

Sermon for Sunday, May 7, 2017

TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT

Psalm 23 / Acts 2:43-47

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Psalm 23 is certainly one of those passages of Scripture most easily recognized, recited, memorized, and quoted, regardless of our faith affiliation. This moving profession of God’s sovereign love, mercy, and grace is woven deeply into the fabric of our faith and even into our secular culture. It inspired poems, paintings, stories, movies, and songs. We teach it to our children and recite it at funerals. And everyone knows what it means. Or do we?

As it usually goes with assumptions, we may find them to be wanting once we poke them a little bit. If we poke the first line of Psalm 23 by comparing various translations, we find out quickly that things are not necessarily all that clear. Confessing that “I shall not want” is different from “I lack nothing” or “I don’t need a thing.” “Shall not want” is certainly an interesting phrase. Does it mean that the Psalmist is content with life? Or is it a defiant exclamation that even though there are many things he or she lacks and needs for a good life, he or she is determined to cling to God by the fingernails as his or her ultimate need?

Looking at the world today, I have to wonder about the pastoral image of Psalm 23. For many people, the wants and needs are great because they may lack even the most basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, or medical care. They have never seen “green pastures” but only know scorched and polluted earth. They have never had access to “still waters” but only know lead-contaminated water, water-borne illnesses, drought, and thirst. They know what it means to walk through all kinds of “dark valleys,” and they would be foolish not to fear evil because not fearing evil would mean to expose themselves to torture and death. For many, too many, there is no comfort. No table. No peace. Enemies abound, and their cups do not overflow, but are bone dry. This is not a gloomy assessment. It’s reality!

How do we cope with such a grim reality, especially in light of Christ’s resurrection from the dead and his promise that he has come that all may have life, and have it in abundance? That he is the Good Shepherd taking care of his sheep? If we are honest, we all want and are in need of some things. I know there are certain things I want. I also know there are certain things I need, and these two are not necessarily the same. So, shall I not want, even though I am aware, often painfully aware, of what I lack and of what I am in need? I am sure all the folks between Texas and Michigan who have been flooded out yet again have an opinion on “not lacking or not needing a thing” right now.

When life meets faith, when flood waters threaten to overwhelm us or tornadoes blow our livelihoods away—both literally and metaphorically speaking—we are stretched in ways we could not even imagine until then. Those are usually also the times when all our human-made divisions have the biggest chance of breaking down. “Life”—floods, droughts, tornadoes, earthquakes,

cancer, Alzheimer's, death—makes no distinctions between Democrats and Republicans, Christians, Jews or Muslims, young or old, men or women, black or white, gay, straight, or transgender. And when “life happens,” all these different tribes to which we pledge our allegiances take second place.

The early Christians understood this. They knew that their survival and abundant life depended on sticking it out together and on sharing their resources. “All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell all their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all, as many had need.” If Jesus’ resurrection taught the early Christians anything, it taught them this: They had become Christ’s ambassadors, Christ’s incarnations, his hands and feet and heart and mind in the world, and it was up to them to continue his work. And in gratitude for the blessings they had received, “they spent much of the time in the temple, they broke bread ... and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people.”

In the early nineties, *The Spice Girls*, a British pop band had a smash hit with a silly song in which they challenged, “I tell you what I want, what I really really want / so tell me what you want, what you really really want.” What is it that we want from God? What is it that we want from each other? From “life?” Whatever the answer might be for each of us individually, as Easter people we know that our well-being and the well-being of all people begins with the community at worship where all our wants and needs are met. “In gratitude, they spent much time in the temple and broke bread.”

That is where the Psalmist finds him- or her-self as well: In the temple, at worship. The Psalms of the faithful were not read alone at home. They were prayed by the assembled community during worship in the temple. So the “I shall not want” becomes a “we shall not want.” The Psalmist knows that the only place in this world fraught with peril, the only place where we truly do not lack a thing, is when we are assembled at worship--in the house of the Lord where we want to dwell our whole life long.

Nowhere is this resurrection reality more evident than at the Lord’s Table, the most radical statement of inclusivity, which lies at the core of our faith. It is the Lord’s Table, and our savior invites all who trust in him to share the feast which he has prepared. At this table, we don’t need to call ahead to make reservations, there are no special seats or sky boxes. At this table, Christ welcomes all and shares all God has so that no one will ever have any need. At this table, we can confess and proclaim that the Lord, the Lord alone, is indeed our shepherd. So tell me, is this not something you and I want, something we really really want?

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