

As Administrative Professional week comes to a close, I salute our church secretary, Peg Burkman, with the following story she shared: The story of Shirley & Marcy:

A mother was concerned about her kindergarten son, Timmy, walking to school.

He didn't want his mother to walk with him.

She wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence but yet know that he was safe.

So she had an idea of how to handle it.

She asked a neighbor if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her.

The neighbor said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor girl he knew.

She did this for the whole week.

As the two walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the same lady was following them as she seemed to do every day all week.

Finally she said to Timmy, 'Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?'

Timmy nonchalantly replied, 'Yeah, I know who she is.'

The little girl said, 'Well, who is she?'

'That's just Shirley Goodnest,' Timmy replied, 'and her daughter Marcy ...'

'Shirley Goodnest? Who is she and why is she following us?

'Well,' Timmy explained, 'every night my Mum makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much.

And in the Psalm, it says, 'Shirley Goodnest (surely goodness) and Marcy (mercy) shall follow me all the days of my life', so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!

Get used to it. We can walk confidently with God when we put love in action.

### ① The Value of a Dollar

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If there is one thing we Presbyterians are known for (if not notorious for), it is for knowing the value of a dollar. Tuesday's meeting of Lehigh Presbytery meeting featured an inspiring report from the Trustees on our new investment strategy to generate the maximum return with the minimum of risk. There were numbers and percentages and trends galore! It was almost enough to bring us our feet and chant, “ROI, ROI, ROI.” Almost enough, but somehow we maintained our Presbyterian decorum.

We're good stewards, but sometimes our stewardship gets in the way of our being good. John asks: *1 John 3:17 (NRSV) How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

The back story to this question is quite contemporary and all-too-Presbyterian. John's church was divided: Some thought that matters of flesh and blood did not matter; they were all about being spiritual. Others (including John) thought that flesh and blood matters do matter; our lives in the flesh are inseparable from our spiritual lives.

One group had money. The other didn't; they had needs. In the past, the church funded largely by the one group provided for the needs of the other group, but now that they disagreed, the one group was withholding their money. In the name of their values, they were not valuing their fellow Christian.

In Presbyterian circles, some honor their values above valuing fellow Christians by withholding per capita. They do not pay the \$28 and change that each member is asked to pay. This is done as a protest. When I was a child, it was because of the support the Presbyterian Church gave Angela Davis. In recent years, people withheld because we might ordain a homosexual. Now, they withhold because we may ordain a homosexual.

The impact is felt. We've laid off staff at the national office; we've cut programs; and a number of Presbyteries across the nation are on the verge of bankruptcy. We see the needs; we hear the cry; and we have to say, "I'm sorry. We can't help you."

*1 John 3:17 (NRSV) How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

I guess we need to teach John about the value of a dollar, or perhaps we're the ones who need to learn that who we value matters more than what we value.

## ② Love in Action

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Talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words. As you've probably figured out by now, I disagree with withholding giving as a means of expressing dissent. And yet, at the Presbytery meeting, I sat next to a friend whose church has withheld its giving for longer than I've been here. His church is in the process of leaving the Presbyterian Church. And as I sat with my friend

with whom I disagree, I found myself wondering.... What do I value more than I value my brother or sister?

It's easy to say, “They shouldn't do that!” I can stand secure in my righteous indignation as I point the finger at “them.” And when I do, I've fallen for evil's trap once again. I'm valuing my values more than I value my brother or sister.

Talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words. *1 John 3:18 (NRSV) Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

So what do we do when we disagree? How do we express our dissent with an action of our Session, Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly? How do we fight City Hall, the Governor's mansion, Congress, or the White House? How do we work for change AND love one another?

We do the Presbyterian two-step:

Step 1: We talk to each other ... not about each other. We pick up the phone, fire off an email, or write a letter. When the time comes to nominate leaders, we step up. We get involved. We work for change by participating in the life of the church or in the school district or in the political process.

Step 2: We talk to God. We pray about the problem and for one another. We don't pray to win. We don't pray, “O God, all praise to You for this, and thanks to You for that. Now, let's cut to the chase – let my will be done!”

It's worth saying what I'm sure you've already figured out – do Step 2 before Step 1. It has a way of preventing our “foot in mouth” disorder.

But what if we don't win? What if we don't get our way? What if our values are not valued? Can we live with that?

*1 John 3:18 (NRSV) Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in*

*truth and action.*

When we disagree, and we do not win, our dissent is not heeded, we have the opportunity to put love in action. We can continue to value one another for the sake of Jesus Christ. This is the powerful challenge John puts before us : *1 John 3:21–23 (NRSV) Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.*

We snatch victory from the jaws of defeat by putting love in action: We may not be able to change the outcome; we may not get our way; but we can be changed in the process. We believe in Jesus in the midst of our defeat; we offer it to Him; we love one another as He loved us and we trust that our Crucified Shepherd will lead His sheep through this dark valley.

We remember that we are sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock. We remember that He is leading us to that blessed land where the pastures are green and the waters are still. We remember the comfort of His rod and staff, and we keep going; we stop looking at the immediate results and rejoice in the ultimate outcome. We love and lose; we love and lose; we love and lose; knowing that one day in the providence of God, we will love and win, for our Crucified Shepherd is risen!

One other thing is worth saying that you’ve probably figured out: We remember that we’re the sheep. Jesus is the shepherd. As sure as we Presbyterians can be that we are right, we could be wrong. And if by some small chance we are wrong, if we’re the ones whose values are misplaced, well, along that journey, our Shepherd will straighten us out.

Talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words. Anything and everything is possible, when we put love in action. Amen.