



First United Church of Oak Park

Green and Growing Places

Psalm 23

The Rev. John Edgerton

April 25, 2021

We are in the third week of our preaching series on generosity, as part of the stewardship season of the church. And Psalm 23 gives the frame for us for today to consider the why and the how of Christian generosity.

The 23rd Psalm is very possibly the most well-known and most well-loved passage in the whole of Scripture. It is read at the most pivotal moments of life, moments when everything hinges around a day or a week or an hour, at hospital beds, at gravesides, in sleepless nights, in moments of sheer gratitude when blessings are all that are on our lips.

It's easy to see why Psalm 23 is so beloved. Its imagery is so earthy and direct, rendering God not as mysterious or inscrutable, but just like a shepherd. This shepherd God I read of in Psalm 23 offers open-handedly and bountifully those things that are really needed in life. Good food to eat to nourish the bodies and satisfy hunger, clean and wholesome water to drink and satisfy thirst, safe and lovely places to lie down to rest that sleep might be easy and deep. This shepherd I read of in Psalm 23 is full of goodness and providence, goodness and providence that takes tangible and real form for my real life. And this is just the first three verses!

Then where it really picks up is in verse 4 — yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil — for you are with me. This turn is so important — for you are with me. The shepherd God of this Psalm is not distant or aloof, but is close at hand. God is close enough to be addressed directly — you are with me, O God. The Psalm imagines speaking to God face to face, close enough and intimate enough to need no formal address or to refer to one who is absent or abstract, but face to face. You are with me. It is your hand, O God, that sets a table before me, your hand that offers an anointing touch, your hand, O God, that fills my cup so full it overflows. It is this intimacy with God that

makes this Psalm so transportive. The goodness and providence of God is rendered as being for me personally, for the one reading the Psalm.

This Psalm is evergreen — and in this past year, it has been particularly important to hold on to. As the parking lot full of cars for our food pantry reminds us, longing for wholesome food to satisfy hunger, this is no abstraction. To long for green pastures of peaceful rest, where sleep might be easy and deep, this is no abstraction. To walk through the valley of the shadow of death, this is no abstraction. This Psalm is earthy and direct and it speaks so immediately to this moment and this day, because it speaks of God the shepherd, full of goodness and providence. And the goodness and providence of God is something I need more than ever.

We are in the third week of our preaching series on generosity, as part of the stewardship season of the church. And Psalm 23 gives the frame for us for today to consider the why and the how of Christian generosity. And that is the goodness and providence of God. Generosity understood in a Christian sense has everything to do with the goodness and providence of God; they provide the why and the how of our giving.

First the why — why should a person be generous merely because they are a Christian? Why is this a Christian value and upon what does that value rest? The why of generosity can be seen in the earthy and direct imagery of Psalm 23. The good things of life, those things that are really needed, they are given by the hand of God. God like a shepherd leads us to green pastures where there are good things to eat to satisfy hunger. God like a shepherd leads us to still clear waters to satisfy thirst. God like a shepherd leads us to peaceful resting places where sleep can be deep and easy. These earthy and direct goods have their source in the goodness of God. If the good things of life have their source in God, then out of gratitude we ought to be generous. Out of a desire to be like God, we, too, ought to give away those good things of life generously. God is good and so we, too, ought to strive to be good. The why of Christian generosity is seen in the earthy and direct imagery of Psalm 23.

The how of Christian generosity is seen in this Psalm as well. Generosity is not necessarily an easy discipline to live into. It is not an automatic posture, and understanding how Christians are empowered to live a generous life: well, that is in Psalm 23, too. Generosity in a Christian sense flows from knowing that God is the source of what we have. Since God is the source of the good things we have, to give some of that away is not to be left poorer. God, who is the source of good

things, is still with us, and so we are empowered to be generous without fear of what generosity will cost us. The goodness and providence of God stands behind Christian generosity, trusting that the providence of God means I can give away some of what I have and still have enough for a life filled with good things.

Lastly, Christian generosity comes from the intimacy of this Psalm, too. Christians are called to see God not as distant or other or aloof, but close enough to speak to face to face. When we give away some of what we have, whether it is to the church or to any other good and worthy cause, Christians can see this as giving a gift directly to God. God has no need of food to eat — but the children of God do. God has no need of a place to lay her head at night, she whose footstool is the galaxy's reach needs no other dwelling than the heavens — but the children of God do. God has no need of a church building, the Lord to whom the morning stars all sing together needs no cathedral more marvelous than the vaulting sky and the pillars of the mountains — but the children of God do. When we as Christians give generously, it is as if we give to God directly. We see this in the intimacy of the 23rd Psalm, which tells us that we are worthy to draw close to God, close enough to address face to face.

It is to you, O God, that we dedicate our gifts. It is to you, O God, that we offer these gifts. It is because of you, O God, that we are able even to make these gifts. We give to you, what is yours. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.