10/17-18/20 Enemies at the Table Rev. Amy Haines

Psalm 23 Come to the Table Series

Thou art with me. Those familiar words anchor this song of trust, words that remind us that no matter what we face in life, God is always with us.

God is with us as a good shepherd. God is also with us as a gracious host.

As we hear these comforting words today from Psalm 23, may we listen for God’s welcome at God’s table, a welcome we are then to extend to others, including our enemies.

Psalm 23, from the King James Version of the Bible:

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

When I was a child, and a storm raged outside, I often found myself reciting this psalm until I fell asleep.

After 20 plus years of ministry, I have lost count how many times I have proclaimed these words at funerals.

There is comfort in this psalm in the image of God as our shepherd. One who will guide us to those places of calm waters and green pastures; One who cares for us and restores our soul; One who is with us even in the midst of the valleys of darkness, evil and death.

There is comfort in this psalm that recognizes life is not always calm and idyllic. There will be times we face evil and enemies. There will be times we face death and dark valleys. For many, 2020 has been one long valley of struggle and fear, of doubt and anxiety.

There is comfort in this psalm that God will be with us through all that we face in life. Through the highs and lows and in-betweens, God is there. Like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, like the early disciples proclaiming a risen Christ to a hostile world, like our faith ancestors who have kept the faith

through war and pandemic and persecution, we, too, can trust this good news that God is with us through it all.

There is also comfort in this psalm that God is our gracious host. One who invites us to the table;

One who honors us in front of enemies; One who pursues us with goodness and faithfulness and grace

throughout our lives.

Often, we listen to this psalm and remember the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John when Jesus proclaimed “I am the Good Shepherd.” Yet today, I invite you to listen to this psalm and remember

the stories of table fellowship in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus welcomed all to God’s table—sinner and saint, Pharisee and tax collector, women and men, disciples and outcast.

Today we are in week three of a four-week series called “Come to the Table.”

Revelation-Hospitality-Enemies-Laughter-all are found at God’s table and also at our tables.

Throughout his life Jesus revealed God’s hospitality and welcome to all, and calls us to share the welcome we have received with others.

Yet today’s theme challenges us—how are we to be at table with those we consider our enemies? How do we receive God’s mercy in the midst of conflict? How do we offer forgiveness and grace?

You may be thinking to yourself, Pastor Amy, I really don’t have anyone I consider an enemy! That is good news if you can say that today!

You may not have any enemies, so take a step back from enemies—who are you in conflict with? Who would you hesitate this day to invite to your table? Who do you struggle to see as a beloved child of God?

There is much that divides us in our world today. Politics. Masks. Human sexuality. Economics. Racism. Immigration. Even how we interpret scripture.

We are divided in society; we are divided in our families; we are divided among our friends; and yes, we are even divided as a church, in our local congregation as well as in our denomination.

We have hope for a better future, yet many of us struggle in the present. We like what F.F. Bruce once said, “The best way to destroy an enemy is to turn him into a friend.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com:enemies

Yet I wonder, how many friends have we turned into enemies? How many family members have we chosen to distance from due to their views or ours? How many Facebook friends have we snoozed for 30 days to get us past the election? How many brothers and sisters in Christ have we refused to truly welcome because they approach life from a different theological perspective?

We may not have enemies, but if we are honest in our confessions, we can name those with whom we would struggle to sit with at table.

And God says to us today, remember—they, too are also invited to my table. They, like us, are loved by God and offered forgiveness and restoration from God.

While we love the image in Psalm 23 of God as Shepherd, we are not as familiar or as comfortable

with the image in Psalm 23 of God as Host.

Verse 5 proclaims: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (v5 NRSV)

This verse builds on the reality of the valleys of evil, struggle and death spoken of in verse 4. King David was not immune to the challenges of life. From the time he was a shepherd for his father’s flocks to the time he became a shepherd for God’s people as king, David walked often in the valleys of life: when Saul pursued him, when his first child died in infancy, when his family fell apart in murderous competitiveness, when he gave into temptation with Bathsheba. David had many enemies throughout his life.

Yet, through it all, David knew God was with him, protecting him, comforting him, guiding him, even if he often took the long route of faith tempered with failures and fear.

Through it all, David knew that God would provide, even in the face of his enemies.

Imagine a wedding feast with an unlimited buffet of the best meats, fruits, breads, and drink. Imagine a party thrown where not only were family and friends invited, but also neighbors and yes, even enemies.

This was one way that wealth was shown and shared in the ancient near eastern culture.

To imagine God as host at such a feast is a reminder that God does not simply say I am with you, but God richly provides for us, out of abundant love and grace.

This is an image of God as host that treats each and every one of us as honored and valued guests. This is an image of God as host that provides substance and fellowship for everyone around the table. This is an image of God as host that is committed to our wellbeing.

No matter what we face in life, no matter what conflicts rent us asunder, God is still wanting to bring out the best in all of us.

Are we ready to recognize our place at God’s table? No matter our struggles, no matter our sins, God still sets an abundant table for each and every one of us. We are all welcomed, chosen, and offered healing by God.

After we recognize our place, then are we ready to recognize the place of others at God’s table? Friend and foe? Those we agree with and those we don’t? Those we embrace and those we tolerate? My challenge has always been when I recognize the other at the table of God, I have to confess when I have been the other to someone else.

If we are ready to recognize the abundant welcome and grace that everyone is offered at God’s table,

then that table can become a table of blessing. Then that table can become the place where reconciliation begins. Then that table can become a conduit for forgiveness given and received.

Such a table is described in Luke 7:36-50, another one of Luke’s 10 table stories. In this story, a different anointing takes place in the presence of enemies.

Jesus was invited to table fellowship at the home of a Pharisee, a respected religious leader. As Jesus took his place at the table, a woman who led a sinful life arrived and approached Jesus, weeping.

She began to wash Jesus’ feet with her tears and her hair, then anointed them with rich perfume.

The Pharisee was appalled that Jesus let her come close, let alone touch him. She was a woman. She was a sinner. She was unclean. To the Pharisee who sought for purity, she was also the enemy.

Yet Jesus not only allowed her to come close, he welcomed her tears. He welcomed her anointing. Then, he forgave her sins. She who sought to bless Jesus was blessed by Jesus. That table became a place where grace was found and reconciliation began.

When have our minds and hearts and lives been shaped and changed at table with others? When have we offered and received forgiveness? When have we approached a table not in fear of conflict but in openness to blessing?

Several years ago, I was part of the planning team for our conference’s Circles of Grace around human sexuality. Many more people turned out at each location than ever expected.

Some were there with open hearts, willing to listen to the stories of others, and some were there with closed minds, determined to teach others why their way was the right way of thinking and believing.

Some table groups were open to forgiveness and blessing while other table groups were not safe places to share no matter where one landed on the theological spectrum.

The one story that has always stuck with me from those nights happened in the Foothills District in southern Ohio. On the way out, one older gentleman admitted he had no idea what LGBTQ even stood for, but that night he had made a new friend. He and his new friend had not bonded through theology;

they found common ground as fathers striving to love their children. They both recognized that they were on a journey of faith, a faith lived out in very different ways.

Just because someone thinks differently than us or lives out their faith differently than us does not make them our enemy. Rather, they remind us of the diversity of God’s children around the table and that we are all on different places on our journeys of faith.

This way of living is not easy. To welcome others as God has welcomed us. To be at table with those with whom we will never fully agree. To see one another as fellow sojourners rather than enemies.

The only way we thrive on this journey of faith is to remember that God is with us. We love because God first loved us. We care because Jesus cares for us. We move forward in ministry because the Holy Spirit guides us. Living by faith is not living by our own power, but by the power of God with us.

As God as host invites us to God’s table of blessing, God as shepherd then leads us from the table

out into the pastures and valleys of life, to love as we’ve been loved. To forgive as we’ve been forgiven.

To be open to possibility rather than shut down by fear.

One of the costliest requirements of Christlike love is follow Jesus’s call in Matthew 5 to

“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Mt 5: 44)

Brett McCracken ponders what they may look like in our lives, and offers us the example of Nadine Collier, whose mother, Ethel, was one of nine victims in the 2015 church massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Given the chance to address her mother’s killer, Collier choked back tears as she forgave him.

She declared: “You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again — but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul… If God forgives you, I forgive you.”

--Adapted from *Uncomfortable*by *Brett McCracken,* *2017*, *p.92*.

 www.crossway.org. Found on thepastorsworkshop.com:enemies

Forgiveness is a process. Living by faith is a journey. We will all have our highs and lows, our times of faithfulness and our times of failure.

Yet, throughout all of life, God is with us all. God provides for us all. God pursues us all, with goodness and mercy, with faithfulness and grace.

Psalm 23 ends with the wonderful image of goodness and mercy following us all the days of our lives.

Yet the word translated follows is not some mere obedient lamb, trailing along behind us. Rather, that word is better translated as pursue. God is pursuing us with goodness and mercy.

Or, as we Wesleyans like to say, God’s grace is always with us, calling us to faith in Jesus through prevenient grace or calling us to be more like Jesus through sanctifying grace. God is never going to let us go, no matter whether we are beside still waters or in the dark valleys of life. God wants the best for us, as shepherd and host, as Creator and Savior.

This is good news proclaimed today in Psalm 23! As good shepherd and gracious host, God is with us always. May we give thanks for God’s presence in our lives, and follow where God leads us, to tables of fellowship and mercy, to lives of forgiveness and grace.

God, by your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world

until Christ comes and we feast together as his heavenly banquet. May we dwell in your house, in your love, in your ways forever. Amen.