

“My Cup Overflows”

Psalm 23

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As you may know, in the Middle East, there is an ancient cultural more that calls for a local resident to welcome and to grant sanctuary to one who is seeking protection from enemies. Thus, if I were fleeing for my life and I knocked on your backdoor, you'd be obligated to take me in. You wouldn't be obligated to feed me your best t-bone steak or to open your best bottle of wine, but you'd be obligated to offer me sanctuary. My enemies might encircle your house and yell threats and maybe burn a cross on your lawn, but they would be required to stay outside and honor your gift of a safe place.

This ancient value lies at the heart of the story in Genesis where the two angels have left the home of Abraham and Sarah and have reached the town of Sodom. The men of Sodom threaten these visitors with rape; so the visitors take refuge in the home of Lot. The men of the town shout threats of violence, but Lot honors the ancient code of hospitality for those fleeing for their lives.

When the writer of Psalm 23 says, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows,” he is thinking of God as the consummate Protector, the One who welcomes and offers hospitality in the time of danger. The Psalm writer has experienced God as going over the top with the welcome. It is not merely a safe place that has been provided, but also a dinner table and an anointing, and other unnamed signs of welcome such that the writer can only describe his feelings for God by blurting out loud, “My cup overflows.”

If we could eaves drop on this writer's prayer time, we might hear him praying: O God, you could have just opened the door and let me in; but you massaged my feet as well. You could have provided a cot in the basement, but you have invited me to use the clean sheets in the guest room. You could have opened a can of hash, but you have prepared stuffed mushrooms and deviled eggs and sushi. You could have simply shaken my hand, but you have given me a bear hug. My cup overflows!

We might say that this Psalm writer is in touch with his gratitude for the ways God has moved in his life. Like a king on a chess board, he has received threats and intimidations and rejections from multiple sources: from pawns and rooks and knights, but he has felt the protection of a loving God. He is grateful for this God who has offered him sanctuary. His gratitude finds its way into Psalm 23. "My cup overflows."

I am guessing his gratitude also leads him to being a person who grants sanctuary to others whose lives are threatened; threatened by cancer or threatened by political harassment, or threatened by economic collapse, or threatened by bullying at the local school. There are so many ways our lives become endangered. I can picture the psalmist placing a sign on his front lawn, a sign that announces: SANCTUARY HOUSE. The depth of his gratitude leads him to this ministry.

For me, gratitude is like a spring board. Gratitude propels us into offering a safe place for those whose lives are in danger. Gratitude might propel us, as a town, to increase the number of Open Choice children in our school system. Gratitude might propel us, as a church, to grant sanctuary to a Syrian family facing the possibility of being sent back to a culture of violence. Gratitude might propel us, as individuals, to speak up when we witness someone being bullied in the grocery store or on the playground or at a sports event.

I'm glad the psalmist is in touch with his gratitude. "My cup overflows," he says. Gratitude is where all ministry and mission begin. Gratitude is where stewardship begins.

The psalm writer invites us to ponder this image of God as one who is there in the day of trouble, when danger threatens, to provide a safe place, a place of welcome, a retreat. One of our longest term members told me recently that when she was a little girl, she'd come into this sanctuary during the week, and just sit for awhile, this being the safest place in her life. In this place, as she imagined the presence of God, she just felt safe. And much of her adult life was invested in providing sanctuary for children who had been orphaned.

"My cup overflows." Our Christian Service Ministry Team makes and freezes soup in containers large enough for one, simple meal. So, on cold days, I can heat up some soup and continue with my work. I did this on Tuesday! I popped the frozen chicken and corn chowder into the microwave, pushed the right buttons, and returned 6 minutes later. The chowder rose right up to the brim! It actually spilled over the side as I walked back to my office. This happened, of course, just as I was half-way through creating this sermon! I sat there staring at the chowder feeling immensely blessed, immensely grateful. My cup was literally overflowing! My soul, too, was overflowing with gratitude!

And when that happens, when my soul is overflowing with gratitude, watch out! I do the wildest things! I lend myself and my truck to somebody who needs to haul an old sofa to the Transfer Station! I round up volunteers and go glean a field of cabbage and deliver the fresh produce to the Open Hearth. I use my So G gift card to pay for the coffee for the folks in line behind me. When gratitude is pumping through my veins, I get a little wild. I send money to the Sioux YMCA.

I round up used clothing and take it to Goodwill. I select novels I can donate to the library book sale. When I see that my cup is overflowing, I find lots of ways to celebrate life.

There is an unwritten invitation in Psalm 23 for us to get in touch with the Great Protector God; to get in touch with times in our lives when our enemies have encamped around us; when powerful forces of addiction have threatened our well being, when failures have crushed our spirit; and to see that it was in those very times that God, the Great Protector, opened the door for us, and granted us a sanctuary, a respite, an environment of safety.

When I walk through the Old Church Cemetery, I read the inscriptions on the tombstones. I sometimes imagine my own stone there. In addition to, "In the greatest of hope," I might advise the engraver to carve, "My cup overflows." I'd want the casual passerby to know I had been a grateful human being.
Amen.