

Everyone's Welcome at the Lord's Table

Psalm 23

Fourth Sunday in Lent/ 2nd March 2008/ Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

It's probably the first portion of scripture we ever tried to memorize. My guess is we could all recite it by heart – King James Version, of course. Psalm 23 is so meaningful for both Jews and Christians. As with many passages of scripture, its familiarity can sometimes prevent us from seeing what's in the text. For example, this poem has a way of becoming just about anything we want it to be. In some ways, the psalm becomes a blank page or canvass onto which we project all our emotions, religious sentiments, and hopes. When we recite or read the psalm, its words just roll off our tongues, maybe with little thought as to what they actually mean. A word here or there – “shepherd,” “green pastures,” “still waters,” “soul,” “valley,” “house,” – triggers a feeling or a memory or some idea about God that causes us to linger, maybe, as the reading continues. It would be interesting to take a survey and ask which word speaks to you the most.

It's difficult to interpret this text because we have our own, very personal associations and meanings of it. Just yesterday, someone came up to me at the reception after the memorial service for Ruth Ann Johnson to say how much she appreciated the reading of Psalm 23 because it was read at her father's funeral. We all have personal associations and meanings of the text and we don't like anyone messing with them – *including the preacher*. I don't want to meddle with your images, but maybe help deepen *one*. Read the text very closely and you will see that there isn't one, but actually *two* metaphors at work attempting to describe our experience of God. There's Yahweh the Shepherd who provides, protects, and leads the sheep. Then the image shifts slightly to Yahweh the Gracious Host who offers hospitality and protects a guest from the pursuit of enemies. Are these different roles for the shepherd? Perhaps. But they're both describing the work of the shepherd – “protector of the sheep as they wander in search of grazing land” and shepherd “the protector of the traveler who finds hospitality in his tent from the dangers and enemies of the desert.”¹

If we pay very close attention, we can see another shift. In verses 1-2 and verse 6, Yahweh is spoken of in the third person. The psalmist is describing Yahweh from afar, as if trying to explain Yahweh to a stranger. But in verses 4-5, Yahweh is directly addressed as “Thou.” *Thou, You are with me... You prepare a table before me.... You anoint*

¹ Bernhard W. Anderson with Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 181.

my head with oil... It's more immediate and intense. Can you hear it? It seems that the gravitational center of the psalm rests in verse 5, in what Walter Brueggemann calls the "two images" of this psalm, the image of *table* and *cup*.²

With this shift in emphasis we can see that while this psalm is about God as protector and provider, God's protection and provision can be viewed as including under part the *overarching* image of God as gracious host, of the one who extends *hospitality*. In the ancient world and the contemporary Middle East, hospitality means so much more than it does for us in the West. It's more than just being nice or extending welcome for a limited period of time. According to the Bedouin law of hospitality, once a traveler is received into the shepherd's tent, and especially once his host has spread food before him, he is guaranteed immunity from enemies who may be attempting to overtake him.³ Ask Don Padgett to tell you sometime about his experience living in Congo during the civil war, especially during *the pillage*, the pillaging that took place, when crowds of rioters marched through the streets, attacking people and destroying property. His friends in the Presbyterian Church promised to protect him, to even die defending him because he was a guest in their homes and in their country. That's hospitality. There's a responsibility and obligation that comes with the welcome.

The psalmist tells us that's what Yahweh is like. In Yahweh's tent one finds protection and a gracious welcome. This is *divine* hospitality, of God actually making space for us. It's not just a temporary reprieve but a limitless protection from the powers that threaten our existence. Even in the face of all that might be against us, Yahweh still provides a safe place to eat. It's so safe that you can even eat in the presence of your enemies. And that's saying a lot – because if there's one thing one never did in the ancient world (or in the contemporary Middle East) it was sit and share a meal with your enemy. Reconciliation in that culture was not signified by just a hand shake. Reconciliation was marked by sitting down at the table with your former-enemy-now-friend and sharing a meal with them. And that is precisely what God intends for God's people, whether it's God's tent of meeting, in the temple, or in the church.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 154.

³Anderson, 183.

*Hospitality stands at the center of biblical faith and experience and can't be taken lightly because it's how God treats every one of us.*⁴ It's the overarching image of God that we find in scripture, from Genesis where God provides a garden right through to Revelation where God provides a new heaven and new earth, a city for God's people. It's an overarching theme. It informs the way we understand God's will for us.

In fact, imagine if everything we did in *this* church was viewed through the lens of gracious hospitality. What would that look like? It would effect: how we greet one another in worship with more than just “good morning,” but the “May the peace of Christ be with you;” how we welcome guests and visitors to worship, being even more intentional about reaching out to them during fellowship hour, so that no guest stands alone in fellowship hour without talking to someone; how we understand fellowship hour as more than just coffee and some goodies, but integral to our life together, as an extension of the Lord's Table to every moment of table fellowship, especially when sharing a more substantial meal that reflects the generosity and graciousness of God; how we would want to insure that anyone who seeks to worship and serve Christ will have an honored place here; how we understand Christian education and our Child Care Center, as creating safe, welcoming, nurturing places for our children and youth. It would even shape how we view and make decisions about the look and feel of this building, for it too needs to extend the gracious hospitality of God, this “tent” of God's meeting.

All that we hope to accomplish through the capital campaign is really about hospitality – it's about accessibility and welcome, of removing every barrier and hindrance that makes it difficult for people to get into the “tent.” The needed refurbishments and renovations of our facility are all connected to the way we seek to *extend* and *embody* the hospitality of God. Even our consideration of air-conditioning needs to be thought of theologically! This is what God calls us toward. And as the psalmist says, we lack for nothing – *nothing*. We have everything we need in life, all the resources we need to accomplish God's will are here among us, which means we are also free to give more of it away to do the work God calls us to do. You probably never thought of this psalm as a stewardship sermon, but it is.

⁴ Cf. the quotations from the worship bulletin: “The practice of hospitality is at the heart of the biblical faith..., because, as the letter to the Hebrews put it, ‘In welcoming the stranger, you may entertain angels unawares.’ What is at stake in hospitality is welcoming God.” Anthony Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 109. Also, “Often, often, often goes Christ in the stranger's guise.” Ancient Celtic Rune of Hospitality

God calls us to be God's hospitable people. Why? Not because it's the nice thing to do, or the politically correct thing to do, but because it's the way God has been toward every one of us. Where? How? Through Christ, the good shepherd who even went to the cross, who protects and leads us through the valley of the shadow of death and provides for us a safe place on the other side of death, in the face of everything or every one, every enemy that seeks to do us harm. Jesus' whole ministry shows us the gracious hospitality of God. For the apostle Paul, God's hospitality was glaringly apparent in God's plan to include the Gentiles in the plan of redemption. Think of *our* inclusion as Gentiles (that is, unless you're a Jewish follower of Jesus) as the extension of God's gospel hospitality to all people. Indeed, Christ welcomes us into God's "tent" and invites us as gracious guests – even though, at times, we are the very enemies of God who betray him daily! – he invites us to this table, *nevertheless (!)*, to share this meal, to break bread and share from one cup.

That's why this table is *so* important and more than just a memorial meal, as some Presbyterians have stressed for far too long. That's just wrong. It's more than "just a memorial meal." John Calvin (1509-1564) saw this meal as a real participation in the very presence of Christ, of actually participating in, of communing with the Risen Christ. Christ is *really present* here when we share this meal. As such, God doesn't want to hinder anyone from coming to this table and neither should we. This joyful feast is for everyone.

As we share the meal this morning, I invite you to pray for someone who's missing from this table. Who needs to be here with us, among us that isn't? What's standing in the way? Do you know? What can we or you do about it? Extend an invitation, maybe?

God calls us to be God's hospitable people and we discover how to be hospitable here.

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