

The Good Shepherd (3)

Pastor Ed Harkey

Psalm 23:5

TLC Keene, NH

“Fed”

*“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.”*

INTRODUCTION

A sumptuous banquet. Healing and anointing. An overflowing cup. What do these images convey to you? Moms! Duh! Many of whom were/are great cooks. And when it came to healing our boobos, who could do it with more finesse? When we wanted a little extra money? Ask my own kids. Dad’s wallet? Locked up tight!

Yes, moms are the face of love. Especially the ones who lived out of their faith in Christ; and then, conveyed that faith to their children. In my mom’s case, she is the one who brought me to faith, and my father too! She was the face of faith: silently praying, singing, teaching, devoted all to her King!

As does our heavenly Father ... and our Good Shepherd; with deep love for us. In fact, I’d like to make a bold assertion this morning (not my own): “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more; there is nothing you can do to make Him love you less.” (Busby in Bryan Smith, “The Love of God Encountering the Reckless, Raging Fury,” in *Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven*, pp. 50-66)¹

MAIN THOUGHT:

In God’s economy of grace, He is luxurious and lavish in His love, holding nothing back, poured out in abundance in the sending of His one and only Son.

THE LAVISH LOVE OF GOD, LEADS THE LAVISHLY LOVED TO
LAVISHLY LOVE GOD, AND OTHERS.

Amen.

+++

¹ I am deeply indebted to the chapter of this book for this morning’s sermon.

So, when it comes to the idea of the unmerited, undeserved, unconditional love of God towards you and me, how would you rate your certainty in this?

“I don’t believe it. I’m only beginning to believe it. I want to, and sometimes do, but am struggling to believe it. I do believe it – for others. I live with complete confidence in God’s love, now living in a radical trust [in Jesus].” (Smith, 213)

Me? It depends on what day you ask me. Growing up in a home where love was often conditional, I *do* struggle on some days believing that it can be totally true. For others, without question! In fact, if I preach anything else, get another Pastor. But personally, I’m all in most days, but not so much on others.

How about you? And how did you come to believe whatever it is that you believe about the nature of God’s love? Where, as we move Psalm 23 towards its terminus, we pause at v. 5, a portrait of liberality, of generosity, of a kindness that is unlike anything in this world.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

To be sure, what comes to mind are the gifts that God freely gives: means of His grace – sacraments, gifts set apart – ways that God tangibly demonstrates His unconditional and unfathomable love: this banqueting Table, that fount of His blessing – vehicles of His grace and forgiveness to weary souls.

But let’s not rush it. There are other ways God’s love is demonstrated to us:

As in creation, just now coming to life again; vibrant colors! *“Green pastures and still waters of refreshment.”* Many ways that this planet of stirs our souls!

Then there is community, “one holy Christian and apostolic church,” the Body of Christ, consisting of our spiritual mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. Yes, who in the Body, in *this* Body, bears the face of love to you? Where, in community, we come together around:

“One body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6)

The Church is ... She is ... you are ... beautiful!

Ah, then, the pre-eminent love of God, seen in the face of our Good Shepherd!

Where God's Word is chock-full of stories of God's overflowing liberality of love towards you and me: stories of laborers in the vineyard each working different hours, but all getting the same pay, or of a selfish kid who took off with his parent's money only to return home to a feast and forgiveness, or all of the disreputable folks Jesus made it His mission to hang around with, or the unschooled/ordinary folks He still loves to call disciples! (Smith, 59-60)

Jesus is the quintessential face of love, reminding us again: "There is nothing you can do to make God love you more; there is nothing you can do to make God love you less." Who went Calvary's Way to prove His love, signing a covenant of love w/us in scarlet ink, with a *"gifts and call that are irrevocable."* (Romans 11:29)

This is more than what God is. John tells us this is *who* He is: love incarnate, love with a face turned ever towards ... *you!* (1 John 4:8)

Why does God so desperately/passionately want us to know and believe this?

First, for those times when we are in the *"presence of (our) enemies."* For those times when life in this ole world just gets to be too much, and when Satan is knocking at our door and calling our inheritance in Christ into question. What better place to come back to than an identity rooted in the water and the Word, or the perpetual feast He sets before His prodigal sons and daughters to emphatically remind them who they are!

Second, God wants us to know and believe this because there is the matter of our own sinfulness, our guilt, our shame and regret.

"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (1 John 2:1)

Yes, I know where I can go when I need to hear a life-giving Word:

"Your sins are forgiven you in Jesus's name."

Here, who I am – not what the world, Satan or my own sin may be screaming in my ear, but who I *truly* am – is restored, never again to be called into question.

Yes, I may be weak. I know I am broken, and that “there is nothing in me that demands or deserves to be loved, but I AM LOVED NONETHELESS.” (Smith, 61) Child of God, yes you are!

God wants us to know this ... finally, because He then wants us to be the face of that love to others.

“Freely you have received without pay; freely give without pay.” (Matthew 10:8)

Which, unfortunately, is where a lot of the lavishness of love of God is lost.

Yes, it’s hard to love others when you don’t think God loves you, or is perpetually angry at you. Child of God, *He is not!*

“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” (John 3:17)

Yes, do you think that the God who knew you before the foundations of the world were laid, who then loved you into existence, and then (if that were not enough) sent His one and only Son to redeem you is now, eternally angry with you? Absolutely, resolutely He is not!

*“There is, now therefore **no** condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1)

Whereby, being secure in His love for you, you are His face to others. Where, it is that love of God expressed towards others that may well convince them that “*God is love.*” But it’s pretty much a guarantee that a lack of that lavish love expressed will almost always will cause another to doubt it.

But our love for others flows from the source: the deep pool of His grace. We receive it from Him; we then, give it to others in His name. It is love’s way, be it a mother, a heavenly Father, or a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Wherein, when God calls us to be His ... we must learn to accept His love on His terms.” (Smith, 62) Where, it’s OK to be broken. That’s the condition God wants us to be in. Indeed, the lavish love of God can only be real for those who need it: who would receive it, be sometimes broken by it, but all to be healed in Jesus’ name.

Second, share it. Practice it with the same liberality in which it was given. For which it is our “duty to pray, praise and give thanks.” *Wed* – as sheep to our Shepherd, *led* by Him even through dark valleys, and now *fed* in lavish love, it’s what the Good Shepherd now calls us to be and to do. We exist for no other purpose than to glorify God, and to be His face – Jesus’ face – to others – to be His liberal, lavish love!

CONCLUSION

In Gary Chapman’s book on the *Five Love Languages*, he characterizes them not only as ones that encourage us, but ones we speak to others. These are: speaking words of affirmation, giving gifts, doing acts of service, quality time spent with others, and appropriate physical touch.

Which is yours – the one that makes your heart sing when it is done unto you?

Perhaps not the same – and often not – what then, is the one you speak or express towards others?

Our heavenly Father embodies them all in His Son. Where, that bold assertion again rings in our ears: “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more; there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.” Yes, in God’s economy of grace, He is liberal and lavish in His love, holding nothing back, pouring out Calvary love both into, and *through* us in the name of His one and only Son.

THE LAVISH LOVE OF GOD, LEADS THE LAVISHLY LOVED TO
LAVISHLY LOVE GOD, AND OTHERS.

Amen.

+++

[FRIDAY E-MAIL:] Returning to the “well” of Psalm 23, I am struck of how many have done the same. Just peruse your hymnal, and you’ll find three “Psalm 23’s” in hymns 709, 710 & 711. Philip Keller’s book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* is still just as popular as it was when it first came out, as is Kenneth Bailey’s 1000-year review of the nature of shepherds and sheep in the Old & New Testaments. A while back, I purchased a collection of poems and anecdotes, entitled *A Huddle of Sheep*. Fascinating! As are we ... with this beloved Psalm.

Here is Psalm 23 from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

GOD, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I’m not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure. [As to this week’s focus:] You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing. [And then, the last stanza:] Your beauty and love chase after me every day ... I’m back home in the house of GOD for the rest of my life.

What a blessed Savior we have! A most trusted Guide, to be sure, but also a LORD who is invested and benevolent. Who knows all the right times and places that we need to rest, and then provides for it. Who in His precious Word and Sacrament offers us the food we need to sustain us. Provisions for the journey. Courage for the day. Assurance that we will see the end.

The reason your Savior does all of this – “*for His name’s sake.*” In other words, as our God sets us on the path of His righteousness, He stakes His whole reputation on the enterprise. Whereby, staking His very being on seeing us through, we can be certain that by means of His food and drink to sustain us, and His sure Word to guide and direct us, He’s all in, child of God, all in. Indeed, Jesus not only paves the way, He *is* “*the Way, the Truth and the Life.*”

Rejoice, today, in this blessed Word, and in a Savior who knows exactly what we need, and when we need it. Yes, how blessed we are to know that out of His great love for us, there is no place He would rather be than right by our side. Where, truth be told, there’s no better place than we – by faith – would want Him to be. SYOS

Additional Notes:

Once we are *wed* – as sheep to their Shepherd . . . *led* through shadowy and dark places . . . Psalm 23 moves us forward still, to revel in the joy of how graciously, sumptuously and liberally, we are *fed*.

We've been here before – food and drink – “*green pastures and still waters.*” But for the one praying this Psalm, the imagery shifts from that of shepherd and his sheep to a gracious host and grateful guest. There, in v. 2 it was about feeding animals. Here, in v. 5 it's about feeding people.

You [my host, like a woman in Middle Eastern culture] **prepare a** [festive and feast worthy] **table** [meal²] **before me** [your guest].

“In the East, a man's fame is spread by means of his table and lavish hospitality rather than by his possessions. Strangers and neighbors alike discuss tables where they have been guests. Such tales spread from one town to another and are handed down from one generation to another. There is considerable gossip as to how guests and strangers are entertained.” (Lamsa, *Shepherd of All*, 65-66)

I recall being in our first parish, when we were invited to the home of a sister and brother-in-law of a dear friend of ours. Just barely making ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck, we were invited to a sumptuous affair of a meal we could never have afforded – Porter House steaks – massive ones! Both sets of our eyes widened, and our mouths watered as each of us received one those puppies fresh off grill and onto our plates. (Vegetarians, I'm sorry!)

It's a common theme in Jesus' ministry – especially in the parables in Luke, where the idea of table fellowship explodes. Where, everywhere you look, Jesus is at somebody's table, enjoying a meal, reveling in the company of others, especially “*tax collectors and sinners.*” Jesus' favorite company! So much so that it earns Him the distinction of being a “*glutton and drunkard.*”

² See Psalm 78:19; Proverbs 9:2; Isaiah 21:5; 65:11; Ezekiel 23:41

Of course, Jesus is neither, but He definitely loves a good meal. And how blessed we are that He offers to meet us every time we come together in His name.

“In traditional Middle Eastern culture, when you want the community to know that you have acquired wealth, you do not buy an expensive car or a large house with acres of grass around it. Rather, you host meals with three times as much food on the table as the numerous guests can eat.” (Bailey, 54)

Scripture is rich with such stories – Abraham and the three visitors (Genesis 18:1-8) ... the waiting father at the return of his wayward son (Luke 15:22-23).

“Wisdom has built her house ... She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table ... To him who lacks sense she says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.” (Proverbs 9:1-5)

Jesus does no less.

In the presence of my enemies [of all that would seek to waylay me and uproot my faith – my own sin, this world and Satan himself] ...

“The picture here is full of drama, action, suspense – and possible death.” (Keller, 96) Wherein, my enemies are God’s enemies.

But Jesus does not succumb to the whiles of sin, death and hell. He knows the tricks and treachery of life in this world, of Satan’s *“desire to sift us like wheat.”*

But we are not left to the whims of this world, as He bids us to stay close to Him.

Wherein, our Savior “demonstrates costly love to me irrespective of who is watching. People hostile to me will observe what he is doing and he knows that their hostility against me will be extended to him as a result. He doesn’t care. He offers that love anyway.” (Bailey, 57)

Again, the parable of the Prodigal Son is a good example, seen in the older brother's response to the lavish feast that the father gives in honor of his wayward son.

C. S. Lewis on getting dirty ...

"Don't sin ... but if you do."

"He has known our sufferings, experienced our sorrows and endured our struggles." (Keller, 99)

He cleanses us. Raises us up. "He wants our summer sojourn to be in peace ... No wonder He makes every possible provision to ensure that when we have to cope with Satan, sin or self, the contest will not be one-sided." (Keller, 98, 99) Your Good Shepherd is nearer than you think. He has set His Table for strength. He has stirred the deep pool of your Baptism, for us to return to for assurance.

Through all of His provision our Good Shepherd "ensures that we will have some gladness with our sadness; some delightful days as well as dark days; some sunshine as well as shadow." (Keller, 100)

"To live thus is to live richly. To walk here is to walk with quiet assurance. To feed here is to be replete with good things. To find this tableland is to have found something of my Shepherd's love for me." (Keller, 102)

You anoint my head with oil ...³

Jesus does not hold back. He pulls out all of the stops in another act of hospitality. See Luke 7:35-50.

My cup overflows.

What is this table? What is this cup that the Lord offers to us but the one He sets before us?

³ Not the normal verb to anoint as with priests or kings, or as a sign of hospitality; rather to "make fat, make greasy" – "the way you look after you've eaten really messy BBQ!" [Bartelt]