

## **“The Lord is Our Shepherd”**

### **Psalm 23**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is always the assigned Psalm in our 3-year lectionary for Good Shepherd Sunday, this Sunday. The psalmist begins his confession of faith with the “Lord is my shepherd”. In the context of a Christian community like Divinity where we worship and serve together, we can say, “the Lord is our shepherd”. The Lord is our shepherd who guides us together on our journey through life.

Unlike Divinity, we can be part of “short term” communities that may only be together a week or two. I think of trips I’ve led throughout the United States, Mexico, Canada, Europe, and the Middle East. Twenty or thirty some of us, most from the congregation I’m serving along with others from all over the U.S. are thrust together in a plane and bus.

Some people are compatible. We laugh and joke and enjoy one another’s company. Some are a little off the wall and we’re never too sure where they’re coming from. Some are reserved and keep to themselves, so you don’t know much more about them at the end of the trip than you did at the beginning. And some are very open, sharing every aspect of their lives, often more than we wanted to know.

Over the years I’ve learned how to relate to these diverse groups. As the travelling pastor, I learned to listen to everyone. I’ve learned the “Lord is our shepherd”, not just my shepherd.

Our journey through life is somewhat like being on a bus full of fellow travelers, only we’ve no idea how long the journey will last.

Unlike a tour bus where the passengers remain the same for a whole trip, on our life bus some passengers get on and off, while others travel the entire way with us. I heard another great analogy for this experience. Life is like being in a box of crayons: some of us are sharp, some are dull, some are pretty, some are fluorescent, and some have weird names, but we have to learn how to live in the same box!

What about your “life bus?” Who has traveled with you? Take a moment to think about...

- the friends you went to school with . . .
- a next-door neighbor when you were growing up . . .
- your favorite teacher . . .
- a distant relative . . .
- your coworkers . . .
- your close family . . .
- your church family members . . .
- study group members . . .

The list of all the people who have shared your life bus over the years can be pretty amazing. Some are still on the bus with you. Some have gotten off, and some may get back on later. Some share your Christian experience. Some do not. Some ignore you. Some think it's their duty to tell you how to run your life. Some are your cheerleaders. Some are your strongest critics.

You may wish that some passengers would just get off the bus and out of your life! Our life buses aren't always filled with the most positive people in the world. There are a lot of folks taking up seats who seem bent on pulling you back from your walk with God. You may see them as your cross to bear, your burden, your sorrow, or your duty. Let me introduce you to a few of these passengers.

### **Negative Noodles**

My least favorite passenger on the life bus is the Negative Noodle, also called a Contrary Commentator. This person disagrees with everything you say or do. These folks dump negativity like a bucket of cold water on any ideas, thoughts, hopes, or dreams you may have. Negative Noodles seldom tell you why they disagree with you. They just do. Try sharing with them the idea you have for teaching a Sunday school lesson. "Oh, that'll never work! The kids will be bored! They only like video games," they say.

The trouble is this negative attitude rubs off on you. You'll probably give up your idea. If you go ahead with it, you're just waiting for it to fail; and if it does, you could hear "I told you so," the Negative Noodle's favorite phrase.

After a while you dread saying anything to these people. You find yourself avoiding conversations with them, holding back information, being secretive about your plans, keeping them in the dark about your ideas, and even lying on occasion! If your Negative Noodle is a close friend or even a spouse or parent, the relationship is never truly open and honest. How difficult that is for you! You probably spend a lot of time rationalizing the guilt you feel at cutting that person off from what's really important in your life.

## **Helpless Hearts**

Then there are the Helpless Hearts. These dear souls cling like ivy. As they lurch from crisis to crisis, they wait for someone, preferably you, to rescue them. The Helpless Hearts tell sad tales and pitiful stories. They pull at your heartstrings and sometimes even your purse strings. You spend a great deal of your time trying to assist them, bolster them up, and solve their problems. However, as soon as one problem is out of the way, another rears its head. If you volunteer to pray for them, they're quick to tell you that it never works!

## **Steamrollers**

The Steamrollers on your bus are determined to run your life – their way. They are out-and-out bullies, but they'll always tell you it's for your own good. "I hate to say this, but . . ."

They can see only one point of view – their own. You can recognize these people because they preface most of their statements with the words, "You should . . ." Aah, fatal words. They really mean, *I don't expect you to; you'll probably fail; or if you don't, you'll feel guilty*. We call that being "should upon".

Jesus never "should upon" people. Jesus' statements were positive, present, action-oriented: "Love your neighbor," not "You should love your neighbor." Can you hear the difference in these statements? The first gives straightforward direction with no gray area: you either do it or not. However, that second statement leaves a lot of leeway, doesn't it? "Well, I tried to love my neighbor." Or "Oh, I know I should, but he's such a difficult person."

Can't these negative people change – or get off the bus?

## **Cheerleaders**

Sometimes we wish we could just ride the bus by ourselves, but we were created for fellowship, not isolation. Thank heavens we also have good, kind, positive people on our bus who are the cheerleaders of our life. They make our journey worthwhile. Consider these questions:

- Who believes the “Lord is our shepherd”?
- Who always upholds and encourages you?
- Who is there for you in every circumstance?
- Who urges you to reach for your dreams?
- Who walks with you on your Christian journey?

These people are your cheerleaders, your earthly angels, the face of God in the midst of a despairing world. Spend time with them. Learn from them. Enjoy them. Talk to one or more of your cheering section at least once a day. Accepting their outflowing to you. Enjoy the encouragement and nurturing they give to you. Make a habit of being aware of your cheering section, connecting with your cheering section, and allowing your cheering section to give you a boost of love every day.

## **Folks You Don't Know**

What about all those people on your bus you hardly know? Coworkers, people in your church, new neighbors, distant family members, the cashier at the supermarket, the mechanic who fixes your car – how do you relate to them?

As Christians we want others to hear the good news, yet most of us know a full-fledged “Are you saved?” can be a turnoff. How do we tell people on the bus about our faith without alienating them?

You can begin with self-disclosure. Self-disclosure means opening up to other people – not throwing your whole life in front of them but letting them see you as a real person. Self-disclosure means allowing others glimpses of the person inside. This is always scary because you’re never sure how they are going to react. You may feel vulnerable, fearful, or afraid. Will they laugh at you, use your disclosures against you, ignore you, or ridicule you?

They might, but in my experience, when I’m open and honest – not pretending to be someone I’m not – and avoid using holier-than-thou language, usually the other person reciprocates by opening up as well. When you look at the moon, you often see only a part of it, but you know it is much larger than it appears. When you converse with someone, you perceive only a sliver of the person’s life; you may think that is all there is. Self-disclosure allows you get to know more about the whole person.

The big question is where to start. Well, for an easy first step, try adding a personal comment to your usual nondisclosure conversations. Comment on something you notice about the other person, something you feel about the day, something that gives you pleasure, or something that is worth noting. *Personal* is the key word here.

A rose becomes beautiful and blesses others only when it opens up and blooms. If a rose stays a tight-closed bud, never fulfilling its potential, its beauty is lost. If we connect with others on a deeper level, we are able to show them the face of Jesus, if only briefly. If something in us draws them and causes them to want what we have, our job is done.

If all Christians reflected the face of Jesus to others, our churches would be overflowing, and our world would be closer to experiencing the reign of God.

Consider all the relationships you have with the fellow travelers on your life bus. You'll probably see that the relationships have changed over the years. Perhaps you have a sense of sadness as you realize that many relationships have faded. The special friend to whom you swore undying loyalty in grade school is now just a dim memory. The boss who stood by you through the rough shake-up in the office, the neighbor who shared your driveway and often shoveled it for you in the winter, great-aunt Mary who is now in a nursing home . . . somehow, you've lost touch with them. There's an old saying; "Friendship is like money; it is easier made than kept". You may meet many people in your lifetime and make many acquaintances, but true friends are rare. Friends are earned, and once they're found, they must be treasured. Keeping a friend requires as much care as tending your garden.

When Robinson Crusoe was cast up on the shore of a tropical island, the lone survivor of a shipwreck, he had everything he needed for a comfortable life. He had more than adequate food, an ideal climate, and a beautiful setting. Though he was thankful for being alive, he cursed his solitary life. He said, "I am divided from mankind, a solitaire, one banished from human society . . . I have no soul to speak to or relieve me." He was emotionally miserable because he was no longer part of the human fellowship.

Although you might prefer to travel alone on your life bus, that's just not how it works. We are put in fellowship with others, and our challenge is to learn how to relate to them meaningfully both for ourselves and for our fellow passengers. We give thanks that the Lord is our shepherd through this life and into eternity.

May the peace of God...

#659–Will You Let Me Be Your Servant