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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
 Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2017  
 Text: Psalm 23

## God's Passion: Hospitality

### *Introduction to Scripture*

Our first reading is the very familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. Listen for God's word: *Psalm 23*.

We continue our Lenten series of God's passions as revealed in the psalms. Today's theme is hospitality. You'll hear Paul encourage hospitality both explicitly and implicitly in our second reading. It's a passage from Paul's letter to the church at Rome. It comes near the end of the letter in a section of exhortations to the congregation. Listen again for God's word: *Romans 12:9-18*.

### *Sermon*

Each sanctuary I've worshiped in has a dominant feature which draws your attention and makes a statement. In this sanctuary, it is the massive clear windows. They say, "Let the light of God's truth and love shine in." In my home sanctuary (First Presbyterian of Greensboro, NC) it is a rose window high up in the chancel with Jesus enthroned in the center like so (*one hand raised in benediction*). It says, "The sovereign God blesses you." And in the church I served in Atlanta (Mount Vernon Presbyterian) it is a tremendous communion table. The table was designed by the architect for the 1968 modern sanctuary. It is made of solid mahogany, an eight inch thick slab in the shape of a cross. The horizontal transept of the cross is 12 feet across while the vertical axis is 16 feet long. Along this axis are twelve mahogany square stools with needlepointed cushions, six on each side. That's where the twelve elders sit when they take communion after serving the congregation. That giant communion table says, "Let's eat!"

That giant table also, in cahoots with the Holy Spirit, planted an image in my head and pestered me until I gave in and preached a rather unusual sermon. It was on a Communion Sunday, and the sermon title was "Sunday Dinner." Only I didn't just preach a sermon with this image of Sunday Dinner as a governing theme, I actually enacted it.

I donned the most grandmotherly outfit I could find: a straight wool skirt, crepe blouse with a large droopy bow, a pretty apron, and sensible shoes. I wore a gray wig and drew a few wrinkle lines on my face. In order to enhance my matronly appearance I borrowed an undergarment from a well-endowed friend and stuffed it with socks. There was no mirror in the sacristy where the preacher and liturgist met prior to the service. I'll never forget the look on that man's face when I adjusted my augmented anatomy, turned to him, and asked, "Am I even?"

Just before the service began, my husband Jack turned on a couple of bread machines hidden in the sanctuary. By the time it was time for the sermon, when I entered pushing a hostess cart, there was a wonderful yeasty aroma wafting throughout the room. On the hostess cart were a folded tablecloth, twelve water goblets of my best crystal, twelve matching wine

glasses, and twelve bread plates of my best china, along with a pitcher of water, bottle of grape juice, and loaf of bread.

The transept or horizontal part of the cross-shaped giant table was already set as usual for communion. Stacks of silver trays containing the cubes of bread and tiny glass cups of juice stood ready. What I proceeded to do for the next twenty minutes was to set the long or vertical part of the cross-shaped giant table as I talked to the congregation in a dramatic monologue, with a bit of a Southern drawl.

I began by putting on a tablecloth and reminiscing about the time Peter had a vision that involved a tablecloth. “My boy Peter was in Joppa and was praying on a rooftop,” I explained to the congregation. “While praying he saw in a vision a tablecloth descending from heaven with all sorts of very unkosher animals on it. ‘Get up, kill, and eat,’ I told Peter. ‘Absolutely not,’ he replied. ‘Nothing unclean has ever touched my lips.’ In my most authoritative voice I intoned, ‘What I have made clean, you must not call profane.’ Well, it took two more replays of that tablecloth vision *and* sending a Roman centurion to his doorstep for Peter to get the message that my family included not just Jews but Gentiles, too.”

After spreading the tablecloth on the Communion Table, I set the table for twelve. As I put the bread plate, water goblet, and wine glass at each place I talked lovingly about the person whose place this was. One was Tammy, a biracial child who had a hard time feeling like she belonged anywhere. Another was Gerald, an archconservative who had recently lost his job. Another was Agatha who was having a hard time forgiving her mother. Another was Clancy, who had marched in the Gay Pride parade in a tutu, no less, (and no more). And so on. After each loving and affectionate description of the twelve very diverse and very human members of my family whom I eagerly expected for Sunday dinner, I uttered that wonderfully compassionate, irreplaceable, Southern benediction, “Bless his (or her) heart.”

Next I went around the table pouring water into the goblets. In all but one case, it was just a splash. But in Aunt Louise’s case, I filled the goblet to the brim. You see, she was Baptist.

While talking about my scripture text from I Corinthians, about the one bread of which we all partake the and cup of blessing we share, I doled out the bread and juice.<sup>i</sup> And I didn’t serve the tiny portions we Presbyterians are accustomed to. I tore off a ragged hunk of bread for each bread plate and poured a big slug of Welch’s in each wine glass. My family was going to eat well! There was no shortage of food and drink at this grandmother’s table! Meanwhile, I secretly relished the vision of the twelve elders who would later in the service after serving the congregation sit in those places. Instead of ingesting dice-sized bread cubes and tiny sips of juice like usual, they would chow down on super-sized servings of God’s forgiveness washed down by gulps of God’s grace.

At the end of the monologue, after I had everything ready Jack, who operated the sound system, broadcast the chime of a doorbell. Ding Dong. “They’re here!” I exclaimed, thrilled to welcome the family I adored to Sunday dinner.

That image of the warm and welcoming grandmother lovingly setting the table comes back to me when I hear the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. Not the first part where the imagery is agrarian with God as the shepherd, but the second part where the imagery changes to the domestic. In the memorable lilt of the King James Version:

*“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;*

*Thou anointest my head with oil;  
My cup runneth over.”*

When I hear those verses I see God fixing a feast for us. I see her serving steaming bowls of rice and boats of gravy, platters filled with sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, squash casseroles, and baskets of yeast rolls. *Thou preparest a table before me.*

I see iced tea glasses never unfilled and other assorted beverages flowing freely. *My cup runneth over.*

I see greasy cheeks from all the fried chicken (for her carnivorous children) and fried tofu (for her vegan ones). *Thou anointest my head with oil.* Actually, the Hebrew for “anoint my head with oil” probably refers to the custom of applying perfumed ointment to guests at a banquet. It signals a festive and joyous occasion. But any way you look at it, the imagery in this psalm is one of hospitality where there’s plenty of goodness and mercy to be had.

Unfortunately, we have a hard time believing there’s enough good stuff to go around. But the Bible has story after story telling us that’s just not true—the manna that came morning after morning in the wilderness, the widow’s oil and meal that didn’t run out during a famine, the water turned to wine when the wedding host thought his stock was depleted, the boy’s lunch of loaves and fish that fed a crowd with leftovers to spare. God has a never-ending supply of what the world needs.

Of course, like the preacher said to the congregation, “The good news is, we have plenty of money to make our budget. The bad news is, it’s still in your pockets.” Or like Joe Neighbors said, eyeing us all from the pulpit prior to our recent Red Cross Drive, “I see plenty of extra blood out there.”

There’s plenty of money, plenty of blood, plenty of--you name it—in God’s household. We just have to be willing to share. We have to be willing to let go of what we are entrusted with and believe that there’s enough to go around. This runs counter to our instinct to hoard.

I was interested to hear a member tell me that her Lenten practice this year is discarding *each day* ten items from one of her four closets. That will add up to 400 items headed to the thrift store donation bin. She’s still working on clothes. When that’s done, she’ll move onto other stuff. And I can guarantee that if her closets are like mine, come Easter she will still have plenty of getups and gadgets. Her Lenten discipline is nurturing her trust in God’s provision. (Incidentally, it’s nurturing her husband’s belief that God does answer prayer.)

God is a God of abundance. When we are generous, we are like God.

God is also a God of welcome. We are hit and miss when it comes to being welcoming like God. It’s easy to get so cozy with those who think, and talk, and vote like we do that we don’t realize we’re being exclusive. That can happen at church. We are happy to greet the friends we know and haven’t seen for a week or more. Unwittingly, we ignore those we don’t know. My heart broke when one of you confided recently, “I feel like an outsider at church.”

When our gaze is turned inward, instead of outward, maybe we’re just not aware, or we’re too busy, or too timid to open the door. Maybe we’re too quick to label folks who are different as “other,” “stranger,” or even “enemy.” Did you notice? In the psalm, God prepares a table for us and who’s present? Our enemies! And guess who invited them.

Jesus made a point of drawing a big circle, a circle that included everybody. He hung out with the rich and the righteous, but also with the people others rejected—the lepers and whores, the tax collectors and beggars. The scribes and Pharisees grumbled, “This fellow

welcomes sinners and eats with them.”<sup>ii</sup> Jesus told parables about hosts and kings who sent out banquet invitations not just to the A list but the B list and even the C list.<sup>iii</sup> Everyone was invited. “People will come from East and West, from North and South and eat in the Kingdom of God,”<sup>iv</sup> he declared.

God calls us to be open to people with other ideas, from other cultures, offering other points of view. One of the best things my church in Atlanta did was to participate in Christmas International House. That’s a nationwide program where Americans host over Christmas break international students studying at US universities. It was eye-opening for me to learn that the typical international student never sets foot in an American home. These are the best and brightest who will go back to be leaders of government and industry in their countries. So, in this program church members put up these students in their guest room and incorporate them into their holiday celebrations. They invite the students to cook them a meal from their native cuisine and share about their families and traditions. Friendships blossom across lines that are usually never crossed.

Repeatedly in the New Testament Christians are encouraged to extend hospitality to strangers. In a world marked by increasing suspicion of strangers that’s more important than ever. I love that our congregation supports IHN—interfaith *hospitality* network. I also love that an interfaith clergy group is getting underway in Athens. The joint, community-wide Thanksgiving service which included Christians, Jews, and Muslims was a first step. I look forward to seeing what else arises from this intentional move to be open and welcoming to one another. When we are open and welcoming, we are like God.

So, God the grandmother (thank you for humoring me and going with that image!) presides over her table. She prepares a delicious feast for her family, and it’s a really big family. There’s room for everyone at her table. At her table we are, in Isaac Watts’s words which we’ll sing before we leave, “like a child at home.”<sup>v</sup> We are loved and doted over, fed and affirmed. There is plenty of Grandmother’s love and apple pie to go around. Goodness and mercy, kindness and blessing never give out. Hospitality is God’s middle name. And when we are at our best, it is ours, as well.

To God be the glory.

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<sup>i</sup> I Cor. 10:16-17

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 15:2

<sup>iii</sup> Matthehw 22:1-9, Luke 14:15-24

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 13:29

<sup>v</sup> Hymn 172, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need”