

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fourth Sunday of Easter • April 22, 2018

Acts 4:5-12 • Psalm 23 • 1 John 3:16-24 • John 10:11-18

When Anna and I lived in Princeton, we would go to this Episcopalian church every once in a while. And the experience of going to this church was a little hard to describe. On the one hand, the liturgy was extremely high. Incense, chanting, icons, ornate vestments. The procession was often led by a vergers, which is a liturgical assistant who carries a mace. And back in the middle ages, the vergers would knock people away if they were blocking the procession. Needless to say, it serves no useful purpose in Princeton, New Jersey.

But the preaching was decidedly different. The rector, who was a really fantastic preacher, never used notes, rarely stayed in the pulpit, and would often veer wildly off of the appointed texts. One time, to try to prove a point, he went down to around where Sally Rutherford is sitting, and preached while standing on a pew.

And after we moved, I never bothered unsubscribing from their mailing list, so I'd still get the newsletter every once in a while. And one week, the little pastor's note at the top caught my eye. "I have been thinking about the events of last Sunday," it began. "Serving as your rector is one of the greatest joys of my life." And so my mind immediately went to the worst possibility. *Another round of clergy misconduct. Great. What'd he do?* But I kept reading, and it was clear that that wasn't what happened. "I would like to publicly affirm my faith in the Apostle's, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. I subscribe to the theology of the historic ecumenical councils of the church, the teachings of the Episcopal Church, and the vows of my ordination."

Completely befuddled, I started sending texts to some friends. Was anybody there last week? What happened? And eventually, I found someone who was. And they said that the appointed psalm for that day was the twenty-third psalm. And the rector, preaching without notes as usual, had said something to the effect of, "The twenty third psalm is good. It's actually so good that we could get rid of the creeds, get rid of the liturgy, get rid of some of the Bible, get rid of the bishops. We could just have the twenty-third psalm and we'd be just as well off."

Now hyperbole is a bit of an acquired taste. One that the bishop, apparently, hadn't acquired. Which was why this mea culpa slid into my inbox. But he may have been on to something. The twenty-third psalm is a much richer, more meaningful text than we often give it credit for. We hear it most often in the context of funerals and memorial services. Having walked through the valley of the shadow of death, the good shepherd makes us to lie down in green pastures. Today is commonly called Good Shepherd Sunday, and the image of God the shepherd is perfectly fine and good. But too often we allow our experience of death to shape how we hear the twenty-third psalm instead of letting the psalm shape our lives.

But there's a second image of God in the psalm, one that we often ignore, but perhaps the one we need to hear today: God the host. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Even in difficult times, even in dark times, even surrounded by adversaries, God sets out a great banquet

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feast. A feast so extravagant, so gracious, that it literally can't be contained. Even surrounded by our enemies, God keeps on giving.

That language of enemies might make us a bit uncomfortable. "Good Christians aren't supposed to have enemies," we tell ourselves. Maybe it's some kind of Old Testament holdover and you don't really have to pay any attention to it. Just stick with the God the shepherd stuff. But cut out the idea of enemies, and you cut out much of what the psalm, not to mention Jesus's resurrection, are all about.

For the past few weeks, I've been reading a book about bullying by Emily Bazelon called *Sticks and Stones*. And one of the stories in it is about this kid named Jacob who lived near Utica, New York. And when Jacob was in eighth grade in the mid-2000s, he came out as gay. And in addition to volleys of slurs and epithets, Jacob was physically assaulted by his classmates. He was pushed down staircases at the school multiple times, once so bad he came back the next day on crutches. Another day he was nearly thrown down a stairwell. And another day he was threatened with a knife. Eventually he transferred schools and a big court case ensued about whether his rights under the equal protection clause had been violated.

So Bazelon went up to the school to interview some people who were familiar with his situation. Most bullying ends without a student having to transfer and a big court case unfolding. So what exactly went wrong in this situation? Why wasn't anyone able to stop the bullying? And one of the most common answers she heard was that Jacob was too unapologetic about his identity. The problem was not that his bullies were too cruel or too conniving. The problem was not that reporting bullying was too onerous for the overworked teachers. The problem was Jacob. If you don't want to be hit with insults, if you don't want to be threatened with physical violence, if you don't want to be pushed down the stairs, they seemed to suggest, then you need to tone it down a little.

Many of us learn that lesson sometime in our lives, hopefully in a less painful way than Jacob. But sooner or later most of us realize that if you want a smooth journey through life, sometimes you need to sand down the edges of your dignity. That when people try to make you feel small, sometimes it's easier to stoop to their expectations. That when people try to make you feel inadequate, sometimes it's just easier to sell yourself short. That's it's easier to accommodate other people's slights than it is to preserve your self-respect.

And yet, the psalmist says, God refuses to accommodate such evil. God refuses to give into its demands. God refuses to tone it down just to try to get by. And instead, God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. God's abundance, God's mercy, God's generosity, is revealed precisely in the places where it seems most out of place.

Why does God prepare a table in the presence of our enemies? So that all people, us and our enemies alike, might be brought closer to God's embrace. Earlier this winter, we prayed the ELW's prayer for our enemies, which reads in part, "Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you." So we don't just pray for the conflict to go away. We don't just pray to get by. We pray for life that is just, life that is affirming, life that is dignified. The table is set up not just for us but for our enemies as well. So that, in God's time, not our time, all people might be reconciled to one another.

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So what does that table look like? Where is this table where we can stand reconciled before God? It looks like the one we gather around every week. God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies so that we have a foretaste of that day when we will be surrounded not by our enemies but by brothers and sisters in Christ. When God's time will be our time. When God gives us life that is gracious, abundant, and transformative. That is the life that we receive every time we gather around this table and are sent out into the world.

When we gather around this table today, we'll be singing "All Are Welcome." This is Matt Hammond's first communion hymn, the hymn he chose because he felt like it best captured what communion is all about. Marty Haugen, who wrote it said that it was "an attempt to write a text that reflects the welcome to table fellowship that Jesus offered unconditionally to everyone." The original hymn had thirteen verses, one for each part of our liturgy, but the version that we'll use has only five. But that third verse should have a special resonance today, when we reflect on the twenty-third psalm. "Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat; a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet. Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space; as we share in Christ the feast that frees us; All are welcome... in this place."

United with Christ at this table, we are sent out in the presence of our enemies to make God's welcome our welcome, to make God's generosity our generosity, and to make God's hospitality our hospitality.

So that whenever someone tells us to that the worst thing about our enemies is the truest thing about them, we can say, "There's more grace in God than sin in us."

So that whenever someone tells us to tone it down, we can say, "All are welcome."

And whenever someone tells us to give up hope, we can say, "Alleluia! Christ is Risen."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor