

LIVING WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

We are invited to fear.
We are tempted to be ignorant,
and we are persuaded to be self indulgent.

And,..... we have the potential to be content, to be aware and informed ,.... and to transcend. I think....we sense the latter is better, and maybe that is why we are here. ???

The list of things **we are told** to fear is getting so long that I wouldn't try to list them all,... but I'll name a few.

Let's see,..... and these are not in any order: Strangers, West Nile, pollution, global warming, terrorists, radioactivity, the struggling economy,... and now the H1N1 virus,.... which goes by many names.

I just listed a few things, and.....at least we don't have to worry about going hungry.

Did you notice the poster in the foyer that showed how much people, from different countries around the world, eat in one week? The photos are from an article that Time magazine ran last year.

The verse added to the layout is from our First John three passage, paraphrasing: How can we claim to be in God's love when we possess food and other basic resources while others are in need?

How can we claim to be loved by God / to be followers of Christ.... when millions are going hungry?

And, it is an issue of sharing or hoarding. Everyone can be fed.

However, today, 25,000 people will die from hunger.

Last year, 15 million children died from hunger and hunger related illnesses.

[facts from stopthehunger.com]

And, the media is in a tizzy over a new flu virus – **that may affect US!**

True, I'm mostly speaking to the choir – we are generous people; we are involved with the foodgrains bank and other efforts to help the needy,. and that great. Yet, the system of greed casts a huge shadow.

For example, for the price of one air to ground missile, a whole school full of children could be fed for FIVE years.

And, why are we making missiles? What is it we are defending?

Freedom and democracy is the wrong answer to that question.

The truth is we are defending our standard of living.

Another example: 90% of the hungriest nations are net **exporters** of food to the rich nations. The vast majority of people going hungry live in countries that are growing food for us! Some of the best farmland in Central America is controlled by “Western” food companies. The best land is growing strawberries for our winter indulgences, while the worst land is left to feed the local population.

I’m not revealing anything new. Ron Sider wrote about this corrupt imbalance thirty years ago, and I bet he got the idea from the O.T.

We are aware of the “exploitive” system.....A system that is mostly controlled, these days, by many of the rich “Christian” nations.

How can that be? Where is Christ’s compassion? Where is the brotherly and sisterly love?

.... What are our priorities?

Where is our trust.... in what?

The early church grew rapidly because Those Christians shared what they had. They were truly known by their love.

This trend of risky compassion continued. In the year 178, a pandemic broke out in Rome; it was likely brought to the city by returning troops. The Roman historian, Dio Cassius, reported that for a while 2,000 people were dying each day, from the disease. It was also reported that the “Christians” willingly cared for the sick. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage organized a city wide aid program that was available to everyone. [from historian Butler-Bass]

In those days, the Christians were known by their love!

Ah,..... but they were the persecuted. They didn’t have a whole lot of the world’s possessions. They didn’t have much to lose.....

Things have changed over the years.

We still appreciate “controlled charity” – helping the poor and all that, yet it seems in most situations, the creed – the dogma – what a person says is more important than the actions from love.

I know of a soap kitchen in Louisville, KY that would not feed hungry people unless they sat through an hour and half preaching service. And, I wouldn’t be surprised if the ones who were “saved” were rewarded with dessert. *I’m being sarcastic.*

However, there are church leaders who do NOT think that the government should do social services. They believe only the churches should help the poor and hungry..... because that way people will be attracted to churchto get assistance. There is a flavour of arrogance and elitism to that attitude –an us and them mentality.

And, I don’t think they would treat people they love that way.

I do not say these things to make anyone feel badly or ashamed.

And, I know most of us here, affirm generous benevolence, but..... we may need to be reminded about the culture we live in.... because every day we are told conflicting messages. We are told to fear.

We are told to protect ourselves. We are told take control of our lives. We learn about shortages and risks, and, we are told to watch out for bad guys who want to take what we have,.... and so on.

From the Bible comes a different message – a message about a God of Love, and love is a verb. Love is action, and not just a concept or a word.

The First John passage points that out by saying we do NOT have God’s love in us if we are NOT loving to others. Verse 18 is very direct:

“...Let us love, not in word of speech, but in truth and action.”

And, the First John passage connects with the John 10 passage by using Jesus as the prime example of this love, noting that Jesus **chose** to give his life for us –all of us.

Choosing to give up our lives for another seems pretty extreme, ... but... not really. I think most parents would do just that for their child. We give of ourselves for those we love. Love is that powerful,.... and that prompts the obvious question: how expansive is our love?

In the John 10 passage, Jesus again reveals, as he did many times, that God’s love is in him. Jesus does this by stating that he is the “Good shepherd.” The tie to Psalm 23 is clear.

Jesus is carrying out God’s love / living God’s love. Jesus is being the shepherd.

He goes on to say that all the sheep are his, and that he is a faithful shepherd. He will protect his sheep from the wolf, and this wolf “snatches and scatters” the sheep.... interesting—snatches and isolates.

Jesus stresses that He is NOT like the hired hand who would neglect the sheep when the wolf comes. The hired hand would protect **self** instead of the sheep, by running away.

Jesus doesn’t elaborate about the hired hand, but a person who is hired for a job does the work because there is pay /reward.

?I wonder.... how many people claim to be Christian because they are wanting a reward perhaps, eternal life or.... whatever....???

That is what the both passages are asking, indirectly.

Jesus continues by saying that he willingly lays down his life for the sheep..... because he loves the sheep. He chooses, from love, to put others first.... before himself. He loves because God is love, and God’s love is in him.

There is a tender, parental “sweetness” to all this.

The imagery of the sheep and shepherd is very endearing,.... But....is all this just a bunch of soothing words?

Moreover, we are in the 21st century. Our culture is very different than it was in Jesus' time. We proclaim democracy, which includes a restrained contempt for leaders and leadership. We are taught to value individualism and self reliance – which doesn't bode well with being one of the sheep,....and there just are not very many shepherds, anymore.

Amazingly, I know three shepherds. Harry Harder being one of them, but I bet not many people in Calgary, Vancouver or Toronto know any shepherds.

I wonder..... Do we really grasp this sheep / shepherd relationship?
Do people, these days, really want to submit to that degree to be as sheep?

If we don't buy into this concept, then what does it look like to live without a shepherd?
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Well, we know what it looks like..... we just have to look at our culture. We just have to look around.

We take care of ourselves. We are on our own, for the most part. Sure we share some, but to what extent..... and is it from love or to get a reward / a payment, such as to ease our guilt? When we feel like we got things under control, then God is an after thought – wallpaper to beautify our lives.
We would rather not think of ourselves as sheep.

Nevertheless, there are times when we are reminded of how helpless we are. In addition, I believe there is an emptiness in our society, and.... many people call out to God during times of need – those moments that remind us how powerless we are.

Yet, is does our call to God feel more like contacting the doctor or a plumber – to fix our problems? Is that how we regard God?

Is prayer to God just our personal 9 1 1.
Is God suppose to jump and run to our rescue when we call out to God?

See what I mean? Not only do we not relate to the shepherd / sheep concept, but we are a bit uncomfortable with it, too, when we do think about it.

Perhaps, a clearer way to regard the relationship is to think of it as a parent to a child, but then again..... how comfortable are we being a child..... all the time, and not just when it suites us?

Truth isThere is something very amazing, very loving about a healthy parent to child relationship. NOT only is there a deep trust, there is a sincere love..... and it goes both ways too.

I believe that children – our relationship with children... teaches us a lot about God – our relationship with God.

I was reminded of this on Friday.

Jessica, my eldest daughter, was on her way to Switzerland. Her work requires her to travel some, and since this trip included some European destinations, her husband Dima and their son Sasha were joining her, for the fun of it. Their flight left at 5:35 in the afternoon, and she called me at 4:30. From caller ID, I knew it was her, and guessed she was calling to say good-bye before they boarded the plane.

I answered the phone and immediately heard Sasha screaming, and then Jessica yelling above the screaming, “We’re stuck in a cab in traffic, can you help?”

I then heard Dima, in the background, yelling, “YOU’RE calling your father in Saskatchewan to help you catch a plane in New York?”

The situation gave me a heart smile – my child was asking me for help.

But, Dima was right..... there was not much I could do, except confirm through my computer, which I was using at the time, that her flight was NOT delayed. They had less than an hour to check in, clear security and board the plane,at JFK airport.

I said reassuring things, which included, “I’m sure you’ll make it.....If you can get their within a ½ hour you’ll still have a chance. When you do, use your screaming child to get to the front of all the lines” and ... I’ll pray for you.” I did what I could, and Jessica felt better, too.

As it turned out, the Flu scare had apparently discouraged enough travellers ... because she said there were no lines at all, and they caught their plane.

There is a wonderful loving and trusting bond between a child and a loving, caring parent.

I remember how it was when I was a child. I didn’t worry about having enough food for supper. I trusted my parents for that. I trusted them to provided me with a warm house, and many other things. In fact, I trust them so much, that I didn’t hope for those things. I simply relied on my parents. Granted, some people are not as fortunate, yet the imagine I’m trying to present is of a loving parent / child relationship.

Jesus calls that a shepherd/sheep relationship, as does the Psalmist.

The wolf in our culture seeks to catch us or isolate us.

In contrast, today’s passages invites all orphans to come home to family / to discover God the parent..... and the child that we are.

Until we grasp that shepherd/sheep ... or parent/child concept then we really can not understand Psalm 23.

Until we become as a child, then Psalm 23 is only a bunch of words.

Until we allow God to love us, we will not know love.

When our hearts pour out to God as a child to a parent then the opening declaration of Psalm 23 – GOD is my shepherd / my parent..... I will NOT live in fear or want... takes on a whole new meaning.

When that happens..... When there is love and trust, then Psalm 23 ceases to be a cry for help,..... and it becomes a love note / a thank you note / a confession.

However, it is NOT about saying the right words. There are not magic words!

We can choose to be orphans, to be self sufficient .. and ever mindful of the threats around us that tell us to fear.... to run and hide.

Or..... we can accept God's love..... and realize that we are just one of the sheep / one of the children..... and that we need to share our toys we all our brothers and sisters, all over the world.

Psalm 23 just got a little more interesting, didn't it?