

#19/HN#3

## **Farewell Sermon held on the 2nd Sunday of August 1789, by Peter Epp, Elder and Minister of the Mennonite Church in the region of Danzig.**

**Translator unknown – probably Ed Hoepfner. Date of translation unknown.**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Beloved in the Lord, we have gathered here in the Name and Presence of the omnipotent and the omnipresent One .. Yes, before that God who has created and made all of us, and without whose blessed support we cannot exist for one hour, not even a moment. Therefore, today I want to gladly say what speaks to our uplifting and nurture and gives Him above the honor as in the words of King David in the 115<sup>th</sup> : “Not to us, O Lord, but to your Name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.” For we have nothing that we have not received from Him, for we live and move and are in Him, according to the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts.

Worthy Friends!

When at one time the beloved disciples of Jesus served the church of God the Lord at Antioch with fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit spoke to them: "Set me aside Barnabas and Saul to the work to which I have called them! Then they fasted and prayed and laid hands on them and let them go," as we read this clearly and understandably in Acts 13, verses 3 & 4.

Notice now, worthy Friends! The Godhead loved the order and the beauty in all its ways and dealings, from the highest seraphim down to the smallest earth worm; everything has its order, its laws and its destination, even as they recognize their place or capabilities and as they are more or less suited and valued. How much more than, actually a thousand times more, should not man who has been made the highest creation by God in this world, and to whom has been decreed that all of nature is subject to him, how much more I say, is he responsible to recognize his high destiny and to respond to the Heavenly calling which Jesus, our Heavenly 'caller' offers, if he doesn't want to lose his eternal reward. And this as well, refers to all Elders, Ministers, Deacons as well as all our faithful brothers and members of the Holy Body of Jesus, all of whom individually and together belong to the Church of Jesus, and whose names are written in Heaven, being faithful and out of love serving in their calling and place to which God in His wisdom has called them. To each one I say, Seek to deal faithfully with and to walk honestly as shepherds and teachers in duty towards God as the highest Good, exercising their opportunities first. We, most precious men, we are to be the ones who are not to be bound by any creation, nor through sensory pleasures or large burdens. Our calling is to watch over our fellowmen and their soul's salvation, each one according to the means and talents he has received from God, which is the calling Jesus holds before us. Yes, that's what He himself did. For did He not leave His eternal glory and the worship of millions of holy angels and gave Himself up to the

greatest and most shameful abuse, martyrdom, blasphemy and even the most horrible martyr's death, being exposed thus to rescue our souls. And He still does that at the right hand of His Heavenly Father, with inexpressible sighs according to the eighth of Romans: which heavenly calling and highest determination and duty now is placed at its highest test, that is, much has to be risked, although we are still called in peace, we are not facing chains or being banned, as the Apostle Paul was faced with everywhere, and many times he really suffered. But in all that there remains with us, a very large and numerous church, which for more than 30 years, although in weakness, but according to my ability, as much as God gave me the greatest love and faithfulness, I have sought to serve, as have all my dear fellows [Sollingen] with whom I served so many years in love and peace harmoniously, no less [credit] to my great love and large family, children and grandchildren, of which there are a great number. To all of them I say as I leave to travel 30 hundred miles by road, over hills, through forests and mire, is certainly not a small matter for me, an old weak man who, because of a high age, difficult services and other incidents that have brought me down. But who is to undertake such large matters? How much I would have turned them down and assigned and given them over to other younger men who have more spirited life and fire than I do. But no one wanted to dare it with me and if those highly important matters were decided on the basis of a lot, it would have given me much more peace and satisfaction in my soul than it does now. Although there is till much discussion back and forth, it has remained with me and which important matter has given me much cause for reflection and self-examination. Whether it's not from an old weak man, to whom it is such a large matter in terms of body and soul, and asking too much for failing strength; would that not be one way of thinking about it? If, however, on the other hand, I consider my responsible duty [Amtspflicht], I hear. "Be faithful unto death" Yes, if I, the fearful one, think of the urgent calling of all my dear brethren and members in the Holy Body of Jesus, all of whom stand together in such great trust in me next to God, and place it more on me than I on myself. So, I ask myself simply whether I have a large enough [Ungemach] and burden that I can avoid it; something is also there when I stay at home and which could overwhelm me in a double measure. What would in that case my conscience say to my shocked soul? Would it not be the most bitter and terrible reproach which I would regret for a long time? That which I have wanted to evade over there, could meet me here in a double manner. And also personally, that which possibly and easily in Russia, might not strike me, or it might, and for this reason I say NO to myself! I want to much rather dare 'YES' in the Holy Name of Jesus. I want to dare and I want to rather place my trust fully in the endless strength and on the powerful assistance of my Saviour, who is the sure strength of the heart, and who can and will send me His holy angels to lead in the right way and stand by me in all in Him. I want to hope and trust in Him as He holds me. And yet precious friends, I will go and come again to you. If you loved me, you would rejoice which are holy words of Jesus for today also in the setting of my farewell from you, all of which shall be if we have first asked our dear Heavenly Father for His merciful support in the worshipful prayer which He has commended to whoever calls on Him!

Text:

From the Gospel of John, Chapter 14. 28

"You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you. If you loved me, you would rejoice, "Thus far the words of our holy text which we want to consider: Firstly, That a shepherd of the soul as Jesus was, and 2ndly, the love and faithfulness that a church owes to faithful shepherds of souls when it wants to deal properly. To deal

properly in this is the content of today's presentation. But you, most precious Immanuel! You who in your whole sending and salvation have become nothing less than pure love and grace, mercy and sympathy, breathing and teaching: Now look down upon us poor earthworms and teach me firstly, to teach Thy Holy Word in the right sense according to Your Holy Will in explaining and opening it up, and secondly, to all my hearers' hearts and souls, so that they not only learn to hear correctly and understand, but also do so in pure love in following the same, so that [ultimately] the heavenly blessing will by grace now and eternally be received and reaped, all in Your will! Amen.

## FIRST PART

Worthy Friends! I have really experienced great doubts in choosing this text since our Savior in using these words talked about Himself, how in His deep suffering He wanted to take on our salvation. Whether a mortal is worthy to take on this blessed word of Jesus, and for the following reasons:

1 because of His eternal divinity;

2 because of His divinity;

3 because of His amazing and mighty power in the control of the whole;

4 because of His endless love and faithfulness in carrying out His so great mediation and reconciling office about which not only human reasoning but even English Rationalism must be astounded by the depth of all that of which nothing but pure Godhead in its sheer beauty and perfection in all its aspects glows forth. And here now an imperfect mortal, who before the Almighty is less than nothing, now wants to dare to take His perfect and blessing-laden words out of which only love streams, and have an imperfect mortal make them his own? And yet on the basis of His glorious promise and immeasurable love in which the Perfect One did make Himself into a picture of perfection, so that we might imitate His perfection, so you will dare for Jesus, as our highest and most perfect High Priest presents and portrays ---.

Now!! In Jesus there was everything possible, the holiest and most superior the Father had in His unfathomable wisdom decided to save us fallen earthworms, and it could happen through no one else, but through His only beloved Son. And in Him who was equipped with all Godly strength, might, beauty and perfection and especially with eternal love, sympathy and mercy for His fallen earth worms. And this sublime Son of God, who is our mediator, our reconciler and high priest was shown according to His godly dignity honor in everything holy and perfect and was fully prepared in everything, to fulfill the will of His Heavenly Father and this all in the fullest obedience, seeking no privilege for Himself. For with what could He be served, who has everything there is; yes, all beauty and perfection which no human and possibly no angel could comprehend, but love without selfishness nor some privilege was the richest source of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, tremble you proud morals! You who think so lightly of the religion, of Jesus, and speak - - - behold here is its superior greatness and heavenly beauty, that cannot be imagined more gloriously nor greater than it really is, and also no less than having eternal welfare above all as its purpose. Therefore, don't waste your years in sensory pleasures and vain pleasures of the world, or you deal very poorly with yourself in the various decisions. Yes, therefore look to Jesus as your sublime mediator and High Priest, who cannot be higher, nor holier than He really is, for everything exists in Him. Colossians 1. Therefore, Paul said it is proper to have such a High Priest, who is holy, innocent and separated from sinners, according to Hebrews 4. 7. And

this all takes place without the least reproach of their former life and walk. His pure rights and Fatherly love which breathes nothing but forgiveness, never accuses the sinner but forgives everything and leads him to a better life, as we note in the prodigal so, in Maria Magdalene, the unfaithful wife, the criminal on the cross and many, many more that indicate this. All these Jesus accepts without reproach in love and receives them as His dear children. Yes, that is the real form of pure heavenly love: Forgiveness without reproach, since reproach always shows a measure of bitterness which cannot be in harmony with pure love. Yes, worthy fellow servants and fellow helpers in the Word, that is our purpose also as in our greatest efforts and purpose we imitate Jesus. And whoever does otherwise, does not deal correctly, nor need he expect any heavenly inheritance from Jesus and in that great day of the awarding of grace will be set back as a servant-worker, because he has shied away from the Cross of Christ. For as long as it has not become serious, as long as there has been peace and quiet in the land of faith, then being a Teacher is an easy task, but when the winds of temptation blow, when our faith, our love. Our faithfulness and stability are put to the test, when honor to God and love for the neighbor and his salvation come to the fore, yes, than it is important how deep or how shallow the faith of Jesus is grounded in our soul - - - whether we do not fear any danger nor threat of any other kind of difficulty, but instead take willingly upon ourselves the Cross of Christ, and according to His holy teaching, apply it to all situations as He taught us .and as He Himself did - - -if we do that and deal accordingly, then we are true disciples and followers of Jesus whose glorious rewards lie before as all – all out of grace, kept in Heaven. And with that I close the first part.

## SECOND PART

Now, beloved in the Lord, let us consider somewhat the love and faithfulness that a church of faithful souls owes its Shepherd, and which is placed on them if they wish to deal properly. Worthy friends! When firstly we consider our heavenly calling and our very high destiny originating from our Heavenly Teacher Jesus, and secondly, the high responsibility as shepherd in watching over souls, and thirdly what such high duties require, we realize what diligence, what deep considerations are involved when others are asleep and we have to be on watch and consider seriously their high office responsibilities sacredly and diligently, let alone meeting all the hard reproaches which such men are subject to brought on by evil men.

Now, taking all of this together, should not all thinking Christians of godly conviction love their leaders from their hearts? I say so full convicted that even though we still live in an imperfect world and seek perfection, otherwise our world would be different with its people and angels. For that real perfection will only take place in the eternity when mortality will be replaced by immortality, and our souls are given a new immortal and spiritual body capable of being raised to perfection. But for that to happen, man is in this life already assigned, that, as a worm-like creature he can seek to follow that perfection, for that is and remains our assigned responsibility. And if we do that, we will also love our superiors, which also belongs to this and is part of the imitation of perfection by Christians which our God requires of us. For when we consider such shepherds' and superiors' sorrows, worries, diligence and trouble, should not the one in whom a spark of the grace of Jesus is left, be fully persuaded within himself to love his superiors sincerely? For this reason that highly enlightened Paul said that we are to love our superiors, and added further, ... so that they can fulfill their duties joyfully and not with tears. But worthy friends, - - - we are not here demanding

high honor, as earlier the Israelites were required to give to their high priests and other superiors. No! We require only love, which involves Christian duties without which we cannot exist. Dear friends, we are not looking to be deified and we want nothing of high honor but only to be loved as one Christian is required to love the other. And now worthy friends! We want to now leave this matter of spiritual dealings and proceed to our plans and our farewell. What on my part has persuaded me to take on the cause of these poor people in Russia, was, and remains till this very hour, is, that nothing but heavenly minded pure love and good will towards my neighbor is the proper and only response to all this. That sad situation of so many people has gone to my heart. And among whom are honorable and honestly minded people whose credit with us been almost completely lost. Giving here is weak and so what is left for such poor people but fear, pain, worry and grief in their whole life? But the wise provision of our gracious God, who not only loves His creatures so much, but cares for them in a Fatherly manner, has also out of generous love taken on these poor people's pain and troubles, and the Most High Empress of Russia, this great Benefactress with an outstanding heart of welfare. This gracious Monarch who at her own costs has called out these poor people and up until the present hour this gracious Ruler of Russia has kept her promise honestly and fully. And out of her exceptionally it follows clearly and conclusively as a Providential working alongside which we will see clearly in the light of the future. Therefore, I here today also carry a loving concern towards the otherwise necessary praise, fame and honor towards the great Ruler of Russia. If God wills, and I live, I hope to confidently eat bread and butter over there in Russia and see it improve. Therefore, precious friends! Stop talking lightly about the whole matter, or you will sin against and stray from the whole matter, but much more thank the gracious God in this matter, or you sin and stray far from the wise plan and reign of God, Who, as Almighty Ruler of the whole matter has it in wealthy hands. I am fully convinced of that in my soul and in that matter hope not to would my conscience as with your consent and agreement leave you as a church for a time. I am and remain yours still in pure love your devoted Elder until the last breath of my life, which I have promised in lifelong love and faithfulness.

Worthy Friends! I verify this before God and our Savior, who is the judge of the living and the dead, that such thoughts in my soul have never come up, i.e., to desert the Church; but now when the need arises, when a pressing matter supersedes the current necessity, I am thus made responsible fully for a time, and thus I carry no reservation in leaving the church for a time. And yet I go and will return again according to the words of our text, i.e., "As the Lord wills." Worthy Friends! I do not wish to praise myself - - - that be far from me. Yet I hope not to exaggerate when I say a few words about my leadership practice, i.e., that I never speak anything in anger, nor done anything in haste, but always with mature consideration, always in humane, truthful and righteous love taken at the moment. And out of this source of love and welfare, my decision has been taken in all matters in which I have dealt and have done so fully convinced of and of which all rational thinking persons will testify. But to please everyone remains simply impossible, something that many hold to quite incorrectly and never open to applause. Now I want to, Dearest Friends, proceed to my farewell. And in order to uphold proper order and form, I will begin with my dear fellow colleagues in the Word and the teaching of Jesus: You, precious fellow-brethren: I commit to you in my absence the church. Take care of yourselves and of the flock, since you are set over them as watchmen! Take care of the church, not only with gracious words in heavenly teaching, but convince also with good deeds. Teaching awakes, but holy and pious example convict and convince a person when he sees that your words and deeds are consistent at all times. In all situations remember the joyous reward, which, if you are faithful,

should shine as heavenly light and like the sun in your Father's Kingdom. At this same time as I'm bidding farewell to you, I commit you to God, in the rich Word of His grace, who is sufficient to give to you the inheritance of the saints in light. And should we not see each other over here again, we hope to meet again in the holy presence given by God! There by grace we will sing the great hymn of praise of God and the Lamb eternally in which we will join in. Secondly, I now turn to our deacons and leaders of the church who also belong to the whole leadership form and have their voice in all. You valued friends! I admonish you to be sympathetic and merciful. Don't treat the poor with strictness, but rather with goodness, for that is Jesus' way. And this you cannot do any better than by practicing it at all times and in a lively manner deal with those who suffer and participate personally in all the pain and misery. Yes, as you wish that others do to you, so deal with them and you will have fulfilled the whole Law of Christ, - - - yes, if you do that you will gain friends without end. And now in the Holy Name of Jesus, I also take my farewell from you with the wish that He may fill you richly. And now I turn to my church, but much more to the Church of God, yes, to all my dearly beloved brethren and sisters, whom for Jesus' sake I love dearly, help readily and wish heartily for them at all times the eternal welfare. Should I have in any way hurt any one of you in the least: Forgive me! For we must not leave such failures until the day of eternity, but rather need to settle everything over here. Who knows whether we shall see each others' countenance in this present time again but we hope for that happy eternity and the blessed sight of our great God and each other. There before the throne of God and the Lamb with all the holy angels and chosen children of God we will sing in great jubilation the hymn of praise, joining in with rejoicing.

Now finally, a word to all leaders and patrons who have honored this weak old man with their coming to attend his farewell. To all of you I offer my heart of love and gratitude knowing that such are honest Christians, possibly different in some respects in their thinking, but only when thinking is honest. In that way we all worship a holy Godhead and a very great Savior who has bought us with His holy and precious blood. Therefore, let us love each other as Christians. And now I say farewell to all of you, and commit you to God and the precious words of His grace, and who is mighty enough to give us the inheritance of the saints in the light. And if we should not see one another over here again, I wish a thousand times out of the depth of my soul, to see you before the face of God. And now our very beloved fellow colleague and preacher of the Word, the Honorable Jakob de Veer, who takes over my place, and in the name of the whole Church, will present the sermon of thanksgiving.

The remembered and honorable Elder Peter Epp, above, became seriously weaker a few days after his farewell message and then critically ill and was taken to his own brother, the honorable Komelius Epp, Teacher in our church, at which place he died in that same year of our Lord on November 12.

corrected 11 Aug 2019 and 22 Feb 2024 by GHP