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“No Separate Tables”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Acts 2: 42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10: 1-10

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Whenever I hear or recite the 23rd Psalm,

I feel immediately comforted and calmed

by the soothing pastoral images of green pastures and still waters.

The Lord is depicted as a wise and caring guardian,

who watches over, feeds, and protects a flock that is

otherwise vulnerable, exposed, and dependent.

The Lord does everything that must be done

so his trusting sheep may live:

Yahweh leads, restores, is with, prepares, and anoints.

Even in the valleys of deepest dark, the shadow lands of utmost threat,

the God Shepherd, is with his sheep,

providing what they can not secure for themselves.

But I'm drawn up short and *discomforted* every time by the line,

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

I am jarred by subtle way the psalmist slips that in:

Green pastures, still waters, restored soul, I am with you,

Dinner with the enemy!

Overflowing cup, goodness and mercy, dwelling in your house,

with you always.

But...guess who's coming to dinner?

As the cultural pundit Jimmy Buffett would say,

"Fins to the left, fins to the right,
and you're the only bait in town."

(Buffett, McColl Chance, Corcoran. *Fins*, 1979)

This couldn't mean that God expects us to share a table with our enemies,
could it?

Surely God's providential and protective goodness and mercy,
will allow sharks and minnows,

wolves and lambs to maintain separate tables, right?

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court passed a ruling

known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legally sanctioned
the idea of separate, but equal facilities for African Americans and whites.

In North Carolina, this law, combined with Jim Crow laws, denoted
a system of second class citizenship

for African Americans and other minorities

that resulted in separate hospitals, prisons, schools,
churches, cemeteries, restrooms,

and separate Bibles used to swear in courtroom witnesses.

One law even directed the state librarian

"to fit up and maintain a separate place for the use of the colored people
who may come to the library for the purpose
of reading books or periodicals".

(www.ncmuseumofhistor.org/edu/ed_md_tw_cr2.htm)

Other customs arising from the *Plessy v. Ferguson*/Jim Crow cocktail included:

*Blacks deferring to whites and stepping off when passing on the sidewalk;

*State and county fairs hosting a separate "colored day";

*Blacks buying movie and show tickets through a separate window,

entering theatres through a separate door, and sitting in the balcony;
*Separate sections being designated on buses and trains for blacks and whites;
*Separate wards in hospitals being designated for blacks and whites;
*Water fountains, building entrances and public bathrooms being designated
for blacks only or whites only;
*Public education segregating into black and white schools.
*And, of course,
blacks not being allowed to eat in white restaurants with whites;
Thou preparest a table, A TABLE, before me in the presence of mine enemies.

My husband and I began our education in those segregated school systems.
As a matter of fact, my husband grew up south of here in Robeson County, NC,
a county which bears two marks of distinction:

1) with 22.8% of its population living below the poverty level,
it is the poorest of the 100 state counties;
and, 2) until the 1970's, it had, not two, but three separate school systems –
one for whites, one for blacks, and one for Native Americans,
consisting mainly of members of the Lumbee and Tuscorora tribes.

I was made alarmingly aware of this separate three-tiered segregation plan
when Susan Blackmon, the local director of Yo Durham,
came and spoke last year at a
Durham Congregations-In-Action luncheon hosted by this church.

While we were at *A TABLE* together,
Susan spoke about her early days as a teacher
at one of the black schools in Robeson County,
where all the materials her students received were *third hand*.
You could tell that the white schools had used them first, she said,
and the Indian schools had used them second,
and then they were passed on to us to use,

because the names written in the weathered and worn textbooks
were white names and Indian names,
and the names carved into the desks and chairs,
were white names and Indian names, Ms. Blackmon said.
I was so moved by Ms. Blackmon's story of being expected to teach
and nurture children with third hand materials,
that I went home and dashed off a poem
that I titled:

Third Hand Children

Do you value us new?

No, we value you so little

That we place you in stale, old schools

With asbestos whispering through the floor tiles;

With dry, fishless tanks littered with rainbow gravel;

With no soap/no towel restrooms where toilets run, non-stop.

And we give you weathered books,

With Anglo names penned at the top of the column:

Turner, Morris, Kelly, James;

And with native names penciled in below them:

Chavis, Hunt, Locklear, Oxindine,

Leaving little or no room for your own proud names,

For your own highlights,

For your own marginalia....

The God Shepherd is lovingly with his sheep,

providing what they can not secure for themselves.

The God Shepherd does everything that must be done

so his trusting sheep may live.

The God Shepherd generously prepares a table,

not three separate tables, before us

in the presence of those we perceive to be our enemies,
but who really are only different from us.

The Good Shepherd's comfort comes at the price of some discomfort, it seems.

*Thou preparest a table, not separate tables,
before me in the presence of mine enemies.*

As I see it, there are at least two ways that we might interpret
this portion of the 23rd Psalm.

One is voiced by Eugene Peterson in his colloquial translation, *The Message*:

*You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head,
My cup brims with blessing.*

To me, this is a separate-table interpretation,
where some diners, the sheep of God's favor,
are granted special privilege apart from the other diners.

This is an "in your face" kind of interpretation,
a plenty-for-me and none-for-you exegesis of the Hebrew text,
which I think in the long-run spills over past the banquet table to
other spheres of shared life, such as
hospitals, prisons, schools, churches, cemeteries,
restrooms, libraries, sidewalks, theatres,
and water fountains.

This separatist interpretation is not the way through the Christ gate
which I see Jesus, the Good Shepherd, espousing,
as he shared tables and sidewalks with sinners and tax collectors;
as he shared meals and conversations
with women and poor people, with Samaritans and Pharisees.

While many seem to live into this interpretation and its ensuing separations,

the life of Jesus, his shoulder rubbing and bread breaking
regularly with the hoi-polloi,
seems contrary to this way of seeing and being in the world.

Another interpretation is espoused by good old King James himself,
as well as by the NIV, the RSV and NRSV.

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

or

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

A more challenging interpretation, I think,

because it entertains the reality of a common table,
across gender lines, across racial lines, across economic lines,
across national lines, across ecclesial lines,
even across friend and enemy lines.

Michael Mburu, in his illness and death, served this congregation well,

by showing us the way through the Christ gate
to a beautiful common table set before us
across gender lines, across racial lines, across economic lines,
and across national lines;

Phyllis Kort, in accompanying Michael's body to his home in Kenya,

served this congregation well by showing us
the way through the Christ gate
to that same boundary-less and beautiful common table set before us.

And so also do many of you in your life's work, your life's vocation,

as well as in your service to humanity outside of your work,
where you access the Christ gate
anytime you share a common table

with those who are different from yourself.

*Thou preparest a table, one table, a common table before me
in the presence of mine enemies....my cup overfloweth.*

Could it be that at this one, common table, there might be enough for all?
Enough food, enough drink, enough textbooks, enough desks, enough beds,
enough cells, enough plots, enough pews, enough Bibles,
so that no one will have to grow up feeling like
a third-hand person.

On this 40th anniversary year of the assassination

Of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

I mention this because I see a subtle, but dangerous undercurrent
in our culture today, seething just beneath the surface of civility,
which is threatening to drive us to separate tables
once again.

I am hearing nasty racial invectives being uttered across tables
by people who know better, but who have been alarmed by
recent violent college murders;

I hear loyal church members anticipating some last straw event
that is going to drive them to leave this "thug-infested city";

I read that North Carolina eighth graders are flagging in their reading abilities,
and I fear the flight, where I'd rather see the fight to
under-gird and improve our public education;

I follow the criticism of one of our presidential candidates
and his pastor and I marvel at the fear and disdain
arising from a misunderstanding of the historic nature
of the black church and of black prophetic preaching.

Racism runs hot and deep in our culture,
and it is bubbling up through the cracks
in our tectonic plates of settled-ness and complacency.

Are we Christians going to let it sputter and spew its vile venom,
and drift us continents apart into our separate lives and separate tables?

My prayer is, NO, we will refuse to allow this to ever happen again;

we won't label people of different color as "enemy",
as we have done in the past;
we won't allow the continental drift of racism to shift us into
third hand, second hand or first hand worlds.

What I hope we will continue to claim
is our table unity in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd,
who leads us through the gate to the green stillness of shalom,
to a table, one table, one common table,
where Christ is present, with us always,
calling us to love one another, to pray for one another,
to do good to one another, not harm;
and yes, to break bread with one another, and share the overflowing cup,
and its overflowing abundance of resources and goodwill.

Then, perhaps, at one common table,
will goodness and mercy follow all the days of our lives.

And then, perhaps, at one common banquet table,
will we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.