

Maybe Desiring, but Wanting Nothing

Psalm 23:1

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“A long time ago, in a galaxy far away . . .” While I am 64+ years old, the early years of my life often seem not that long ago, then again sometimes they do, and in another galaxy, so much the world seems to have changed since that time. Eighteen years before the first Star Wars movie was released in 1977, from which filmmaker George Lucas first gave us those memorable lines, Miss Irene Bradford was my Sunday school teacher. From 1959 to 1961, I was six and seven years old. Miss Bradford seemed sixty years older than I was, about the age of my grandmother. One of Miss Bradford’s goals for the class was for each of the six of us in her class to memorize Psalm 23. In some ways, that seems a long time ago and a galaxy far away, then again, sometimes not so much. Under her guidance and with her gentle encouragement, working on one verse per Sunday for six weeks, the six of us each made it through. We made it through even though I, for one, was not proficient then and have, to the present day, yet to become proficient in the skill of memorization. But, back then, I did think about those words, and continue to do so.

Fairly recently, a friend who is a Christian said to me: “Have you ever thought about preaching more often about children and youth? Tell me if you do.” Thinking about that question, my first conclusion was that I certainly never intend to preach only about adults or to adults. My second conclusion is that – whatever I do that’s measurable in terms of actual topics or illustrations in preaching, what matters more is this member’s perception that I do not speak enough directly about the spiritual struggles of youth and children. Can I, then, respond to this fellow-Christian’s concern by being more aware of this critique? This Christian friend’s question also leads me to think what might be underneath making this suggestion: SOMETIMES adults worry that children and youth are failing to receive or to comprehend and absorb the direction that we adults think and say “they need to know and learn,” which really is what I learned or failed to learn when I was their age (but forty or fifty years ago); and we say or think, “They need to learn it in the same way I learned it back then.” Yet adults often say this without asking the follow-up question: “Did I actually learn this when I was their age, or did I fail to learn it then, and only learned it later?” Such a worry can yield positive results if an assessment of this kind prompts adults – with genuine caring – to be engaged and involved with children and youth – without assumptions about their challenges. Such an approach can yield positive results if, through an engagement and involvement with children and youth which never includes assumptions, adults also assess their own life and growth in faith through the years of one’s own journey. A failure to become engaged with children and youth without assumptions and a failure to assess the past and present of one’s own life – now as an adult – leave each adult’s present-day life and faith deficient on stimulation and nourishment for growth. In some ways, a verse of Scripture like verse 1 of Psalm 23 best first probes the life of each person individually, regardless of age. Looking back to that long time ago and galaxy pretty far away which today seems like my personal six and seven year old experience in Sunday school, from what I knew about her, Miss Bradford lived the essence of Psalm 23 verse 1, before she asked us to learn about it; and how important that is for any teacher’s, mentor’s, or any friend’s credibility.

Verse 1 of Psalm 23 is an example of how we can grow – or miss an opportunity for growing – from the time we are six or seven and the time we are many years older. Consider the word “want” in English language usage. From its earliest days, this word has meant “lacking” or “have a deficit” or “have a need.” Interestingly, the word today often means not “what one lacks and cannot be sustained without,” but “what is desired so one will feel a greater degree of fulfillment.” Is there any doubt why children, teens, and adults most often understand this contemporary definition and usage when we remember such phrases as, “What do you want for your birthday?” “What do you want for Christmas?” Those questions are about “desires to feel greater” due to an experience or a gift which a person desires to gain.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” I’ll say more on May 6th about “shepherd imagery” in particular, but it should be enough this morning to say the shepherd works deliberately and carefully to meet the needs of the sheep, and is likely not able to satisfy the wants of the sheep. At times, even (let’s say) in a society of high affluence, persons realize that money cannot buy or purchase or create a sense and

experience: of inner peace; of passion for engagement; of sacrifice for others; of fulfillment because one is striving for authentic community and sharing the love God freely bestows.

When Miss Bradford – back in 1960, or '61, or '62 encouraged us first and second graders of Gatesville, Texas' First Presbyterian Church to memorize verse 1 of Psalm 23, I'm certain she attempted to help us know that the psalm writer was speaking of "want" as "need that we lack." – "The Lord is my shepherd, who is near enough so that I need nothing crucial, because everything that is most important is provided by God's presence, love, and willingness to sacrifice." From my thinking back to the time Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy were Presidents and I was in first and second grade, I'm fairly certain Miss Bradford attempted to help us understand that Psalm 23, verse 1 has nothing to do with "what we wanted" for our birthdays, for Christmas, etc. This means that any growing we would do over the years of life beyond when we were 6 and 7 years old would be growing into a deeper understanding of how God who is known in Jesus Christ is near in a way that our every basic need for inner peace, passion for engagement, sacrifice for others, authentic community, and sharing in love – our every basic need is met in The Good Shepherd of all. Miss Bradford believed, I think, that any person might understand this in a greater way when you are ten or sixteen or twenty or twenty-six, or older; but every time you experience that The Good Shepherd of all abides with the genuineness that you need nothing else – ever – you are growing in faith – no matter what age – even ages – you experience this and no matter what age – even ages – you grow in your awareness of this.

In 1937, Frenchman Georges Bernanos wrote the book entitled "The Diary of a Country Priest." It's a journal-memoir of a young priest who serves a rural parish in northern France. He ponders and writes of the people of his parish, of their struggles of faith, doubt, loss, grief, accommodation to culture, and harshness in life. The young priest's journal-memoir also describes the priest's own puzzlements and daily challenges to growth in grace: challenges day by day amid the people of the parish, and challenges within himself as an individual, both spiritual and physical. For example, he writes: "When I was twelve years old, I cannot say that I knew nothing of God; but I can say 'Thanks be to God' for the realization that my living could be rescued and saved from despair . . . Amongst the poor, as amongst the rich, a boy or girl is all alone, as alone as a son or daughter of a king or queen . . . Distress is not shared. Each creature is alone in each one's own distress. I don't think I had any perception of that loneliness, but I merely submitted to this law of my life without understanding . . . Yet I have come to feel that such distress, which has ceased to reason or to hope, lays its tortured head here or there, and awakens one day or many days on the shoulder of Jesus Christ" (pgs.52-53). In the story, the young priest discovers he is ill with a stomach cancer. When he dies at a friend's home; and the friend writes to the young priest's mentor and spiritual director. "He knew I had called for a priest to come and share with him the Church's sacrament of final consolations. He also knew that death was approaching faster than the priest. His eyes seemed to invite me to draw close to hear what he desired to express. I leaned down, and, his voice, though halting, was strangely distinct: 'Does it matter that the priest has not arrived? Grace is everywhere . . .' I think he died just then" (p.298).

Georges Bernanos never met Miss Irene Bradford or any of us. None of you (that I know of) ever met Miss Bradford. Yet each of us know the journey from distress and aloneness as a child, as an adolescent, as an adult younger or older – we know the journey from distress and aloneness to experiences in life which awaken us with our head on the shoulder of Jesus Christ, able to affirm God's grace being everywhere. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." This has nothing to do with what any of us ever desire for a birthday, or for Christmas, or for helping us feel good or strong or satisfied. This has everything to do with the chasing back of distress and despair due to perceived aloneness; since God draws near to abide and sacrifice in love with grace – which is everywhere. And God is doing such drawing near, abiding, and sacrificing in love with grace – offering the shoulder of Jesus Christ, whether we are infants, children, adolescents, or adults – (God is doing so) all the times we experience how, with the nearness of this Good Shepherd, we do not want or lack what heals and makes us whole. No matter what time period or galaxy in which we live, as communities of God's people, we are vessels of grace together on life's journey, for sharing God's love with God's world, wanting nothing. – All honor and praise be to God.