

Don't be a Stranger
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Acts 2:42-47 (NIV): ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Sacred Relationships

I want to emphasize how important it is to practice "sacred stewardship." All that we are, all that we have and all we can do for others is the best definition I can give for "sacred stewardship." Giving of our lives in that way brings us closer to each other as we hold the soul of our relationship with God in reverence, a covenant relationship, a bond we can trust and treasure. Which brings me back to the idea of a "prosperity gospel." True prosperity is not about rewards, but about the rich blessing we receive when we share our lives with each other and with God. Those rich blessings are the "sacred relationships" that give meaning to the lives God has given each of us. God shared his Son, Jesus, with us. That is the greatest gift the world has even known or will ever know. Church families are often referred to as the "Body of Christ." If we are going to refer to ourselves as a "Body of Christ," then we need to make sure our efforts are held in "awe" by those who look at who we are and what we do. I pray they will always see us as servants sharing the richness of the best of our lives –our sacred relationships. It is an "awful" sight to me when I see churches strive for a "cathedral status" that displays the soul of who they are as the rich tapestry of economic success. In Acts 2:43-47, Luke introduces us to the beginning of the early church, as a "Body of Christ," a fellowship of believers that wanted to share all they had with each other, "⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." This is a powerful and influential Scripture that that is often abused by religious leaders that want to increase their power and influence by controlling more and more "gold and silver." What this Scripture actually says is that early believers would convert their assets into stewardship opportunities to give the early followers of Jesus Christ the ability to share with each other. A priority was to make sure they were not leaving the less fortunate behind. If you pay attention to the verses, what you will discover is that the sharing together by the community was the forming of the "Body of Christ." They were truly following the Spirit of their Savior. I want to remind you that Jesus ate with families and when we have fellowship dinners, Jesus is there.

We often leave behind broken relationships that continue to infect us daily. Those disconnects haunt us and become a buried part of our lives – a form of social distancing that is not sacred but destructive. In this unnatural time of social distancing, nothing could be more important than learning new and sacred ways to do "social sharing!" I believe tears are falling in heaven, as we are in the midst of an "awful" tragedy happening every time we hold unclean hands on earth. I also believe God's tears will wash away our fear, our pain and our suffering when we discover new ways to share our lives and our relationships with "awe." Our "burning bush" should be the miracles we are seeing and hearing about day in and day out. We cannot allow our responsible efforts of "social distancing" to become "social isolation," for there is no "social sharing" in isolation. In 1987, I wrote a poem entitled "When Divine Intervention Becomes Destiny" and the last two lines of the poem say:

"May the adventures we're now experiencing,
become blessings for our new beginning!"

I am not sure that I can call our Covid-19 experience an "adventure," so a new version should probably replace adventure with the word "nightmare." However, even nightmares can be a foundation for new beginnings. How can that happen? Divine intervention can get us on the right path – a righteous path with God. I confess that this day-in and day-out has really been a trial for me. Being "socially connected" has always been a driving force in my life. This is 2020 and we are living precariously in a time we have labeled Covid-19, a time of disconnect, but I pray that the path I've taken in my past will lead me through the valley of the shadow of death in my future:

- *I have been married to my wife for 50+ years, we have a wonderful “social connection.”
- *I have been ordained in the Presbyterian Church for 39+ years, which is my “Body of Christ” — my “social connection.”
- *I served 37+ years in the Navy, from a seaman to a Captain, I always prayed to keep a “social connection.”
- *I have been a Chaplain at the VAMC for 30+ years and I treasure my “social connection” with our veterans.
- *I have been the minister at Branford Presbyterian Church for 30+ years, now that’s a “social connection.”
- *I have been the minister at First Presbyterian Church of High Springs for 26+ years, now that’s a “social connection.”
- *I want to be a friend to every “Sacred Relationship” I’ve had for my 72+ years, my treasured “social connections.”

50 + 39 + 37 + 30 + 30 + 26 + 72 + years = 284 + years – now that’s a “flock” of “social connection years.”

Clearly, I am striving to be older than Methuselah, at 284, I only have 685 years to go!

Why are the asterisks in the above catalog of years written in my book of life?

*Footnotes in the order they are listed.

** I was 14 and my wife was 12, when we first held hands at 4-H Camp McQuarrie in Astor Park Florida.

I have actually been a member of the Presbyterian Church since my infant baptism.

Technically, I had 38 years in the Navy before my retirement, but some people claim I have forgotten to disconnect!

** I gave a Memorial Day Speech in 1987 – see poem with Malcom Randall beside me as I gave the Benediction.

**I officially have had a “temporary pastoral relationship” with Branford since March of 1990.

**I officially have had a “temporary pastoral relationship” with High Springs since June of 1993.

I pray that I can faithfully multiply the number of “Sacred Relationships” I carry in my heart.

**But, why do some have double asterisks in the above catalog of years written in my book of life? My wife has stood by my side over and over again, while others have claimed my time and attention. My years with the VA hospital include 17 years of part-time service, so that I could meet my obligation to my Country by serving in the Naval Reserve. Even though I have only had a “temporary pastoral relationship” with my Churches, they have never treated me like I was their temporary pastor. For years, they have served their God and Country by faithfully supporting me every time I was called to serve the Navy. They supported me when:

I was at the Coast Guard at Yorktown and Kuwait was invaded by Saddam Hussein.

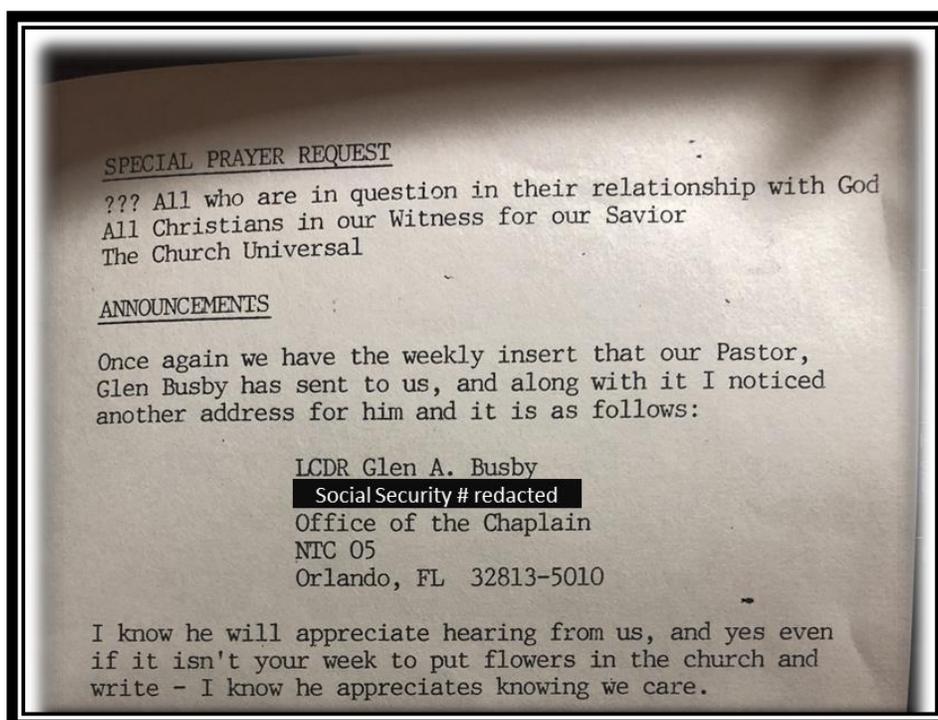
I was called up to Desert Storm at RTC in Orlando (see illustration).

You read about my call-up to Hawaii in 1993 in last week’s sermon.

My leaving on the Sunday afternoon after the “Storm of the Century” ravaged the south all the way to Camp Lejeune.

My multiple times going to the Middle East for extended periods, while serving with Central Command.

The emergency call-up to Fort Worth, to take command of a Chaplain Service in disarray because of social dissension.



This 19 May 1991, Pentecost Sunday Bulletin from Branford Presbyterian Church is a lesson in “Sacred Relationships.” It also gives a snapshot of our changing world! My Navy address in 1991 included my Social Security number. Note: They refer to me as their Pastor – there is no mention of “temporary” and no “sacred Relationships” are temporary.

Psalms 23 (KJV): ¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

God's Highway

Not only does God “..... heal the cracks in our souls,” but God gives us a healing path to follow. I like to call it “God’s Highway.” Psalms 23 tells us the Lord is our shepherd, who leads us beside the still waters – living waters of peace and tranquility. Psalms 23 also tells us the Lord is our shepherd, who leads us through the valley of the shadow of death – a stark picture that comes to my mind today would be “To lead us through the New York canyons of the skyscraper shadows of death.” Many years ago, I drove through a tunnel under the Detroit River to Windsor, Ontario on my way to the town of Rodney, Ontario. To get to Rodney, I traveled on “The King’s Highway, the 401. Even back then in my youth, I reminded myself that King George was not my King. My King was ironically, the “King of the Jews,” my Lord and Savior (The title "King of the Jews" is only used in the New Testament by gentiles like the Wise Men, Pontius Pilate and Roman Soldiers). Jesus’s highway was a broken path of broken relationships we call the path to Calvary – a shadowed path Jesus took for all of us. That broken path Jesus took was the essential and crucial segment of God’s Highway to complete Salvation History. We all have routes we’ve taken in life, on broken highways, that lead us away from the Good Shepherd. In my youth, I knew people that loved to steal road signs like a “DO NOT ENTER” sign on your dorm room. It was illegal back then and I’m sure it still is. One of my friends was explaining to me that it wasn’t really stealing, because it was just harmless fun. My retort was that it won’t be harmless, if it causes an accident. This time of Covid-19 with its dark shadows, is a time to look for God’s roadmaps and signs that can lead us safely through the valley.

John 10:1-10(GNT): ¹Jesus said, “I am telling you the truth: ¹ the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The man who goes in through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him; the sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name, and he leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow someone else; instead, they will run away from such a person, because they do not know his voice.” ⁶ Jesus told them this parable, but they did not understand what he meant. ⁷ So Jesus said again, “I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All others who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Those who come in by me will be saved; they will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness.

Don't be a Stranger

Did the Pharisees practice identity theft? Did they climb over the fence to steal life from the sheep? Did they want to nurture a flock for God? Those are the questions the shepherd’s flock of the Pharisees, in first century Jerusalem, should have been asking. But they didn’t, just like the Israelites before them, who failed to recognize the friendly, yet sometimes harsh voices, of the prophets. In today’s world, we would say, “Yes, the Pharisees practiced identity theft!” They were stealing the salvation voice of the Messiah, so the “Bethlehem Star” began to shine from the heavens to guide them along God’s Highway to the one who saves – Jesus saves and Jesus walks God’s Highway with us – every step of the way.

The identity theft practiced by the Pharisees kept them from being “Good Shepherds.” They could not give their flock healthy and healing roadmaps and signs to have “sacred relationships” with God, if they came with stolen identities.

They were clearly strangers in a time when the people desperately needed a friendly voice. Why were they making harmful laws that separated their flock from God with “broken relationships?” What if I am writing this sermon with a “stranger’s voice?” I stand in pulpits and preach to the congregations. I meet with veterans in groups and in worship and pray that they recognize my voice. I pray that they recognize my voice, as a voice of a friend – I pray that I don’t use my voice to prey on them! For twenty-seven years, I served active duty, retired military, reserves, families of service members, veterans and families of veterans – all at the same time. All those respected communities deserved to be treated and guided by a friendly voice, not the voice of a stranger. It was important for me to understand that I had to approach each community’s gate with the heart and soul of a good shepherd that cared for each one of them. It was as if I had to carry a seaman’s chest filled with an assortment of different hats (or “covers,” as we refer to hats in the Navy), a different one for each community. As all my different flocks know, there is always a variety of parables (sea stories) in my sea bag, like Jesus used with the Pharisees, so maybe, just maybe, they could have a “eureka or aha! moment.” Chaplains are taught that we are not to proselytize (convert or recruit) our military or veteran communities to our personal beliefs and faith groups. We live in a world engulfed with an attitude that believes it is “only right” to convert or recruit others to your way of thinking. If others have a different belief or opinion than yours, then they must be wrong and you must be right. I call that being engulfed in a world where “my opinion and beliefs are the correct ones.” It becomes a world without a flock of sheep that want to listen to the good shepherd’s guidance and support. It fast becomes a world with a “herd mentality” – a herd that can be led to the slaughter! Those are harsh words, but the world is full of bullies, including “pulpit bullies” that relish the opportunity to climb over your fence and take advantage of you.

During my 40 years of ordination, I have come to believe my role is to be a good shepherd with a friendly voice that guides and supports you on your journey along God’s Highway. I pray to my God, that it is your God that you form a “sacred relationship with” – and so be it if your God and my God are one and the same!

If you are honest with yourself, it is really scary to speak for God. So, I want to be honest with myself and you. This is not the time to use the opening lines of a sea story, “You’re not going to believe this, but ...!” The only way I have been able to speak for God, as a minister and a chaplain, is because I have discovered that Jesus Christ is my Good shepherd. I have learned and now know and recognize the voice of my Good Shepherd leading me. My Jesus saves and He has saved me over and over again – each time, I’m born again and discover new life. That’s what I want to share with you.

“The Void”

Have you ever thought what is beyond
the expanse and boundary of the universe?
In my early years, after my brother’s death –
The dark hidden recesses of my mind ached,
as I wrestled with the ulcer of festering Survivor’s Guilt.
My life was a dark emptiness I called, “The Void.”
In my loneliness, isolation and my alienation,
all I could envision, beyond my time and space,
was a twenty-four-hour ultimate nightmare,
falling from my universe’s edge into my unknown.
My life’s turmoil was best described,
a never-ending gut-wrenching gasp to live.
How did I ever survive Survivor’s Guilt?
I began to receive the sunshine and love
of God’s presence in my corner of the universe.
Looking around, I began to see God’s instruments.
The sound of love coming through my wife and boys.
I discovered God shines through my shadows.
Love becomes our bond through the spirit.
The “void” I carried was heavy on my shoulders,
as I struggled with my existence or non-existence.
Then I began to see the sunshine of a multitude of stars,
and time and space beyond the universe was overflowing
with God’s love, my Bethlehem star, leading me home.

Amen – so be it!