

MAY 3, 2020: JESUS AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD, JOHN 10

The first really wonderful, Christlike, shepherd that I will never forget, was my scoutmaster, George Bugle. That was his real name and what a great name for a scout leader. It was only many years after my scouting experiences that this realization came to mind. Mr. Bugle came into my conscious awareness as I read the Gospels and Jesus the Christ describing Himself as the Good Shepherd. We were on a week-long camping trip in the Ozarks of Missouri. It was a very hot, humid summer day. We were hot and thirsty when a group of us made note of an unattended cooler filled with soft drinks. We each purloined a couple of bottles and left an empty cooler. Celebrating our ill-gotten gains lakeside, we were suddenly apprehended by the park ranger. He took us to the ranger station and summoned Mr. Bugle. Between our scoutmaster and Ranger Ed, we were sentenced to a full day of picking up trash by using a stick (with a nail on the end), a plastic bag, while wearing an iridescent vest. Five minutes after suiting up and beginning our work, George Bugle showed up wearing the vest, and armed with a stick and bag. The awareness lightbulb did not really grasp what happened on that day until I studied the passage in John's Gospel about Jesus as our "Good Shepherd."

Mr. Bugle modeled servant leadership and "the suffering servant" in a manner I will NEVER forget. Reflecting back on my scouting days, this was only one of the many times that he taught us by being beyond the wall of words normally conveyed to subordinates. If we open our eyes to look for this kind of leadership, we will find it every day. On at least two occasions in the Gospel record, Christ would address disciples who sought power instead of servanthood. "Why are you arguing?" Jesus asks. "We want to know who gets to sit at your right and left hand when you get to be King of Kings in heaven. Jesus would rebuke his friends by saying that "the gentiles i.e. The Romans seek to lord it over one another and their subjects. In our Christlike kingdom the servant to everyone is our master." That was the whole point of the foot washing ritual and the Lord's countless teachings about humility and "the least of these."

Saint Augustine would tell us that the three most important Christian virtues are: "humilitas, humilitas and humilitas." Most human families at their best live this sacrificial love in day to day existence. The story is often told about a mother who holds back an ice-cream treat saying she is selfish and wants the sundae for herself. The daughter replies that this is impossible because Moms are never selfish. At our best, as disciples, we always try to put the needs of others above our own. This is not natural but supernatural and requires the help of our loving Lord. We can't relate to others in this way without divine help. If we look at the religious leaders around us, humility has taken a back seat to pomp, parades and very extravagant, "look at me garb." Protestants have replaced popes and bishops with "Executive Presbyters, Synod Executives and basketball stadiums with thousands of dotting followers. I am not sure I know what else we should be doing but we are certainly on the wrong path.

The Good Shepherd addresses both leadership and asks us to question who we are choosing to serve. The “voice of the thief or robber “wants something from us.” Jesus the Christ is for us and tells us that if we follow His voice, we can lead our best life. This is because as the good shepherd, He loves us unconditionally and wants us to “have an abundant life.” The secret ingredient to following Him is “joy and joy in all its fullness.” There is a tale concerning a Dutch Reformed pastor who can skate across a lake to preach at his two “yoked” churches. The bishop and Elders give him permission, “if he promises not to enjoy the experience.” Since Jesus the Christ suffered and died to show the Father’s love for us, we often feel compelled to suffer in this life until we are able to die and go to heaven. This is part of what scholars refer to as the “Medieval heresy.” The thinking here is that being a king, queen or royalty is a burden that the poor do not have to suffer! Jesus taught us that having a lot is not necessarily a blessing. His kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is an internal, eternal place that brings peace and joy irrespective of wealth, power, or circumstances. Queens and paupers alike are invited to this banquet.

Jesus knew about Anna Freud, Mad Men advertisers who existed in a primitive way even 2000 years ago. Soap and deodorant companies want us to believe that we will not smell right without the use of their product. Car and clothing concerns want us to buy new stuff because what we have is not enough. Advertisers want to convince us that we have a deficit that can only be fulfilled with the purchase of their goods. We seek new shiny things to make us feel whole and this trail never ends. If that isn’t bad enough, we all have voices in our heads that tell us we are not good enough or good looking enough or smart enough. Voices everywhere telling us to do that which may make us miserable! The voice of Jesus the Christ seeks only to help us to live an abundant life. He wants nothing from us but seeks only to give us peace and a happy, fulfilling life. Most of the time, frail humans want us to do what is beneficial to them. The voice of Jesus is always telling us we are loved and that we are perfect in His eyes.

Bob Dylan has expressed all of this very eloquently in his song, “Gotta Serve Somebody.” “...you may be an ambassador to England or France—you may like to gamble, you may like to dance—you may be the heavyweight champion of the world—you may be a socialite with a long string of pearls—but you’re going to have to serve somebody, yes indeed you’re going to have to serve somebody—well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord—but your gonna have to serve somebody.” If, indeed, all of us serve, why not serve the suffering servant who only seeks our joy and well-being?

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