

## “FOOD FOR THOUGHT: A TABLE BEFORE YOU”

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39; Psalm 23

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*Intro to Psalm 23:* You might remember that a few weeks ago, we read from Psalm 78, which reflects back on the experience of the people of Israel in the desert, before God sent manna to feed them, when they were afraid that they were going to starve. The Psalm writer tells about how the people doubted God’s help; they asked, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” You might hear the latter part of this Psalm as a response to that question. *read Psalm 23*

Most of our mental – and artistic – images of this oh-so-familiar Psalm focus on the first part, on the shepherd imagery, which is only natural. Sheep are cute, lush green pastures are beautiful, and a spot beside a quiet lake is, for many of us, the definition of “restorative.” From a Christian perspective, we inevitably associate the shepherd image of God with Jesus, the “Good Shepherd.”

But this is the conclusion of our “Food for Thought” summer sermon series, so today I’m going to focus on the other striking and powerful image Psalm 23 offers us: the table.

“You prepare a table before me,” the Psalmist says, *addressing* God now, rather than talking *about* God as in the first, shepherd, part of the psalm. “You prepare a table before me.”

The words are very simple, but we instinctively conjure up a vision of a nice meal and a nice atmosphere – maybe a banquet, maybe a picnic, maybe an intimate supper. However we picture it, simple or fancy, this is an image of a satisfying, nourishing meal and a welcome from a gracious host. We know that anybody who is going to “prepare a table” for us isn’t tossing a couple of flimsy paper plates and a microwaved meal on that table. “Preparing a table” implies preparation and care and attention, a desire to make those who sit at that table feel special, a determination to feed them something good, an intention to create a place of sanctuary and nurture. The kind of place you don’t want to leave.

This image of God as host tells us something about the world: that its bounty is God’s provision for human need and human flourishing. It tells us something about God: that God is good and generous and compassionate. And it tells us something about us: that we matter to God, that God desires our company, that God cares for us and is willing to go to a lot of trouble to do so. What more could we ask from the Psalm?

But the next phrase gives us pause: the table is “in the presence of my enemies.” What is that all about? Just as we relax into the comforting image of welcome and plates of good food on the table, here we are talking about enemies! What do enemies have to do with this lovely picture? And – I always wondered – how are we supposed to enjoy the feast with enemies standing around watching us?

Enemies is a pretty strong word. Many of us might be quick to say that we don't have any enemies. I get that; we are not living with bombs dropping on our cities or the dangers faced by people who are persecuted or driven from their homes because of their religion or skin color. We are rightly careful about equating less-threatening experiences with those that kind of trauma. But we ought to pause and think about it before distancing ourselves from this part of a Psalm that otherwise speaks so powerfully and intimately to us. It's worth contemplating what this phrase could be saying to us, too.

In fact, we do have enemies, and I think it's the Psalm writer's intention to remind us of this reality. It would be nice to cocoon ourselves inside an image of safety, but even this table of plenty and welcome isn't a place for denial and naiveté.

Don't misunderstand me. No one is our enemy because their faith or culture or language is different, or because of who they love or what pronouns they use or what they look like. No one is our enemy because they need help or because hunger and violence have forced them to flee their homeland. Disliking or feeling uncomfortable around a person doesn't make them your enemy. And just because you're told you should fear and despise someone doesn't make that person (or group) your enemy. But for all that, I think the Psalmist *is* speaking to us.

The reality is that there are those in the world whose intentions are hostile and whose actions deliberately or carelessly cause harm to people and to communities. Some people, some communities, experience a lot of that harm. All of us experience some.

It may well be, of course, that you *are* the target of some personal enmity – maybe from a co-worker who undermines you, an angry neighbor, somebody you've disagreed with or who's taken an irrational dislike of you for some reason. From a so-called friend who takes advantage of you, or even someone close whose behavior veers toward abusive.

But enmity doesn't have to be personal. There are plenty of people out in the world harboring hate and willing harm toward those they see as "other" ... including toward folks we love, and maybe even toward some of us. Both individuals and groups make choices that pose a threat to the well-being of other people.

Those who profit by exploiting the poor are enemies of those Jesus told us to feed. Companies that knowingly pollute the air their neighbors breathe and the ground water their neighbors drink are enemies of the communities around them. Leaders and others who won't treat gun violence as the emergency it is are enemies to our children. People distorting our political processes with hate speech and disinformation are enemies of civil society. The algorithms and addictive qualities of the internet and social media are enemies that steal our time and energy away from other priorities.

Not all enemies are "out there" though. Some of them are within. The voices in our head that tell us we aren't good enough, loveable enough, attractive enough, smart enough. The problems we know we ought to deal with but continue to deny. Assumptions and beliefs we're afraid to question. Things we can't forgive ourselves for. Fears that hold us back.

All these – and more - threats to our peace of mind and our security and our communities and to those we love... are real.

I used to think that the table “in the presence of my enemies” was about a gloating kind of triumph: getting to enjoy God’s blessings and protection while laughing at the bad people who had to stand around hungry and left out, getting what they had coming to them. I’m not sure about that any more. I think this is more about us – about our awareness - than about the “enemies,” whoever or whatever they are. It’s the Psalmist’s reminder that hostility and dangers are part of life – people of faith don’t get a pass on this. And faith does not require a pretense that nothing is wrong.

But the Psalm writer also shows us two other important things:

First, in the midst of all of that, God is still present. Still providing us with so much. Still making a place for us, still nurturing us, still watching over us. Still offering us peace and calm in the midst of the storm. Still showing us what goodness and mercy look like. Nothing can change that, no matter how hostile or how many or how powerful those enemies may be.

Second: that it’s really important for us to partake of the loving hospitality God offers us. To sit down at the table. To let that welcome and peace wash over us. To remember - or discover - belonging and identity within God’s hospitality. To let God feed us, and nurture our strength and hope. To be encouraged in the midst of our fears. To accept God’s love. To be reminded that nothing can separate us from that love.

Yes, there is always so much to do. There are battles to fight. People to help. Problems to solve. Damaging possibilities to defend against. But we can only do that so long before we need to be nourished and refreshed and cared for and reminded that we are loved. The more persistent the enemies of the good are, the greater our fears, the deeper our trouble... the more we need to turn to our Source of strength.

“You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” These phrases sum up the experience of being fed at God’s table. Anointing with oil, in the Bible, can be about healing, affirmation, or recognition of someone’s calling and purpose. The phrase can also be a metaphorical way to describe that physical sense of well-being we get when we receive good news. I like how that idea flows right into the next words: “my cup overflows.” Metaphor, again; not about sloshing your wine or juice on the table, but about *plenty*, about *enough*. About God sustaining us with all that we need as we face whatever might make us afraid.

The table in this Psalm isn’t a reference to the table of communion, but like it, the table of Jesus is prepared with loving care, and is a place of welcome and belonging. Here we are fed and our faith is nurtured. Here we find a little more strength and courage, and when we leave we understand just a little bit better that God’s goodness and God’s mercy follow us, wherever we may go, always.

Resources:

Essays on Psalm 23, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 4*, David L. Barlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.