

Reflection on Psalm 23 Pat Weatherwax April 22, 2018
 Bible Stories for Big People: "Face to Face"
 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies".

INTRODUCTION

This year, on the Sundays when I have the privilege and the responsibility to bring the message I'm going to try to bring a Bible passage you may have learned early on, and specifically stress deeper or different theological points that might need to be emphasized as we mature.

I wouldn't believe it, but the calendar says I started seminary 20 years ago, this year. Seminary professors generally want to turn your thinking upside down. Anything you believe and understand and cling to, gets to be examined under a "sure, maybe, but what about this" lens. The challenge of seminary training is to push the narrow and easy answers out, and put some mystery, expansion and serious examination in. My seminary stressed *less* either/or and *more* both/ and thinking. Everything gets considered through the paradigm of "Yes, it's like that. No, it's not like that, and oh, it's so much more than what we can line up straight."

THE TABLE

on earth

One of the first dissections I experienced was how I looked at Psalm 23, specifically at banquets and enemies. What does the verse mean to you? "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies", Psalm 23:5. I had a delightful visual image, maybe you have it too, of being an honored guest, surrounded by joy and loveliness, with those who have "despitefully used me" (Matt 5:44) either serving me or better yet, standing in the background, hungry and hopeless. And I gloat. That's an earthly attitude.

Professor Boogaart rocked my world when he said the Hebrew phrase "a table before me, in *the presence* of my enemies" - is "face to face". Think that through. Now if *you* are sitting at a table, enjoying a banquet, a celebratory feast, where is the someone who is sitting "face to face" with you? Are they back there, outside, looking in? Not behind you, but across from you, sitting with you. They are welcomed at the table, too. Your enemy. Right there, in your face, in your space. And the professor said "Learn to love your enemies now; they will be across the table from you in heaven."

We don't get to choose who's across the table from us in heaven like we do on earth.

as in Heaven

I had to learn that the Bible mixes literal and metaphorical all the time, and we must consider that, when discussing matters of faith. One of those metaphors is the

“banquet table”. Now, we get it that our communion “feast” with its tiny portions of juice and bread is hugely symbolic. Feast is a word picture, a metaphor. We know the feast is for our spirit not our stomach.

Well the Biblical use of “banquet” like in Psalm 23, and “wedding feast” like Rev 19:9- “blessed are those invited to the wedding feast of the lamb” are probably speaking to spiritual events that we can anticipate in the heavenly kingdom, not to literal tables and celebrations here below.

But we can’t pretend those are all “pie in the sky”, for someday, later. They *are* relevant to our current living. We prayed for God’s reign to be “on earth as it is in heaven”. We want Jesus to “prepare a place for us, and come again for us to take us” to the dwelling place with our name on the door (John 14:2-3) but we live *here*, now. We are happy to hear that “no hunger or thirst”, and no tears will plague us in the heavenly realm (Rev 7:16-17). But we also *kind of know* we are called to love our enemies and feed the hungry, now. You *have* heard that before, right?

OF MY ENEMIES

Jesus’ attitude

We often study the book of Acts this time of year. What happened to the Christ-followers directly after the resurrection? In Acts 2:42 (NLT) we read that the early church members

“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship, to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.”

We know from other accounts in Acts that these meals welcomed all. There was great diversity in the beginning. There still is, in the Christian church. Almost 1/3 of the world’s people define themselves as Christ’s disciples.

But we aren’t called to simply love other Christ followers. Jesus was pretty blunt:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matt 5:43-45).

It’s naive to say we don’t have enemies. Many Christians contend they don’t have enemies, that they hate no one. But must admit there are people they wouldn’t sit at a table with, not willingly, anyway.

The Psalm 23 phrase “In the Presence of my Enemies” is a common title for tv episodes, movies, and books. People know the phrase, even if they don’t know where it comes from.

Do you know the Gracia Burnham book by that name? The latest copyright is 2010. I read it recently, mostly because I assumed by the title it would apply. It does. The Burnhams, Gracia and her husband Martin were a missionary couple, active in the Philippines in 2001. They were kidnapped for ransom by an extremely radical Islamism group, the Abu Sayyaf, and held captive for over a year. Gracia was wounded and Martin was killed in the crossfire when rescuers finally came for them. She wrote their story, often praising her husband's faith, and his attempt to love their enemies. In the book Gracia consistently calls her captors: "Bad people", but praised Martin's goodness.

... pray for those who despitefully use you," Martin said "Jesus said we were to be the servants of all—and he didn't add any exception clause like, 'except for terrorists, whom you have every right to hate.'

She wrote that he said to her:

"Let's just ask the Lord to work out some contentment in our hearts and teach us what he wants us to learn." (so) We decided to do that. We committed our situation to the Lord.

Wow.

Singular

Jesus said: "There's a new command: Love your enemies". *Jesus* said that. Deal with it. My NIV study Bible, which I use because it has great thematic hints, states that the evil one is to be our only enemy! We put on the "armor of God" (because, as Ephesians 6:11-13 reminds us) we are to

stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy.

That may be where the reminder came from: Hate the sin, but love the sinner. Because we are all sinners in need of love. And Jesus said so, and modeled a new way: "Father, forgive them". It isn't about ignoring the evil in our world. I recently read this explanation:

"Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free." (Common Prayer Pocket Edition: Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals)

THE PRESENCE as in heaven

Gracia Burnham concluded her biography:

I feel compelled to say: We need to find ways to defuse the raging resentment and hatred that fuel “holy war” and introduce a God who does more than demand rituals—he truly loves us.

She realized that this can not come from human effort, writing:

“We learned that the fruit of the Spirit could not be drummed up by ourselves. We couldn’t force joyfulness or loving action or a peaceful mind. The Holy Spirit had to grow those things within us.”

And it takes our conscious effort to surrender our hatred to God’s care. She noted:

“None of us was meant to carry a weight of resentment and anger. We have to give it up to God, or it will crush us over time.”

We know we can expect peace in our heavenly future, but how about now? Jesus was quite direct.

so on earth

We are called to not hate, to eliminate *having* any enemies. I don’t think I really hate, but do confess there are many people I’d prefer NOT to be with. Everyone makes me happy- some when they come into my office and others when they leave. What would happen if we sat across the table with those whom we really struggle to like? And who would it be? It’s not only terrorist and ruthless dictators.

I didn’t used to think of a long-time friend as an enemy. He’s another pastor I know; he’s not local. His mom went to the same church I did; we’ve been friends longer than either of us have been pastors. And lately we have had trouble communicating. It started with disagreeing on the definition of marriage, and grew to divisions over theology and denominational stances. Then he moved to the Ozarks, and became quite vocal, politically. This guy had been like a brother to me in seminary and I stopped talking to him altogether. The peril of Facebook is you can stop talking to someone that you never would have had the opportunity to talk with before!

And Jesus was quite adamant that, as a disciple, I was wrong: Eugene Peterson’s Message paraphrase of another part of Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 5 (46-48) challenge this way:

If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

I reconnected with my bud, recently, when his mom died. I found that, truthfully I still loved him, even though I didn’t like his socio-political rhetoric. I assume he *will* be across from me at the heavenly banquet.

But what about Muslim terrorists? Or upset school-boys with guns? We don't get the last word on who will be at the table with us in heaven. That, God gets to decide. Certainly somehow, someday "every knee will bow". Romans 14 and other places declare:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Accountable to God, not accountable to me. I'm accountable to Jesus' challenge, to *love* my enemies. We love our enemies by wanting them to be with us at the heavenly feast. What would happen if we sat with our enemies now, not then? Gracia Burnham said it this way:

"People in today's world, whether Muslim or not, will not pay attention to Christians because we can explain our theology in crystal-clear terms. They will not esteem us because we give to charity or maintain a positive outlook on life. What will impress them is genuine love in our hearts."

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

CONCLUSION

While I empathize with the struggle the Burnham family suffered, a week ago Friday night, after hearing of bombs dropped on Syria I was brought to tears by what Henri Nouwen wrote, back in 1994:

when we look at the world around us, the question arises: Do we really live as brothers and sisters? Everyday, the newspapers and televisions remind us that human beings are fighting each other, torturing each other, killing each other. All over the world there is hatred, people are the victims of persecution, war, and starvation. All over the world there is hatred, violence, and abuse. ...

The true sin of humanity is that men and women created to be brothers and sisters become again and again each other's enemies, willing to destroy each other's lives. God sent Jesus to restore the true human order. He came to remind us of the truth that we are sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of one another."

What's changed in 24 years? Anything? When we leave this sanctuary today we have coffee and talk to our friends and family. That's good. When we leave the peace of

this place we go into the world's church, probably our enemies are out there, hopefully not in here. Our purpose is to reach out to our enemies, showing them love. All people are God's children. And the people who we feel negative toward, are our most important spiritual teachers. What do we need to learn?

Jesus is calling: bring your enemies to the table of love.

Prayer of Response:

Thank you Good Shepherd- You are our LORD.

You provide for all our needs - knowing more than we do, what they are.

You lead us the way we should to go- constantly clearing our paths.

You strengthen us for what is to come- and humble us when we are too proud.

Although times of sadness, loss, & grief will come our way You are there to comfort us.

We never need to fear because You are with us. - You give us peace and hope.

You take care of us even when others want to cause us harm;

you ask us to love everyone, even our enemies.

You never leave us.

When we lose our way You pursue us- always calling us back to your presence.

We will be with you forever- and ask that your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Thank you Good Shepherd- for your love.

AMEN