Peter the Presbyter

1 Peter 5:1-11

West Valley Presbyterian, August 21, 2022

1. How many of you are ordained elders? Deacons? Pastors? Raise your hands!

A. How does it feel to know that Peter consider(s) (ed) himself to be your colleague? Peter, whom Jesus had renamed as Rock? Peter, on whom Jesus said he would build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it? Peter, who saw the transfiguration and the ascension, who witnessed Jesus’ arrest, and started the church in Jerusalem at Pentecost? Peter, who wrote the letter that we have been studying all summer?

B. But there it is, 5:1, “Now as an elder myself”. Literally, “As a fellow-elder”. Sumpresbutyros, in Greek.

a. Presbutyros, does that sound a little familiar? Greek word for elder. Our denomination is called Presbyterian because we are governed by elders, who have oversight over congregations.

b. We were set up that way back in 1540 because our founding father, John Calvin, felt that the most scripturally-based way to organize churches was to have them governed by elders. Presbutyroi. Hence, Presbyterians.

c. And BTW, if you are ordained as a deacon, you’re included too. Remember, back in Acts 6, it was Peter and the other apostles who set up the first board of deacons. Even before setting up elders in other churches.

C. We as Christians are connected to Peter, and especially if we are elders, deacons or pastors, since he explicitly says he is one of us. So, how about if we listen today to what he has to say to us?

2. Peter the Presbyter is wrapping up his letter to the churches of Asia Minor, and he has some advice for us. Particularly for church leaders, and also for all Christians. If I were to sum up his advice to us in this section, it would be one word: humility. That’s what this whole passage is about. First 4 verses, he talks about what humility looks like in a leader.

A. v. 1 and 2 – “I exhort the elders among you (here he means church leader, not age per se) to tend the flock of God that is in your charge…”

a. Being a shepherd back then was not a high status occupation. It was hard work in all weather; the shepherds were often lonely; and usually poor.

b. Still the case today. Look at the picture of modern-day American shepherds in bulletin and on screen. Look at their truck and their trailer. Do they look like they’re rich? More like they’re just scraping by.

c. So if church leaders are shepherds, they shouldn’t expect to get rich at it. (Okay. I don’t think any of us here today would expect that; but historically that has occasionally been a problem, and in some areas it still is. So Peter’s instructions are still very relevant.)

B. Continuing on, Peter tells us leaders in VV 2 and 3 what our attitude and behavior should be:

a. “exercising the oversight not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it.” There’s a big difference between “they asked me to do it, and they can’t get anybody else, so I guess I’ll have to,” and, “God has chosen me through the voice of this congregation, so I will serve as best I can.” Which attitude would you want your leaders to have? So what should your attitude be?

b. “not for sordid gain but eagerly.” Look at that picture of modern-day shepherds again. What are they doing? We’ve already noticed that they aren’t rich. But look at the face of the woman bottle-feeding the lambs. Look at the faces of the lambs. She looks like she genuinely loves those lambs, doesn’t she? That’s what “not for sordid gain but eagerly” looks like. And the lambs are eager to drink what she is feeding them.

c. “Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.” I haven’t personally met a church leader who is serving because they want to get rich. But I have occasionally met church leaders who serve because they want power over others. So for any of us, this is a good verse to keep in mind. Not “power over”, but “examples to”.

d. Not wealth, not power – but we do share in the crown of glory that will never fade away.

3. This passage is not only about humility in leaders. Most of it, vv. 5-11, is about humility in all Christians.

A. v 5 All of us must clothe ourselves with humility; particularly mentions younger people accepting authority of older people (here, “elder” means age). (Boomers and greatest generation, this verse doesn’t mean we get to run everything; remember, humility is the overarching virtue for everyone. We are to set examples, not boss younger people around.)

B. “’God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ (Prv 3:34) Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.” And what does that mean? Are we supposed to beat ourselves up and say, oh, what an awful person I am? Or be doormats to one another? No! Not at all!

4. Here’s what Peter says we do to humble ourselves:

A. v. 7: Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. This verse is a challenge for me, because I get anxious about a lot of things – little things like driving on freeways, finding my way around my new phone, my dogs’ behavior. And big things like, will my money run out before my life runs out. Praying on this passage has taught me that hanging on to all these anxieties is a control issue. If I hang onto my anxieties, I’m saying I don’t trust God to deal with my problems. I’m saying that I could do a better job of dealing with them than God can. That’s ridiculous, isn’t it? A humble approach would be to turn my anxieties over to God, trusting that he knows more than I do, that he loves me, and will do what is best. So that’s the first thing we do. Let go, and let God.

B. v.8-9a: And what else does Peter say we should do? “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.” As CS Lewis puts it, the worst thing that the devil does is persuade us that he does not exist. Scripture tells us that he does; that he is nowhere like as powerful as God; and that ultimately he will be destroyed. But in the meantime he can cause a lot of evil and suffering. So what do we do? We resist him! And how do we resist him? We stand firm in our faith!

5. For example: I once worked with an ordained deacon who had been born and raised in Iran as a Muslim. He came to America to study engineering; and became a Christian as well as a software engineer. After a few years he went back to Iran to visit his family. And he was arrested, and thrown into prison. It is a crime in Iran for an Iranian citizen to leave Muhammed and follow Jesus. He wasted away in prison for months, until his family could raise enough money to bribe the judge to let him out. Once released, his family told him that he must leave immediately and never return.

6. Resisting evil and standing firm in our faith isn’t easy here in America, at a time when rage seems to spiral everywhere around the online world, and on the freeways, and in mass shootings. But it’s much harder for our brothers and sisters in many other countries around the world, such as Iran and Egypt and Afghanistan. Peter reminds us in v. 9 about our brothers and sisters in all the world who are suffering for their faith. 2000 years later, that’s still very much the case. Last week Pastor Morgan commended the Voice of the Martyrs to us, to help us pray for those brothers and sisters who suffer as Christians; and I recommend it too.

7. And. It is not up to us to be superheroes and overcome the bad guys. That’s not what humility is about. Humility is about trusting in God, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, and who will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you. For God holds the ultimate power, forever and ever. Fortunately, we don’t have to save the world. That’s God’s job. But we are all called to trust God, to cast our anxieties on him, and resist the devil’s temptations. If we are called to be leaders, we are to lead willingly and eagerly, not seeking power or money, and be examples to others. We are all called to eternal glory in Christ.

8. Is that even possible? Well, consider the change in Peter himself (and you’ll be hearing more about that this fall).

A. Peter was not an especially humble man when Jesus first called him to follow and learn to fish for people. He pulled Jesus away from prayer, assuming that he, Peter, knew what was best. He argued with Jesus. He made promises he could not keep.

B. But he learned. He grew. And as he grew greater in Jesus, he grew more humble with his brothers and sisters.

C. In his letter he could have said, “I’m the head of the church, so this is what I order you to do.” Instead he says, “Now as a fellow elder with you, a witness of the sufferings of Christ and well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed…” Instead he speaks and acts like the shepherds you see in the picture.

D. And now, towards the end of his life, he really wants us to understand how important humility is. Elders can’t govern without it. Deacons can’t serve without it. Pastors can’t teach and lead without it. Or we find ourselves harming others rather than helping them. And Christians everywhere find themselves unhappy and anxious without it.

9. Humility means recognizing that none of us are superheroes, none of us are perfect. Humility means that there are reasons why each and every one of us needs God’s grace. Humility means being grateful that God’s grace is available for each and every one of us at all times and in all places. Humility means having an honest understanding of ourselves. It means seeing ourselves as we are, and seeing Jesus as he is. And it means, giving praise and thanks to God, to whom be power and glory for ever and ever. Let’s pray.

Benediction: vv10-11. “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”