



From the Pulpit: August 29, 2021

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time / Back to School Blessing Sunday

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Psalm 23:5

How to Love the World Again, VI: The Feast of Each Moment

Next week Bill will preach the last sermon in our “How to Love the World Again” series which pairs poetry with each verse of Psalm 23. Today we are delighted to be blessing our children and youth as they return to school. Psalm 23 is very familiar—Kenilworth Unions’ 3rd graders have learned it by heart for the last 75 years.

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 forever.

“Maybe it helps us to see more clearly God’s desire for us to grow love, to remember that we are invited to sit at the table of the Good Shepherd—where there is a place for everyone.”

The fifth verse also has a noticeable shift. Did you notice that this psalm, or song, starts off outdoors with the shepherd in the green grass, and the cool water, and then goes into a valley of shadows? Then all of a sudden, we are at a table, maybe even a feast! There are many stories about food and meals in the Bible. In Sunday school, we use the Godly Play story of the

Good Shepherd and World Communion to help make sense of the movement from pasture to table.

Then we ask, “Now I wonder where this table could really be? I wonder if the people around this table are happy?” Some of you might say here in church we have a table like this. Some of you may say that this table is God’s dream for the world—a place where all of us can be around the table, in peace, and joy, and the love of God, and there is enough for everyone. What a feast!

God prepares a table the psalmist writes. But then did you notice what comes next? “in the presence

of mine enemies.” Wait a minute.... Is the writer of this song saying that they want God to make a table for them that their enemies can see and smell but can’t join in? That the psalmist wants to leave his enemies out of God’s feast?

Last week we explored one of the big shifts in Psalm 23: the writer of the psalm, or psalmist, starts by talking **about** God, (God makes, God restores) and then begins talking **to** God, saying, “For you are with me.” Today we are going to talk about the three parts of verse 5: the table, the head, and the cup.

We can all imagine both being left out and wanting to leave out someone in the school lunchroom or a birthday party. We know what that feels like don't we? Show me with your thumbs up or down "is that what God the good shepherd would do!"? Of course not! Every year our third graders wonder about this line. The year that we made up the hand motions for the 23rd psalm, one of our young people said, no God wants to make a way for us to sit at the same table with our enemies.

Children aren't the only ones to wonder about this part about not wanting good things for our enemies. Our adult Bible study this summer was reluctant to read the psalms because there are many lines like this in the 150 psalms. So we, like the third graders, had to study, and make sense of these kinds of lines.

One of the people who has helped make sense of this particular line is CS Lewis. Have you ever read or watched *The Lion the Witch and The Wardrobe*? The author is CS Lewis and he also wrote books about the Bible. He says, we cannot ignore these lines, but we can make them useful.¹

CS Lewis says that this verse might be helpful, not because it is the right thing to do but because it reminds us that making someone jealous, leaving them out of God's feast, is the wrong thing to do. It hurts others. And then those people who are hurt and left out might leave out and hurt other people. And that is the little seed of dislike that can grow and grow if we don't stop it. When we say it out loud it makes us pay attention.

Maybe it helps us to see more clearly God's desire for us to grow love, to remember that we are invited to sit at the table of the Good Shepherd—where there is a place for everyone. The wonderful thing about the Bible is that every time you read and study it, you notice something new or make a new connection.

One of the Back to School Blessing gifts you will receive at the end of worship has a sticker that says, "For you are with me." I hope that it reminds you that God is with us everywhere—at the table, in our homes, in the church, wherever we learn and grow and play. God leaves no one out.

The second part of verse 5 says, "thou anointest my head with oil," Anointing is a fancy word for smearing or pouring oil on the head. Does that seem strange? Around 3,000 years ago when this psalm was written, anointing someone's head with oil was a way to show that they were special, and were going to do good things for God.

Each of you are special and are meant to do good things for God. But instead of pouring oil on your head, I hope it is ok that we are giving you a "You are loved" sticker in your blessing bag instead. You may place it on a laptop or a water bottle to remind you God loves you. You may also give it away to someone else who might need to hear that God loves them.

Sometimes it takes a long time to find what makes us special. Not every teacher or coach or friend will see what makes you—you right away. But God sees you. God loves you!

Turn to someone next to you and say, "God loves you. You are special." Doesn't that feel good to hear! So while we don't put oil on our heads, or even temporary tattoos that say "You are loved," let these stickers remind you every day.

The third part of verse 5 is the cup. This part is especially for the parents, teachers, coaches, and all those who work with kids. Perhaps your cups feel a bit empty at the start of this school year. Many of us are concerned about our kids, the pandemic, about work and time and money. The psalmist invites us to remember that even in challenging situations God's blessings, the

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¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Psalms*, page 22.

things that bring us life and love, surround us. The biggest obstacle to recognizing our overflowing cups might be not having time to slow down and pay attention to the wonder and beauty all around us.

Of course it is challenging to notice God's blessing when life moves so quickly all the time! I'm going to take a point of personal privilege here and say that at 2:00 I will be moving my youngest daughter into her dorm. Just a few hours from now Brian and I will be officially "empty nesting." I am sure we will take a picture. And I will probably not be able to resist posting it on social media with a side by side of her in preschool or kindergarten. All of you know that familiar mix of joy at watching our kids grow into these amazing humans—and the tenderness of how quickly it all happens.

"Children help
us to live in the
present—to see
what a feast each
moment is....
A reminder that
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Today's poem explores the mix of parenting emotions while inviting us to notice the blessings that surround us, to be present to the feast of each moment:

"My Daughter's Singing" by Garret Keizer
How to Love the World, Poems of Gratitude and Hope

I will miss the sound of her singing
through the wall that separates
her bathroom from ours, in the morning
before school, how she would harmonize
with the bare-navel angst
of some screaming Ophelia on her stereo,
though she had always seemed a contented kid,
a grower of rare gourds, an aficionado
of salamanders, and a babysitter prized
for her playful, earnest care, her love
of children so pure she seemed to become
a little child whenever she took one by the hand,
entering heaven so handily.

But it reminded me, that singing,
of the soul depths we never know,
even in those we love more than our souls,
so mad we are to anticipate the future,
and already I am talking—
a year to go before she goes
to college, and listen to me talking—
in the past tense as she sings.

That one pulls at the heartstrings doesn't it? Every parent and grandparent wants to slow down time—well at least the good parts. We might be happy to skip over the sleepless nights and the hangry over tired tantrums. Perhaps recognizing God's abundant blessings is easier said than done when time seems to be accelerating.

One antidote to the speed of life is to practice gratitude, to live in the present tense. Make a habit of sharing what you are thankful for at the dinner table, in a poem, in a journal, or even an app. Write them on slips of paper and put them in a box, like this one that used to be my grandmother's recipe box. It is a joy to look back and see the things my children were grateful for—so cute to see their preschool spellings of “sister,” “dragonfly”, and “cousin”.

Children help us to live in the present—to see what a feast each moment is. So the third thing in your blessing bag is a bracelet that says, “my cup runneth over,”

when you wear it, be reminded to pay attention to God's gifts all around us, to say thank you for the feast in each moment.

A vision of God's table where all are welcome. The knowledge that we are special to God. A reminder that our cups of blessing overflow. May these three things from verse five accompany you into the new school year. May it be one of hope and health, learning and love.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

—Prayers of the People— **By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

God, we are awake.
The song of the birds.
The song of the sun.
The song of our friends.
We are awake.
Awake, we can trust.
Awake, we can pray.
Awake, we can offer to you those we love.
For the ones who know joy this week, hear us.
For the ones who know worry, hear us.
For the ones who know sorrow, hear us.
For the ones who know love, hear us.
For the ones who know peace, hear us.
For the ones who know fear, hear us.
For the ones who know in a new way, hear us.
Hear us, O God.
With gratitude, we offer such love to you.

Bless our school year.
Bless the littlest ones, their very first day.
Bless the oldest ones, a return to the classroom.
And everyone in between.
Bless the full backpacks.
Bless the carpool.
Bless the bus ride.
Bless the crossing guard.
Bless the bike rack.
Bless the principal.

Bless the janitor.
Bless the chalkboard and computer.
Bless the art room.
Bless the music.
Bless budding scientists.
Bless curious minds.
Bless kindness.
Bless friendship.
Bless connection.
Bless learning.
Bless teaching.
Bless supporting.
Bless the lunch room.
Bless afternoon snacks.
Bless the homework.
Bless the walk home.
Bless the sports fields.
Bless the after school connection.
Bless the tutors.
Bless the coaches.
Bless the hallways.
Bless us all in the way of love.
Bless, O God, the full hearts.
Bless, O God.
Amen. Amen. Amen.

And God of such blessing, hear us gather our voices together praying...