

Visiting the Sick

Rev. Arthur Litke

"I was sick and you visited Me" (Matthew 25:36).

As a pastor, I have made thousands of calls on the sick and shut-ins over the past twenty-six years. I can always tell by the reception I receive from the people I call on that my visits are appreciated. But last summer, I found myself on the other end of this interaction when, for the first time in my fifty-two years, I spent eight days in the hospital as a patient. The many cards, visits, and telephone calls that I received were comforting, to be sure, but the most comforting of all were the visits I received from brother pastors. They prayed with me and spoke the Word of God to me, and one even brought me the Lord's Supper. These visits eased my burden like nothing else.

Why were these visits more comforting? It was not because our relationship was closer or because the pastors had more charming personalities. It was because they, in a very special way, came as representatives of the Lord, Jesus Christ, bringing with them the Savior's means of grace in Word and Sacrament. In this sense, these visits, unlike any others, were incarnational. Christ Himself came to me when these pastors visited, because they brought Christ with them in a very real and tangible way. The whole experience gave me a better appreciation of the great responsibility and honor that comes to me when I, as a pastor, am given the privilege of bringing the Savior to those who are sick.

When the pastor visits the sick, he is really performing a dual role. He comes first of all as a brother Christian. "Bear one another's burdens," writes the apostle, "and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Visiting the sick (together with offering support and encouragement in all circumstances) is the responsibility and privilege of every Christian, who is a part of the "great . . . cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) with which the child of God is surrounded. Especially when things aren't going so well, we need the comfort of Christian fellowship, the knowledge that we do not have to face difficulty alone but that Christ is with us through the presence of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

But the pastor brings something even more powerful to the bedside of those who are ill. It is not only the comfort of friendship or even Christian fellowship, but it is the Savior Himself. In Word and Sacrament, Jesus Himself visits the sick with the healing that only His Gospel can provide. His promise is sure: "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20). From the perspective of a person who is ill, a visit from the pastor is not just a visit with a friend or acquaintance. Instead, it is a visit with Jesus Himself, not because of who the pastor is, but because of the means of grace that he brings with him.

Visiting the sick and shut-ins has been for me both one of the most challenging and one of the most rewarding experiences that I have as a pastor. No matter how busy you are, you can't cut corners with this part of your ministry. It always takes priority. It only takes one phone call to rearrange your schedule, no matter how crowded that schedule is already.

But it is also rewarding to see the comfort that the Gospel brings to people who are suffering. This past fall, my wife and I visited the congregation where I began my ministry so many years ago. As soon as we walked into the narthex, a woman (who, I must confess, I did not remember) greeted me enthusiastically and told me how she has never forgotten my visit to her in the hospital shortly after I arrived there. But it wasn't me that made such a big impression on her; it was the Gospel that I brought to her.

I am forever grateful to the Lord Jesus, first for the Gospel itself as it speaks to me, and also for the great privilege of bringing that Gospel, in Word and Sacrament, to His people, especially those who are suffering.

Rev. Arthur Litke (CTS 1981) hcurrrently serves Bethel Lutheran Church in Glnsbaw, Pennsylvania..