

## WHO IS AT THE TABLE?

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

I John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Susan Jane Brown loves nature. She believes it is important to protect endangered species, and she thought the best way to do that was to prevent logging in the national forests. Susan Jane is a lawyer in Portland, Oregon and, several years ago, she used her skills to tie the U.S. Forest Service in procedural knots to stop logging. As a result, loggers in the small town of John Day were furious. Their livelihoods were threatened and the local sawmill was about to close, which meant the town itself would likely die. As you might imagine, her work stirred up a venomous battle between loggers and environmentalists.

Desperate to save their jobs, a delegation of woodsmen approached Susan Jane and invited her to go into the forest with them. “My life flashed before my eyes,” she says, but she accepted their invitation and eventually spent three days with the loggers, taking along a burly friend to act as bodyguard. Although the two sides didn’t agree, a conversation was begun. Over a period of years they began to find ways to work together. Susan Jane and her colleagues came to understand that the best way to revive the forests was to hire loggers to clear out small trees and overgrown underbrush. Together the tree-huggers and the tree-cutters won a 10-year stewardship contract to subsidize forest thinning and restoration of the traditional landscape as a safe home for endangered species. Loggers kept their jobs; the sawmill stayed in business; the forest was renewed and the town of John Day was saved. This isn’t the end of the story, of course. New issues continue to arise and there are varying degrees of success and frustration, but the conversations continue. And here is what caught my eye—The loggers and the environmentalists report that those disagreements are now argued around a dinner table. Susan Jane says, “It helps to have food.”<sup>i</sup>

Think about it. Enemies found a way to sit down at table with one another. This story gave me a different way of thinking about the verse in today’s psalm, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”<sup>ii</sup> The image I have always carried in my head for this verse is of the Bedouin shepherd who offers a traveler hospitality and protection from any who might be pursuing that traveler.<sup>iii</sup> The abundant table is set inside the tent, while the enemies lurk outside, eating dust. The illustrator, Tim Ladwig, in his children’s book of the 23rd Psalm, offers a more contemporary image. His pictures are of a Black child living in an inner city. While the child sits down to a hearty dinner in his grandparents’ apartment, a group of threatening-looking gang members gather outside on the sidewalk.<sup>iv</sup> In these ways of thinking about the verse, the traveler, the child, the psalmist is the one protected, cared for and loved by the Shepherd-Host, while the enemy is kept out.

We love the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm for many reasons, but mainly because it comforts us. It articulates the care that God gives us in all the circumstances of our lives. We teach it to

our children because they can understand a shepherd who sees that the sheep have fresh grass to eat and clear water to drink and a place to lie down in safety. We turn to it as adults when life is difficult and we need reassurance that God is with us in the midst of its challenges. And we recite it when life is ending and cling to the promise that God will walk with us through death's dark valley. It is a beautiful song of trust, a lyrical confession that God's nurturing love will never abandon us. So we call it up when we need the shepherd's care and guidance.

Yet this psalm is about God, not just about our needs, and there is a danger that it can be read too individualistically, that we focus only on what God does for us. When we do, the enemy is the other, the one on the outside, the one not included in God's care. But this verse challenges that. A colleague describes the verse as a metaphorical clinker, in which the divine seating chart seems designed to spoil our sense of well-being.<sup>v</sup> The psalmist challenges us to allow the enemy into the tent of God's grace, to sit at table together, to be recognized as one of God's sheep also. When we do, another of our needs is met—the need for peace.

I don't have to tell you that our country is deeply divided. There are forces of violence and hatred in our culture that seem to operate almost full-time. They seek to undermine unity at every turn, to polarize and divide us along every potential social, cultural, economic, political, ethnic, racial and religious fissure. Even those who claim the same name of Christian are divided over what that means and how our faith is to be lived out. Those on the other side, whatever the side is, are no longer those with whom we simply disagree, but those who are illegitimate, even evil, those who are the enemy.

But what if, when God sets the table and invites us to eat, we find ourselves sitting next to someone we don't like, even hate. There is no denying that you and I have enemies, people we don't like or trust, people who have hurt us, opposed or betrayed us, but there is no suggestion in the psalm that our enemies are God's enemies. In fact, there is no suggestion that God has any enemies at all. There certainly are people who are angry with God, who even consider God to be their enemy, but that animosity is not returned by God. God has no enemies. We do, but God does not.

When we Christians think about God preparing a table for us, the Lord's Supper is likely to come to mind. Consider who was at that last meal of Jesus. Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus; Peter, the one who denied Jesus; James and John who fell asleep when Jesus was in agony in the garden; and all of the rest, who went into hiding when he was arrested. Did Jesus consider them his enemies? It was at that meal that he called them friends. What about us? Are we Jesus' enemies? We surely don't want to think of ourselves that way, though in our own ways and at various times, we, too, have denied and turned away from him. If we can claim for ourselves the blessings, the protection, the forgiveness, the companionship, the love of the Good Shepherd, then how do we think God deals with our enemies? The table God prepares, the goodness God offers is set before them as well as before us.

Next Sunday, this table will be set with the bread of heaven and cup of salvation. The invitation will be made to all who trust in Jesus to join the feast—not just Presbyterians, not just New Canaanites, not just the people we like, not just the people we approve of, but everyone. Pastor Sam Wells tells of a professor of his from Hungary who complained, “I can’t stand it that people in this country invite you dinner and never tell you who you’ll be sitting next to; it could be someone you’ve just slammed in a book review and it can be so embarrassing.”<sup>vi</sup> That is exactly what God does—invites us to dinner but doesn’t tell us who else might be there, whom we will be sitting next to. It can be embarrassing, but it can also be wonderful. Think about those loggers and tree-huggers who loathed and feared each other, but discovered something wonderful could happen when they sat down at the dinner table together. Together they have managed to make peace and save a town.

We should not be surprised to find that God’s guest list is more inclusive than ours. After all, what has any of us done to merit such a gracious invitation? Perhaps the best we can do is by remembering that we are all children of God and try to make friends out of enemies.

In the story of John Day, Oregon, I confess it was Susan Jane Brown with whom I identified. I, too, love nature, treasure the songs of birds and cringe at the sound of chain saws taking down a stately oak. I was geared up to look down my nose at those loggers who disturbed God’s good creation. But, when I read that it was they who reached out first, who began the dialogue, I saw myself as the other, the enemy of God. Maybe those wood-choppers have something to teach me about how to prepare to sit at table with my enemies without embarrassment.

My friends, our world is in desperate need of healing so that all God’s children can dine together in peace. None of us can heal the whole world, but each of us can try to heal our small part of it, to reach a hand of compassion and forgiveness across some breach. The Good Shepherd prepares the table for us all.

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<sup>i</sup> Nicholas Kristoff, “They Overcame Mutual Loathing, and Saved a Town,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2021, p. SR7.

<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 23:5a.

<sup>iii</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 208.

<sup>iv</sup> Tim Ladwig, ill., *Psalm Twenty-Three*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1993).

<sup>v</sup> Carol Bechtel Reynolds, “God’s Startling Seating Chart,” *Presbyterians Today*, September 1995, p. 39.

<sup>vi</sup> Sam Wells, “The Ten Joys,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2019, p. 20.