

Today we mark an important milestone in the history of Evergreen Community Church. It's the day when Anthony Beery and Lester Peters return to service as elders, having receive their call earlier, we again celebrate God's work of holding them close to himself and continuing the good work he started at their profession of faith. This sermon will serve as a charge to them and to all of us to take our calling of leader seriously, as these men do. Everyone, from dads to moms to big brothers and sisters, all of us are leaders somewhere, and growing into maturity means taking that responsibility onto our shoulders.

We the office that Anthony and Lester are called to "ruling elder" because it's an office with the authority to teach and lead. But they don't have authority on their own; they only have authority as they vote and act with the Session, Glen, Robert and Stephen. But in the congregation they have influence that will impact the future of Evergreen. Their counsel to me will influence how you are taught. Their presence and words in branch groups will impact the way that small group cares for your family. But they do have two kinds responsibilities and duties that are carried out both as a Session, and that are singular and personal. Those two are teaching and governing.

1 Timothy 3:2 says that the overseer must be able to teach. That's something the elders are doing formally, from up front, or in small groups. It's something we do as we guard the doctrines of the church. As we defend the church from the attack of godless ideas that threaten the hearts and minds of believers. But it's also something they do just by living and talking and loving those around them. All us elders must feel the reality of the organic teaching ministry God has called us to.

But God also calls us to govern and guard and protect the flock, as individuals and as a group. 1 Peter 5:2 says therefore, I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God.

And Acts 20:28, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood."

This happens when elders meet and vote to exhort or discipline member, but it also happens over a cup of coffee with a racist. It

happens when we are talking about infant baptism and I tell you with a twinkle in my eye that I think you are sinning by not baptizing that baby. This call to shepherd happens when the Session meets, but it also happens whenever and wherever the Lord gives you a teachable moment. Leaders, if you want to have these sorts of conversations, it's not too hard. Just talk about important things and pray. God will give you opportunities to speak from your personal walk with him and the Scriptures. It's as easy as committing to talk about real life and pray for each other. I'm not just talking to Anthony and Lester. Moms and Dads, brothers and sisters. You, too.

But there's one area of shepherding, of protecting the flock, that is difficult to talk about. It's not easy to talk about in private or in public. But we must.

The world has changed in the last 40 years. There are now men and women and children walking among us who view the vulnerable in society, young and old, as targets. They view children as an object to give them pleasure, even if it hurts the child. And often the church isn't as vigilant as schools or even public playgrounds or the YMCA in making it as safe as it should be. As our society begins to grapple with the prevalence of predators who want to take advantage of kindness, the Church is awakening to a truth that can no longer be ignored. The scourge of manipulation and abuse, in both its sinfulness and criminality, are being revealed within the Church. Not just the Catholic church. Not just the bad churches. But even PCA churches have had pedophiles preying on their children.

It happened in my previous church in Spring Hill. A man came and used a disability to cover up his attempts at inappropriate touching. He had a tiny digital camera he used to snap pictures of our children. It happened to another church in my presbytery where their worship leader was a producer of child pornography. It happened at another church in my presbytery where the youth director went pursued a teenage volunteer. An elder in my previous church was revealed to have a past soiled with this sort of behavior. It happens in PCA churches.

The scale of abuse cannot be underestimated in our culture. Today, over 60 million survivors of child abuse are living in the United States.

This translates into 45 out of every 1,000 American children, sitting in our churches and attending our Christian schools, living with this. Assault, abuse, domestic violence, and abuse of religious authority are real and exist within Christian communities, cutting across denominational lines. Tragically, many survivors walk away from their faith as a result of the Christian community's failure to confront this heinous and destructive sin.

Today, when these survivors confront the church for their failure to protect them and care for them, we can no longer say, "Well we weren't thinking about that stuff back then." No. It's everywhere. There are posters in every public building. There are posters in our YMCA. There are billboards. There are commercials. And Lord have mercy if we ignore all that and just keep pretending like we can make the victims, the cries for help, and our own responsibilities as elders just go away. We can't pretend that bad excuses are enough. Or a single background check means we've done enough.

Elders: Because Jesus said in Mark 9:24 to let the little ones come to him and to not turn them away from him, and that causing them to stumble places us under judgment, that means we need to protect them. Because Paul said in Ephesians 5:3, "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints" we need to be watchful for sexual predators. Because Psalm 82 says "Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" we care for the victims and listen to them and pursue criminal and ecclesiastical charges against predators. If you are a predator and you are here today, you will not get away with it. We are watching. God is watching. And we will not overlook or sweep under the carpet or give you a second chance if we believe you are pursuing our children. Every adult and child here should tell someone if you believe there is a person who is inappropriately pursuing the vulnerable among us.

You'll hear more in the coming weeks about what the Session of Evergreen will be doing to put the teaching of Scripture into action on this topic—I believe our men will have a balanced, common-sense approach to this, yet one that reflects the reality of the changing world

we live in. Who will be praying for our Session as they work on this in the coming weeks?

This week the Session of Evergreen agreed to the following statement:

Session of Evergreen Community Church is committed to developing the policies that protect the vulnerable among us and ensure that we don't view one another as potential victims or victimizers, but as brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers in the Lord.

Through careful vetting of those who work with children, through informative membership classes, it's our intent to keep this loving, friendly church the same, even though we will grow. We'll do that by talking about this topic as a part of every leadership training class and addressing this with every group of new members, and making adjustments to how we vet volunteers at all our events.

By doing this, we will enable trust and safety to flourish as we grow and expand our ministries.

I want to finish up by looking at a story from the Bible. Jeremiah was a master of word pictures, of parables that said a lot with a few words. Look back at Jeremiah 23:1-4, our text for the day.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.”

Jeremiah sees the spiritual leaders of his day and pronounces judgment upon them. But that’s not the point today, praise the Lord. He looks to a day when God will bless the church in three ways.

- 1) Gather the remnant. The church will be scattered, but then experience renewal with language that Adam first heard: “fruitful and multiply.” It’s almost like there will be a second Adam, one that will be a part of a re-creation that will not just be in Eden, but will impact every garden, every mountain, every valley, and he will be with them always even until the end of the age, till the**

Great Commission is accomplished and the remnant is gathered in. Jesus said not one would be taken out his hand. And God is keeping that promise today as Anthony and Lester are present before us, having gone through great trials and been tested, they stand qualified to serve.

- 2) Set shepherds over them who will care. One of the promises of the New Covenant is that the elders will not be like the up-and-down judges of the Old Covenant. Or the up-and-down Kings of the Old Covenant. But the shepherds of the New Covenant would be characterized by their relationship with the Good Shepherd. And it's about the heart, the shepherd will care and the flock will not live in fear but as they interact with their shepherds, they will see the Good Shepherd manifested before them, treating them with dignity and compassion, with special care for the covenant children.**
- 3) Finally, this word of Jeremiah is declared by the Lord. Jeremiah isn't giving advice. This is God's Word and God declares it and it's settled. And every elder and leader here looks to Jesus to be that ultimate shepherd, not in the future, but he's already done it in as he laid down his life for the sheep and brought us near to the Father. And he keeps us there and protects us and guards our souls, because no one can hurt that. The Great Shepherd of our Souls has begun a good work and will be faithful to complete it.**

This is a serious thing, being a elder. And some parts of the job are difficult and our culture has changed so rapidly in some areas that make it more so. But Jesus does not change. His word does not change. His good news of forgiveness and healing flowing forth from his Gospel is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And I look forward to seeing that Good News flow forth from your lives into my own for an eternity.