

The Good Shepherd Guides Me/Us in Right Paths for the Good Shepherd's Name's Sake

Psalm 23:3b; Luke 10:25-37; I Peter 2:15-17

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In the Southern United States, and elsewhere, words or phrases - called "idioms" - can express emphasis. Some are reactive idioms: phrases spoken, muttered, or shouted to express wonderment, puzzlement, frustration, or irritation in reaction to a development or observation. My mother (born in 1928) - in my presence - used the mildest forms of idiom when saying, "My goodness!" meaning, in a psychological and philosophical sense that "goodness" exists; and "goodness," as a reality, is being named and invoked as a reference point to an observation: "My goodness, the sky today is so blue." My maternal grandmother, born in 1898, used a similar, but slightly more emphasized phrase. "For goodness' sake," she might say, "get that tarp over the firewood so the firewood doesn't get wet from the rain;" and "For goodness sake, wash and clean the milk pail before going to milk the cow and collecting fresh milk." In a way, "for goodness' sake" was simply an expression my grandmother used to emphasize what is an important quality-control-step or act, even if there is no direct relationship between "goodness" as such and something like covering a pile of firewood outside exposed to rain or rinsing the inside of a milk pail before its next use.

Rather than "goodness," both my first football coach and my first employer sometimes brought Christ or God into the conversation. My seventh grade football coach would say: "For Christ's sake, you've got to make that tackle," even though (I'm fairly certain) Christ and defensive football have nothing to do with each other. The owner of the Gulf auto service station where I worked when in high school would say, "For God's sake, don't tighten the drain plug on the car's oil pan too much, or you'll strip its threads," which I knew was a phrase describing the trouble it was to acquire a different oil pan spacer or drain bolt, and it had nothing to do with God.

The writer of Psalm 23 expresses a faith-statement: "(God, as the Good Shepherd,) leads me in paths of righteousness (or right-ness) for the Good Shepherd's own name's sake." What does that mean? Psalm 23's metaphor of shepherd and sheep obviously becomes less literal at this point. Sheep may or may not have a sense of rightness, or righteousness, but most people believe that most human beings have a significantly more highly developed sense of rightness and wrongness than sheep. "The Good Shepherd leads me in paths of rightness for the Good Shepherd's own name's sake." The Good Shepherd has a good name to uphold, a good name to maintain, a good name to serve as a reference point for the sheep (really, for people) to measure their relationship with the Good Shepherd. Thus, people - in relation to the Good Shepherd - are called and claimed for honoring the Good Shepherd's good name. The Good Shepherd leads people in paths of rightness with and for a purpose: the purpose of persons and communities upholding and maintaining the Good Shepherd's good name - whose good name serves as the reference point for persons in all relationships along life's journey in God's right paths..

In the 10th chapter of Luke's gospel account, in response to Jesus teaching that loving God completely includes "loving one's neighbor as one's self," Jesus is then asked by a very religious man, "So who is my neighbor?" Jesus replies, telling the parable known as "The Good Samaritan." Two religious professionals walk past a beaten man along the roadside because they do not regard him as their neighbor, and they do not love him as they can well love themselves. Then along comes a traveler from the despised northern territory of Samaria, who stops and renders aid to this victim from the south, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road as the southern citizen was. Jesus asks the religious professional who is in dialog with him: "In this story, who is neighbor to the other?" The person replies, "The one who demonstrated mercy," meaning "the one who reached out as neighbor," which was a testimony to the Good Shepherd's good name; it was a witness to and an honoring of the Good Shepherd's good name, as God has created us for relationships as neighbors who love others as we are created to love ourselves healthily.

In the Biblical letter called 1st Peter, written 70+ years after Jesus' death and resurrection, in chapter 2, verses 16 and 17, the writer references slavery, encouraging free citizens to consider themselves - in the culture of their time long before ours - as if they are not free citizens, but as if they are slaves. "Consider each person and all together as being servants/slaves of God - yet living, believing, and relating equally as human beings created, claimed, owned, and made new in life for serving God 'for God's sake,' 'for Christ's sake,' for 'the good name of the Good Shepherd.'" Paul Scherer was a Lutheran who taught and preached in Manhattan during the middle of the 20th century. In a sermon based on this teaching from 1st Peter, Dr. Scherer preached that we humans can live as slaves and servants to life as we prefer, enslaved by the culture's perspectives and values and models of relating which do not honor EVERY person as a full citizen in God's love and world, OR we can live as citizens

made truly free BECAUSE God - with life-changing love – makes us new for serving God with a radically transformed purpose – for Christ’s sake – right in the middle of every day’s competing claims and very real agonies. From and for Christ’s good name people are claimed for the kind of serving which honors every other person as a fellow free citizen in God’s love alone. Daily accepting this role as servants of God in Jesus Christ frees us from competing claims, even when pressures abound and persecutions threaten (“As Free – as the Servants of God,” in The Word God Sent, pgs.216-224).

John Claypool taught and preached during the 20th century. In his adulthood, Dr. Claypool was a Southern Baptist, a parent of a child who died of leukemia, a husband who experienced a divorce, and who later served as an Episcopal pastor. After his retirement, he gave a lecture on pastoral care and relationships in which he said: “In order to love the neighbor as Jesus teaches from Leviticus 19:18, one must first love oneself healthily. Loving one’s self healthily is only possible through God restoring us to a right relationship with one’s own self – with one’s own humanness – which thereby connects us healthily to God and to every other person as one’s neighbor in God’s love and human community.” Dr. Claypool was saying this happens – our humanness journeying healthily in paths of rightness for God’s own Good Shepherd’s good name’s sake/ for Jesus Christ’s name’s sake.

I was recently in Corsicana’s Westminster Presbyterian Church attending the memorial service for Bill Watson’s mother, Arliss. Bill’s dad’s oil-company-work led the family to live in Venezuela for many years while Bill and his brother (Tres) were school age. Both Bill and Tres spoke during the service. Tres spoke of the morning when he waked up, went downstairs early, and found a goat tied in the kitchen. He knew his mother had attended a party with friends the night before. He went to her bedroom and asked her if she knew there was a goat tied in their kitchen. “Yes, I know it,” she replied. “I won him last night at the party. Where else could I have put him when coming home so late? It’s only one night.” I’ve been thinking about Mrs. Watson and that story ever since. Bill did not tell of any livestock tied and spending the night in the kitchen, but he spoke of his mother being a pioneer in accepting people even when diversity in their lives was evident, if such diversity was related to race, sexuality, religion, politics, etc. Bill and Tres both mentioned how their mother loved to dance, literally, and metaphorically, Bill was saying, she taught her sons and anyone who was paying attention how to dance with folks who may dance differently in one aspect of their personhood or another. Arliss Watson, I gathered, walked where she understood the Good Shepherd was leading in right paths for the good name’s sake of the Good Shepherd. When the service ended, I rose to leave, but found my way temporarily blocked. The woman to my right in the pew had reached back to embrace a woman who sat in the pew behind us. The woman behind us leaned on the shoulder of the woman who stood up next to me, and she began to weep and weep and weep and weep. After about 45 seconds, she looked up at me, blinked, and said, “I am so sorry to be so upset.” I replied, “It’s o.k.” – at which point she again bowed her head onto the should of the woman next to me and began once more to weep. After another minute or so, she looked at me a second time and said: “Arliss was such a good friend.” And I said, “I can tell.” In Dr. Scherer’s words, Arliss Watson lived a kind of serving which honors every other person as a fellow free citizen in God’s love alone. In Dr. Claypool’s words, she “experienced herself restored to a right relationship with her own humanness,” loved herself healthily as much as any of us can – flawed and idiosyncratic as we are – and thereby she was connected healthily to both God and every other person as one’s neighbor to journey in paths of rightness for the Good Shepherd’s good name’s sake.

The public schools where I lived in Gatesville, Texas, implemented a de-segregation and integration plan in August of 1963. At that point, the town had not two public school systems but one. Before too many months passed, as a 5th grader, I noticed that one of the African-American students a grade or two behind me went by the first name of Cherie. My mother’s first name was Cherry, the only difference between them being my mother’s name spelled with two “r”s and Cherie Kelly’s name spelled with one “r.” Stranger still to me was that Cherie’s younger sister’s name was Charlene – which was my mother’s middle name. When – as a 5th grader – I said to my mother that she was the only person I knew with those two names, except the Kelly sisters, my mother said, “That’s because the Kellys named their daughters after me. As a nurse, I helped deliver them.” It never easily computed to me that my mother’s name was shared with people whose skin-color was so different from my personal family’s skin color; yet this was so because ordinary flawed people who had certain differences mixed and served together in paths of rightness for the Good Shepherd’s own good name’s sake. We can love ourselves healthily when, from God’s love embodied in Jesus Christ, we are freed to serve among God’s people, not according to what we or our cultural values prefer, but as neighbors and fellow servants led along paths of rightness, for the Good Shepherd’s good name’s sake! Friends: today and every day, live as servants of God, and free! For Christ’s sake! – All honor and praise be to God.