majority NDP government. In addition, we are bombarded with articles and different “experts” telling us how to live to be healthy and have long lives. My Mum just died on Friday, but before she died, she had about six years of dementia. I have done a fair bit of study on dementia as a result, and have found out a few things:

- a.) there is inherited Alzheimers – this usually will show up when people are in their 50's
- b.) there are other forms of dementia, which can be stopped or delayed by certain key practices:
  1. Avoid high blood pressure – else you can get 'mini-strokes', which effectively shut down parts of your brain. Don't stress! Breathe deeply.
  2. Exercise on a daily basis. When you do so, get out of breath – this is healthier for your brain. The brain takes up 2% of your body, and 25% of your energy – its like a V12 engine with the gas pedal pushed to the floor all the time, and has over 600 km of blood vessels in it. Exercising the rest of your body helps make sure your brain receives its needed energy level.
  3. Keep challenging your brain with variety and learning. Trying writing things out with your left hand. Learn a new language. Take up music. Do something differently every day. Try to memorize something just for fun.
  4. Keep a positive outlook on life. Have fun! Remember that in Christ, you ARE set for life: eternal life!
  5. Have a healthy diet.
  6. Get good sleep.
  7. Have strong relationships with others.

If you search for more information on preventing Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, you will find other lists – but my understanding is that these 7 are key.

Notwithstanding the validity of what I've just told you, for I think it is accurate, going through elections, wading through all the information on the Internet can be confusing and we often uncover contradictory information.

How do we know how to live? How do we know who to follow?

Jesus addresses this in our reading today. He tells the Pharisees and Disciples a parable, which (of course) they do not understand – so He also gives them the interpretation. He states “I am the gate for the sheep.” I don't know why our reading ends where it does, because the interpretation continues for a few more verses. The verse immediately after the place where we stopped, Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”

So, Jesus is the gate to the sheepfold. In other words, He is the way to safety. In *other* words, He is the way to the Kingdom of God. And we – we are shepherds who lead our sheep through the gate into the sheepfold for safety, and out again for feeding. Jesus is our way to the Father, to abundant life, to wholeness, to eternal life. Jesus is our way to the Kingdom. And just as we are shepherds through Jesus, caring for His people, His sheep, Jesus is in turn *our* Shepherd, the Good Shepherd – He is our example, our Lord, our Saviour, the one who we imitate and follow, the one who searched us out and leads us. I am a shepherd for you, and you are a shepherd for me. Jesus is The Shepherd, the shepherd for all of us. We follow Him and no other, because we know His voice.

Through Jesus, we echo the gratitude shown in Psalm 23: We've got God – we don't need anything

else! God cares for us, shelters us, comforts us, never leaves us, guides us through scary places and blesses us in the midst of persecution. Halleluiah! We shall be with God for ever and ever.

Gratitude has a predominant place in the follower of Jesus, in our lives – it has had an important place ever since God created us, and rightfully so. Paradoxically, though we are filled with gratitude, we also can suffer. As Psalm 23 says, we need not fear evil when walking through the valley of death, and we shall be blessed in the midst of persecution: it does NOT say we shall not walk through the valley of death, nor shall we be persecuted! Rather, when these things happen, we can take comfort that we have the Shepherd with us, and He will not allow us to take eternal harm – even though we die, we live. Peter speaks to us in this, in the portion of his letter that was read out to us today.

Peter is saying: “If we suffer for something we have done, we get the proper consequences. However, if we suffer unjustly, we are not getting the proper consequences. When we suffer unjustly while pursuing our love for God and for our neighbour, we become a sacrificial gift of love just as Christ was. Just as the Father used Christ's sacrifice for the redemption of the world, Christ can use our sacrifice to further that redemption, to gather in more lost and scattered sheep. And in Christ you have returned, healed and alive in righteousness, to the shepherd and guardian of your soul.”

Just as Christ is our shepherd, sacrificing Himself for us, we too can be shepherds, sacrificing ourselves for others. And God honours us in that. I think God sheds tears of love when we show our love to Him to that extent.

Why would we suffer? A big reason is that people get angry at those who are different, those who are on the margins, especially when those people insist they know a “better way” -- and we are the people of the “better way.” The early Christians weren't different because of their ethnic identity, or place of origin, or colour, race, or anything readily identifiable: they were different because they insisted the Son of God, anointed for the end-times, had come; they insisted that Christ alone is Lord; and they strove to worship Him in everything they did.

Our reading from the Book of Acts is a description of daily life of the very beginning of the church. Let's compare it with my typical day, and you can compare it to yours.

Monday to Thursday, I get up at 5:15, say a very brief prayer, then do about 9 minutes of exercise. I have a shower, a quick breakfast, and am out the door to work at Syncrude. If I get a ride, I'm at Syncrude by 6:30 in the morning. If I take the bus, I'm there by 7:30. At Syncrude, I have various meetings and do activities related to the project I'm working on. I usually don't break for lunch, but rather eat while working. At 3:50 I get ready to close for the day, and then catch the 4:00 bus home.

Arriving at home at 5, I have supper. If it's Tuesday, Benita and I have a date night where we do some activities together. If it's Monday or Wednesday, I may do something around the house or do something to prepare for the weekend. If it's Thursday, I hop in the car and come down to Boyle. I'm usually in bed around 9 or 9:30, to re-charge for the next day. Your day will be different, but I suspect you have a routine you adhere to. Now, let's contrast to the life of the earliest Christians, as depicted in the reading we heard this morning:

They gathered together not just on Sunday, but as often as they could. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers:

- The teaching was of Jesus, and relating Him to their lives in that moment
- Fellowship was the “common life”, which included meeting together for activities of:

- worship,
- study of the Word of God,
- prayer (prayer was a defining characteristic of the community's life),
- celebration, and
- service: the “common life” also included attending to each other's needs and the needs of others.
- Economic responsibility and commitment was expected, so that no one had too much, and no one had too little – so those who had lots shared with those who didn't.
- The “breaking of bread” was the Lord's Supper, re-uniting with Christ in the sacrifice of bread and wine.
- Wonders and signs are evidence of God's power over that of demonic and worldly influences.
- They had glad and generous hearts and praised God: gratitude is the hallmark of true Christian spirituality.
- Commitment to Christ led believers to lead exemplary lives, and God blessed them by increasing the number of His people.

So, if my day was changed to their day, it may sound like this:

- Get up at 5:15 in the morning, say a quick prayer, have a quick exercise and shower
- Sneak out the door and quietly go to a house (location secret for fear of persecution). Spend 30 minutes in teaching, worship and prayer, Holy Communion and breakfast.
- Go to work
- Come home from work, have supper
- If safe, go to the worship centre or someones' house, for more worship, teaching, prayer, and Holy Communion.
- Seek out those in need, and strive to help them with the love of Christ

> they would go to people who were sick, who everyone else was avoiding, and feed and nurture them. They would find people who didn't have enough to buy groceries, and feed them. They would find people without a home, and invite them into theirs. They would go out at night and search the streets for abandoned babies and children, and bring them back to their own homes, adopt them as their own. If they found someone who had a need of any kind, they would ask if they could help them in any way, and at least if they could pray for them – and they would pray what they thought Jesus' will would be, expecting Jesus to act, in a loving, caring, nurturing way.

When asked why they were doing these strange things, they may respond with something like: “Why not? Jesus is Lord, and He is telling me to follow Him in this. I am being a shepherd, just as He is a shepherd for Me.”

What if we were to live like the early Christians? What if there is a way of embracing a dangerous and risky path: living as the first Christians did, embracing Jesus as Lord in everything you do? It may mean changes to how you live: for example, meeting once or twice a week outside of the Sunday service, for worship, study, prayer, and celebration. It would mean seeking to serve all you meet as Christ would have served them. It would mean seeking out those in need, and again, serving them as Christ would. It means filling your heart with gratitude over all God has given you, most especially Himself – and all He is leading you to. It means being open to persecution, and praising God if that does happen, for it also happened to Him. Just imagine what the world would be like if everyone lived that way – sharing Christ, building each other up, serving those in need – what a wonderful world it would be.

Adhering to a way of life takes discipline. Just like exercising or eating healthy, it takes discipline, but does not have to be difficult: weekly apostleship groups are easy to organize, people in need are easy to find – however, it takes energy, it takes risk, and most of all, it takes God and it takes you.

Following guidelines to prevent dementia mean living a good and healthy life here on earth. Following the guidelines of Christ mean living a good and healthy life for eternity. And if the world doesn't want to embrace it, at least you and I can.

You are so loved! What if everyone knew how they are loved? This new life means knowing that, and declaring that to all you meet, in word and in deed, that they too, are so loved – you and they are loved to the bottom of God's heart. That's what it is all about – living a life of love. May you know this for now, and for eternity, in a life of loving gratitude.

Amen.