

Sermon – 4th Easter “Good Shepherd Sunday”

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By Rev. Max Phillips

@Memorial Lutheran Church—Ames, Iowa

Title: “The Door to the Lutheran Home only swings one way!”

Text: *“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” [John 10:9]*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Max Phillips and I am the senior pastor down the road at your sister congregations, Christ Bouton, and Zion Ogden. Pastor Heilman was kind enough to suggest that I come and spend some time with you this morning, teaching you about one of the hottest mission fields in the country.

Now, if I were to inquire of you where that might be without further introduction, you might assume that I have just returned from being a deployed missionary in Ethiopia, perhaps furloughed from the Lord’s burgeoning work in Madagascar. Maybe, you might suspect, I’m another missionary from Mission Central crusading for funds. Well, no, no,... and sort of!

And while the Lord has raised up some very capable individuals and families who are anxious to go into mission work, thanks be to God, the one mission field that almost no one wants to go to, is the same one that none of you want to go to. And that’s one of the growing, hottest, and most ripening mission fields in the world. The mission field that no one want to go to is ... the nursing home.

So, let me further introduce myself. I’m the CEO and one of three of our LCMS pastors and one very special young deaconess intern, who go through those mission field doors every day. The deaconess is even further deployed, she lives there. Who knew? Her neighbors are singles, couples, elders, and small children who are the community of Christ that the Holy Spirit has assembled at Perry Lutheran Homes, the second oldest and most forgotten of the Iowa District West missions.

In the context of Good Shepherd Sunday, we are the very picture of that early church that St. Luke describes in the book of Acts. The one that *“devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship and the breaking of the bread and the prayers.”* [Acts 2:42]

The one where *“awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”* [Acts 2:43]

The one where, *“day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes they received their food with glad and generous hearts.”* [Acts 2:46]

And yes, even the place where *“the Lord added to their number day-by-day those who were being saved.”* [Acts 2:47]

If you're like me, you may have suspected that the early church was a sanitized place where there was as Gene Autry sang 'seldom a discouraging word, and where uncloudy skies were all day.' Is that how this fellowship of believers at Memorial looks? IS there never a disagreement? Never a conflict? No one ever leaves or is received because they were mad here or at another place? Not hardly. It's not in my congregations.

Which brings me to the Perry Lutheran Homes. That fellowship of the sheep of Christ is a messy place.

Several years ago, one of my old neighbors came into Perry Lutheran Homes kicking and screaming. Well, not really. He had a broken hip so his kicking was limited. But his countenance was screaming. He feared that coming into a 'facility' as some call us, was the kiss of death. As I greeted him warmly, he said bluntly what many do, "I want to go home." I gave him the normal reassurances of the good possible outcomes of our therapy and care, and he looked at me grimly and said, "Max, the door to the Lutheran Home only swings one way." I knew what he meant. It is true, many die who come into our care, but, there is heaven while we wait.

And here's what I mean....

For those in Christ, Perry Lutheran Homes is part of the good pasture that the Lord promises. It's a transformative mission field and much needed, even more today than when it was originally established by our Lutheran Church – Missouri

Synod back in 1956. Back then, it was a place where our church brothers and sisters could come and be wrapped around by the church in elder care. Today, we still do that for a few. Very few. You'd be surprised at the number of folks who come into our care from many denominations and an increasing number of those who have either strayed from their church, or never were.

I was in St. Louis this last week. One of my other jobs is as chairman of the board of the Lutheran Church Extension Fund, for those of you who don't know LCEF, we are essentially the church's bank, where the depositors are you, and the billion dollars plus of loans we make are for the building up of the church. We were meeting with our Synodical Chief Mission Officer and his underling, the Director of National Mission. They have a plan to plant more churches, primarily through planting more schools. It's a good thought, not necessarily new, and not wildly successful in the past. However, they had done their research, and they proved-out what I knew. One of the fastest growing segments of society that the Holy Spirit is calling us to are the elderly "nones", those 75 plus, who have no church affiliation, these are the elder strays that the Lord seeks. When they come into Perry Lutheran Homes, they are found.

At PLH (Perry Lutheran Homes) the church wraps itself around 250 staff members, nurses, cooks, housekeepers, and bookkeepers, 150 or so residents and tenants in our continuing care, their families, and an even stranger assembled crew. There at Perry Lutheran Homes, every morning right around 6 am, cars start pulling up dropping off little ones aged six weeks and up, to join the family of God up to 106 years of age. Christ Bouton's growing early childhood ministry is planted there, soon to include a preschool and then elementary grades. The joy in that fellowship of youngsters and oldsters is one of those 'awe' things that God brings to our souls. And you see it in how the advanced dementia resident, unresponsive much of the time, lights up when a little friend comes to visit. How a grieving grandma, so looks forward to spending time with her special 'adopted' grandchild and lives for her daily embrace with those little arms. And that fellowship of believers extends even farther than our three campuses.

Each day we send our delivery guys, and no they are not FedEx or Amazon, these are the PLH delivery men who bring meals to 80+ folks living in all kinds of situations in northern Dallas county.

Each week the Word of the Lord is front and center of our fellowship as Bible Studies are held on each campus, in our worship and songs of praise sung in our three weekly church services, and each day, as prayers are given and received. I'm quite sure that more prayers have been delivered up from PLH than all of our Boone Zone churches combined. Not because anywhere is less committed to prayer, rather because 24x7, we live in our fellowship of believers.

I told you that we have three pastors and a deaconess who are familiar fixtures, praying at staff meetings, encouraging the depressed with God's hope in Christ, strengthening the dying with resurrection promise in Jesus, bringing the hope and comfort of the sacrament. We push a lot of people around. Pushing them in their chairs to Bible Study, church, and just general helping. You might assume that we are the Lord's missionary might in that place, but that would be wrong. The folks who are gathered around the word are missionaries too. They may not have wanted to come in, but they know why they're there.

Let me tell you of two pastors wives. The first one is a recent move in at our Spring Valley assisted living. Her children looked around for just the right place for her to go after her pastor husband passed into heaven. They brought her to us and she was sorrowful, grieving, could find no good and resigned to this chapter of her life. A week ago, after worship, she came up to me and said how uplifting this fellowship and our worship was. It was the first time I'd seen her smile. One of those 'awe' things the Holy Spirit does.

The other pastor's wives story was Vera Krengle, some of you may remember her husband George who was a long time pastor at Zion Ogden. Vera moved in and she too was sorrowful. She had led a rich life of travel and family. And her stay meant that she would no longer be able to help care for her special needs son. One day a roommate came into be with Vera and after two days she complained to our administrator that she wanted a room change. "Why?" asked the administrator. She pointed to a picture that Vera had hanging prominently on the wall. "I don't want him staring down at me all the time." She insisted. The picture was of Jesus.

We didn't really have another room so we urged her to persevere, but it was Vera who persevered. When I would come in to pray or bring communion to Vera, she would urge me to speak loudly. Not because she was hard of hearing, rather Vera

knew the efficacy of God's Word. When she said her own evening prayers she would say them loudly too. She would softly sing her hymns of praise. She kept her Bibles in plain sight, reading many passages out loud in her daily devotions. One day she came to me and said that her roommate wanted to talk to me...about Jesus! I did, and she was revived in her faith. She was a strayer, who was found, dying with the Lord and His church surrounding her when her cancer eventually took her.

We have many missionaries at Perry Lutheran Homes and their faithful witness to the power of the resurrection that Paul writes to the Philippians about is evident.

One other fact that I learned in my collaboration with the Synod's mission execs was that our international missionaries are well supplied, quite a contrast to what had been the case only a decade or two ago. The average missionary has funding on hand for 460 days. Another opportunity to praise the Lord. At PLH we live on the edge of financial survival, especially during and coming out of the pandemic. We're not afraid of it, usually, it is the story of our mission. 70% of those we care for are those without enough means to care for themselves. That means that our financial situation is always precarious and dependent on others to support our work and pasture mission field.

One of those great partnerships has been with the LWML of our district, who have helped support a partnership we have with our Fort Wayne Seminary to place deaconess interns at PLH for a year of ministry training. The first, Sarah Federwitz is here with me today and she'll be talking about the deaconess ministry of our church and the work at PLH in the Bible Class time. The second deaconess intern just received her call to minister with us this past week. She is a veteran of the international mission field, being deployed in Taiwan and Thailand for 2 ½ years. But she's coming into another hotter mission field, that pasture where the Good Shepherd keeps his people at Perry Lutheran Homes. She's one of the strange ones, like Sarah our current one. Someone who actually wanted to come into the elder mission field.

Dear friends, I hope you might become those strange ones as well. Pastor Mark wanted me to come and introduce this good fellowship of believers at Perry Lutheran Homes and tell you about the Lord's work being done in that mission

field, to see if the Lord moved you to support us with your prayers, perhaps your time, and always such a blessing, your financial gifts and support.

Let me close by reading a footnote prayer from the Lutheran Study Bible that seems to fit about the too often contrast between that early church of the believers in Acts, and the one you and I too often find here in Ames, Perry, the world.

“The early Christians lived only for their Lord and for other members of the Body, the Church. How cheap in comparison is our indifference to the church, how sad our compromises with the world. Yet, the Holy Spirit still dwells and works among us; we still have the apostle’s teaching embodied in New Testament scriptures. How blessed are we in such a heavenly fellowship. Lord, open our eyes to Your reality, order our priorities, and let Your light transfigure these latter days. Amen!”

My neighbor Dean was right. The door to the Lutheran Home does only swing one way, but not what he was looking for, not what he was expecting. The door to the Lutheran Home swings into a most special company, one that Paul describes by proclaiming, *“God is faithful, by who you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”* [1 Corinthians 1:9] That’s the fellowship we have and that’s the way the Lutheran Home door swings.

In the powerful name of Christ, May God bless and keep you in your mission and this fellowship at Memorial Lutheran.

Amen!