

Dinner with Your Enemies **Psalm 23: 5**

(preached April 21, 2024)

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” These words begin a psalm that is familiar to many of us. In fact, the 23rd psalm might well be the best known passage in the entire Bible. For generations, people have found hope in its comforting words. With beautiful images of green pastures and still waters, the psalm assures us of our place in God’s creation. The psalm assures us of God’s constant care, instilling confidence that God will provide for our every need. The psalm assures us that in every situation, no matter how difficult, God will sustain us.

Over the years, I’ve read and prayed this psalm more times than I can count. I’ve drawn inspiration from its words of assurance and hope. I imagine many of you have done the same. But every time I read it, one verse stands out. One verse stands out from the message of God’s constant care. It stands out from the beautiful images of lush green fields and quiet waters. It stands out in a way that I can only call incongruous. Here, in the midst of the message that God will protect and provide for us, we find these words: “thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

A table prepared...for me! So far, so good. But, “in the presence of my enemies?” What’s that about? It’s incongruous. I was truly puzzled until I found some new insight about this verse in a book by Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner wrote a book about the 23rd psalm, where he discusses this verse. He asks a question, “How did this line find its way into the psalm? ... There is something abrupt and unsettling about these words. [They] seem at first glance to reek of spite and taking pleasure in the [discomfort] of others. The psalmist seems to be saying, Not only does God supply me with a lavish banquet; what makes it even more pleasurable is that all those people who don’t like me will see how God treats me and realize that I am God’s favorite” (Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm*, 2003, p. 125).

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” What is this verse - this vivid description of a banquet spread for us while our enemies look on - what is this verse doing in this psalm about trust and gratitude? What are we to make of it? It seems a long way from the lofty spiritual tone of the psalm. It verges on vindictiveness.

So what are we to do with this verse? In his book on the 23rd psalm, Kushner offers another way to think about it. He refers to an idea from the Jewish theologian Zalman Schachter: the idea of a different kind of dinner party, a dinner party in our imagination. Schachter says that, every year, he hosts a dinner party in his imagination: so to speak, a dinner party in his head.

Who does he invite to this dinner party in his head? He invites everyone with whom he’s had a run-in in the past year. He invites everyone with whom he’s been on bad terms, everyone who was mean to his family, everyone who has hurt or disappointed him – he invites all of them

to this imaginary dinner party. Then, in his mind, he goes around the table and thanks each of these people for the lessons they have taught him.

For example, he would thank the person who didn't help him in his time of need. She didn't help him in his time of need because she was too wrapped up in her own problems. He would tell that person that she has taught him how much he can realistically expect of people. Because she didn't help him in his time of need, he has come to expect that most people will be thinking about their own concerns more than his. This might sound cynical, but it can bring a nice outcome. When someone actually does help him, it comes as a pleasant surprise. His expectations are more realistic. He would also thank this person for helping him grow in self-awareness. Because of her, he has realized that sometimes he has failed to help when someone has turned to him.

The 23rd psalm is full of God's goodness, and this verse about feasting in front of our enemies seems incongruous. But could it point to a way you and I might learn to see our enemies differently? Could we learn to see them as people God might use to help us grow, to help us grow into the people God created us to be?

All of us know people who are hard for us to get along with. All of us know people whose thoughtlessness or downright meanness is tough to deal with. All of us know people who push our buttons. Even members of the clergy know people who push our buttons. We see this in something that happened to a pastor who arrived at her church one Monday morning to find a very unpleasant surprise. There was a dead mule in the churchyard! The pastor called the police. But there did not appear to be any foul play, so they referred her to the health department. The health department said there did not appear to be any threat to public health, and they told her to call the sanitation department. The manager there said he could not pick up the mule without authorization from the mayor.

Now the pastor knew the mayor. She and he had had many disputes over the years. The mayor had a bad temper and was generally hard to deal with. Still, she decided she had to call and settle the issue of the mule once and for all. When the mayor picked up the phone, he did just what she expected. He immediately began to rant and rave at the pastor. Finally, the mayor asked her, "Why did you call me anyway? Isn't it your job to bury the dead?"

Now the pastor's patience was at an end. She replied, "Yes, Mayor, it is my job to bury the dead. But first I like to inform the next of kin!"

All of us know people who push our buttons. We might think of them as enemies. But could this banquet in the psalm, this banquet in the presence of our enemies, be an invitation to see those people differently? Could it be a different kind of dinner party? Could we host a dinner party in our imaginations, where we learn to see our enemies in a new light? Could we acknowledge that God can use many things - even our enemies - to help us grow into the people God created us to be?

Who would you invite to your table for that imaginary dinner party? The boss who fired you, in spite of your years of faithful service? Would you tell him that you now appreciate what

he did, because it forced you to look in a new direction and find a job that suited you better? Would you invite your sister in law: the woman who never fails to remind you of the stupid thing you did years ago? Would you thank her for keeping you humble?

I can think of a few folks I'd invite if I were to host a dinner party like that. For sure I'd invite a woman I'll call Claudia, whom I knew when I lived in Germany years ago. Claudia and I both worked at the language school where I taught English and she taught German.

Claudia was the kind of person who would tell you, very shortly after meeting you, that she was from one of Germany's aristocratic families. It didn't seem to matter that, after two world wars, aristocrats are few and far between in Germany. Claudia often made a fuss about her pedigree. She was a formal sort of person. She called me Frau Merry and expected the same formality from me.

Still, I wanted to be Claudia's friend. I wanted to know as many German people as possible, aristocrat or not, and Claudia qualified. I wanted a more familiar relationship with her. One day, when it was just the two of us in the staff room, I suggested that she and I call each other by our first names. With perfect hindsight, I can see now that for some reason Claudia saw that as an opening: if we were going to be more familiar with each other, and call each other by our first names, she wanted to tell me all the things she didn't like about me. I guess you could say she wanted to give me some constructive criticism.

She criticized my clothes. My slacks were too short and my jacket wasn't tailored properly. She said I looked silly because I carried my things in a backpack, and in Germany no self-respecting person would wear a backpack unless they were on a hiking trip. She found fault with a number of other things. For a good fifteen minutes, she told me everything she didn't like about me. Then she headed for the door. Just before leaving, she turned around and said, "OK. You can call me Claudia now and I will call you Elva."

At this point I was in no mood to call her Claudia. There were a lot of other things I wanted to call her, none of which I can say in a sermon. For a long time, I was hurting over what she said that day. It seems to me that whoever said "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me," couldn't be more wrong. I was deeply hurt by her words. But now, all these years later, when I think about invitations to that imaginary dinner party, Claudia's name would be at the top of the list.

Here's what I would say to her: I would say, "Now, Claudia, I appreciate what you did. Of course I don't appreciate feeling two inches tall after your harangue. But from that experience I learned a different way to react to being treated badly. Here's what I learned.

"I learned that, when I'm treated badly, it's not because of something I did. I've learned that it's not my fault. I don't have to ask myself, 'What did I do to make this happen to me?' And, I don't have to ask myself, 'What's wrong with her that she would do something so awful to me?' I learned there is another way to react: a way that doesn't seek to blame myself or others.

Instead, I might simply ask, ‘What can I learn from this? What can I learn from this that will help reduce the number of people I think of as enemies? What can I learn that will lead me to grow into the person God created me to be?’”

The 23rd psalm is a beautiful, beloved psalm of praise and gratitude. In this psalm about God’s constant love and care, it may seem incongruous to say that God sets a lavish table for us, in the presence of our enemies. Or maybe it’s not so incongruous after all. Maybe it’s not intended to be vindictive. Maybe God sets that splendid feast before us, as a way for us to encounter those people we might consider enemies. Maybe God provides that feast so that, around that dinner table, you and I might realize that God can use them to help us become the people God created us to be.

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