

Keep Watch

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on January 10, 1993, on the occasion of the ordination and installation of elders and deacons. Scripture: Luke 15:1-7; John 10:11-16; Acts 20:28-32.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Back in the summer of 1968, during the height of the War in Viet Nam and in between my middler and senior year at seminary, I worked at the Pioneer chlorine factory on the Delaware River. I filled steel cylinders with liquid chlorine. The job wasn't hard but it did require me to keep watch on a pressure gauge and turn off the liquid chlorine line when the cylinder was filled. If a cylinder was overfilled highly toxic chlorine gas would spew into the factory. One afternoon, while filling a cylinder, I was thinking about how to end the war in Viet Nam. I was just at the point of bringing the war to a satisfactory end when the pressure reached it's limit and liquid chlorine burst through the seals and began to pour into the factory. I managed to crawl outside gasping and wheezing for air. The building was evacuated. Someone had to go back in with a gas mask to turn off the chlorine valve. I was taken to the hospital and treated. A few days later I was called into the head office and told that my job had been terminated. I had failed in my most important job task, to keep watch. It's not really hard work to watch. You don't have to have a lot of talent to watch. It doesn't take a lot of training to watch. All you have to do is keep your eyes open and pay attention.

One of the most important jobs of elders and deacons is to keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. I could preach a whole sermon on keeping watch over yourselves but, this morning, I want to focus on what Paul says about keeping watch over all the flock. The word that he uses means "pay close attention to" or "take care of". In the context of shepherding it means to "keep watch over the flock." Wolves would love to sink their teeth into a succulent veal patty,

Within the flock there are some sheep that lead others astray to their destruction. So as shepherd keep watch, so also must elders and deacons.

There was a time in the history of the Oxford Presbyterian Church when the elders and deacons did nothing else but keep watch over the congregation. It wasn't primarily the job of the minister. It wasn't even the primary job of the Membership Development and Evangelism Committee. It was the primary job of the elders and deacons to keep watch over all the flock.

Last year I spent a whole afternoon at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia reading session minutes from our church dating back to the 1700s. What impressed me most was how closely these elders and deacons kept watch over the church of God. At their session and deacon meetings there were no committee reports. They did nothing else but pray for and talk about ways to shepherd the flock.

I tried to imagine, on the basis of the minutes, what happened at one of those meetings. Dr. Dickey opens with prayer. Then ^{Elder Ramsey} ~~an elder~~ says, "I haven't seen farmer ^{white side} ~~Jones~~ for two weeks. That's not like him." ^{Elder Hutchinson adds,} "Haven't seen his family either." ^{Elder Muddaugh asks} "Anybody know anything about ^{them}?" ^{Then} Nobody knows, so Dr. Dickey says, "Elders ^{Jackson and Hogg} ~~Smith~~ and ^{white side} ~~White~~, go out there to the ^{white side} ~~Jones~~ farm this week and see what's wrong and report back." The next week, ^{Jackson Hogg} elders ^{white side} ~~Smith~~ and ~~White~~ report back. "Farmer ~~Jones~~ got kicked in the head by a horse. They're having a hard time trying to milk the cows and do all the other work without him. We need to get some people to help them." The elders and deacons knew the members. When members weren't present, they missed them. They followed up on them. This was their main job; to keep watch.

I discovered another amazing thing from reading these old minutes. I read every word of the minutes from 1835 until 1865 to find out what controversies surrounded the

building of the old church. I found not one reference to the building of the church which was completed in 1864. The main concern of the elders and deacons was to keep watch over the flock. It's almost as if they were saying, "The Building Committee and the Trustees are responsible people. We trust them. They can take care of the building project. We have more important things to do. We have to keep watch over the flock."

I realize that we can't go back to the good old days. And I wouldn't want elders and deacons to today to imitate everything that they did back then. But what if the many talented, hard working, responsible and faithful members said, "Let us worry about fund raising, the completion of the building, and the finances and we want you elders and deacons to keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

Jesus told a parable of a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One lamb strayed away and got lost. He didn't forget that lost sheep. He left the 99 and searched for it until he found it and brought it home. He was so happy he threw a big party and invited all his friends to celebrate. Jesus says that the angels in heaven rejoice whenever one lost man or woman of God's flock is found.

The session appointed a task force to identify the wandering sheep of our congregation. Lucille Liggitt chairs the committee and Liz Miller, Ann Bailey, and Jason Bauer (a baptized member) serve with her. Kathy Smith and I are *ex officio* members. We've gone over the membership list and are deeply concerned that more than half our members are wandering, if not lost to the flock of God. We don't even know the whereabouts of some; they're lost sheep. Our primary concern is to encourage elders, deacons and all faithful members to find these lost and wandering sheep, to bring them home, and then to keep watch over all the flock so that none are lost.

Let me suggest just one way for elders, deacons and all faithful members to keep watch. Take the membership list. Use it as a directory for prayer. Put it in your bathroom, kitchen, or study; somewhere that you go routinely. Single out three families each day. Visualize their circumstances. Think of their work, their difficulties, their temptations. Remember especially any who may have been growing careless in their worship and drifting away from the flock of God. Lift them up by name to God in prayer individually. If you do this, two things will happen. First, as you remember them in prayer, the Holy Spirit will reveal to you practical ways to help them *and give you* opportunities to show them something of the kindness of God in Jesus Christ. And, second, you'll be more likely to look into their faces on Sunday and greet them by name. And if they're absent, you'll miss them. Prayer is one way elders, deacons, and all faithful members keep watch over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made us overseers. *Personal technique*

It's so important for elders and deacons to keep watch because God has obtained this flock with *the blood of his own Son*. There's nothing more valuable than one of God's flock. The loss of even one of these members of God's flock to spiritual indifference and carelessness is more tragic than the burning down of our church. I'll be so happy to get back into our building next week. It promises to provide wonderful opportunities for ministry. But Jesus didn't shed his blood for a building, but for his flock. See the faces of the boys and girls, men and women who, over the last several years, have stood before the congregation, confessed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, promised to follow him to their life's end, but who now are indifferent to the message of God's grace. It's a tragedy. These boys and girls, men and women, are precious in God's sight.

Who will hear the cries of these boys and girls and men and women when they fall into

deepest sin? Who will bring light to those who've wandered off into the darkness of God's absence? Who will share their pain when they go through a divorce or lose a loved one? Who will weep for love of them when they turn away from Christ and his flock? Who will tend the poor and lame and feed them? Who will seek out Christ's other sheep that don't yet belong to God's flock?

What if we kept watch over the flock of God with as much energy, intelligence, imagination and love as has gone into the rebuilding of our church? What if we kept watch over the flock of God with the same intensity that parents keep watch over sons and daughters who wander off? In 1970 I attended the Urbana Missionary Conference along with about 18,000 other young people. I was deeply moved by the words of Presbyterian evangelist Leighton Ford as he told us of how his little girl was lost and found ~~oneday~~. He said -

When our daughter, Debbie Jean, was six, she disappeared one day. We searched everywhere for her - the other houses nearby, the shopping center, the schoolyard. I remember walking up and down a little dirt road calling, "Debbie Jean," and fearing the silence. Two hours later she showed up and told us she had gone with a friend to a candy store and then on to the friend's house. After the thunder, lightning and tears had passed, I reflected: During those two hours that my little girl was missing, there were books that I had to read, letters I had to answer, telephone calls I had to make, planning I had to do - but I could think of only one thing: My little girl was lost. I had only one prayer and I prayed it a thousand times, "God, help me to find her." But how often, I asked myself, had I felt the same terrible urgency about men (and women) who are lost from God?

Elders, deacons and all faithful members of this church - you have many things to do over the next three years - meetings to attend, budgets to prepare, reports to make, but I urge you to keep those things in the proper perspective. I charge you to "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son."

Amen