

Trinity UMC  
 April 17, 2016  
 Easter # 3  
 A Place to Belong- Prepare a Table

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want  
 The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures,

Leads me beside still waters, restores my life.  
 Leads me in right paths for the sake of the Lord's name.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
 For you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
 You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
 And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

READING OF THE GOSPEL

John 10: 11-18

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him.*

*<sup>14</sup> "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.*

*<sup>17</sup> "This is why the Father loves me: I give up my life so that I can take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I give it up because I want to. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it up again. I received this commandment from my Father."*

Prayer

I read a story this week about a pastor and the surprising things that children say during the 'children's story' during worship! The pastor, just like we do here, invited the children to the front of the sanctuary and sat on the steps for a short children's sermon, based on 23rd Psalm. She told the children that sheep weren't smart and needed lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing dumb things that would get them hurt or killed. She pointed to the little children and said that they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance.

Then the pastor put her hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and, with raised eyebrows, said to the children, "If you are the sheep, then who is the shepherd?"

She was obviously indicating himself.

A silence of a few seconds followed. Then one boy said, "Jesus. Jesus is the shepherd."

The pastor, obviously caught by surprise, said to the boy, "Well then, who am I?"

The child frowned thoughtfully, and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

Ahh...such humility can come from the wisdom of children.

Psalm 23 is known to many people—this poetic scripture is used more than any other scripture at memorial services. On Wednesday evening, 24 hours after the deadly shooting in Emerald Park, I found myself silently reciting Psalm 23 as I stood with a lit candle with neighbors that I did not know...even though I walk through the valley of death... you are with me. I did not know the people in the park who were grieving a

beloved friend, son while across the street stood an empty house where deep grief was also present in its emptiness. The house of the shooter in the violence where a man struggled with post war traumatic stress did not have people standing with lit candles, yet we could not ignore the pain and death that had also occurred in that home.

There was a place at the table that night for skateboards and candles. There was also place for people to come together in their confusion and grief. There is not an easy answer—there is not a quick fix to the fear, to the gun violence that has come to our neighborhood...yet as a small group from Trinity stood joined in the candlelit vigil, I realized that we were standing as witnesses to the pain and suffering that was experienced after a gun was pulled out in anger and used. It was important to stand at the table with our neighbors. Even though I walk through the darkest valley...

Prior to the neighborhood events as I prayed, read and listened, I was drawn to a different phrase from Psalm 23 that challenges me rather than comforts me. It is a bit startling and confusing. From the NRSV translation we read—“*you prepare a table a table before in the presence of my enemies*”. The original KJV— one that some of us may have memorized in our youth states: *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.*

What does this mean? Is God calling us to sit at table with the people we perceive to be our enemies? What happens when enemies sit down at the same table—can we find connection?

During this Easter Season we are focusing on how Trinity is a ‘place to belong’. So what does this phrase from Psalm 23 mean to us a community of faith? Who are our enemies? Why is there a table prepared not with friends and family but in the

presence of our foes? Do we have the courage individually and in community to explore how we are to sit at an open table where not only friends gather but also people we may fear?

Last weekend, I attended a Spiritual director's conference. I heard great presentations from inspiring speakers, I attended workshops on the spiritual practice of waiting and prayer, I entered into conversations with people from all over the world--- people who I did not know—and there was a connection. I spoke from people from England, from Toronto, from Edmonton, from Connecticut, from New Mexico--- there was a connection—as spiritual directors, our work is about listening and making connections, with each other and with the Divine.

However, here it is a week later, and I find myself going back to the opening ritual on Friday morning where I was confronting by my own perceptions and how so often, my initial assumptions about people do not represent their story. This conference was located in San Diego, about 3 ½ miles from the Mexican border. Yet from our location at a conference center, one would never know the significance of our geographical location. In the opening ritual, to represent the north, south, east and west geographical borders of San Diego, four different people shared their story. Their sharing began with the statement--“How I am seen by others”. After listing a number of statements, they then said, “This is who I am.”

All four people, a navy seal from the north representing the military community of San Diego, an immigrant from the south, Mexico, who has lived in San Diego for 35, a native American from the eastern desert edge and a surfer with dread locks who represented the pacific ocean to the west, spoke clearly about the differences between

how they are often seen by others and who they really are. I was struck- I was convicted- by my own assumptions as they began to speak. It is not until we take time to sit with people, to hear their stories that we move from what separates us to what is held in common.

I learned that the surfer was a mom and a published author. I learned that the navy seal was having a difficult time making it financially with his wife and three children with the salary he received from the government. All four of them were spiritual directors, each of them working within their context, each of them helping to break down false perceptions. Through the telling of their stories, they broke down barriers of exclusion and we all found commonalities.

You prepare a table in the presence of my enemies...

How are being called to sit down at table with those in our neighborhood who at first glance seem 'different'? How are we being called to break down barriers? How are we creating space to hear each other's stories? How are we making Trinity a place where all can belong?

Nan Merrill, wrote the paraphrase of the Psalms many years ago and I have used it for prayers in retreats as well as personal devotion. This is her paraphrase of Psalm 23—*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my fears"*. I appreciate this twist of changing the word enemies to fears—I can identify with fears much more than enemies. An enemy is a word that I attempt to avoid. After all, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus instructs his followers to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' However, fear is a word I can relate too- I can admit that I

have both internal and external fears. I can also admit that many of my fears, both internal and external of the 'other' are based on my own illusions rather than reality.

Father Greg Boyle, who has worked with gang members in LA and began 'Home Boy Industries' where members of rival gangs work together in a bakery, a diner, and in many other industries asked us the question last weekend—" how do we obliterate the illusions that we are different?" He discovered that it was in working together that rival gang members began to break down those illusions of difference. He recounted that he had heard many times over the many years he has worked with individuals—"I will work with them but I won't talk with them'. Yet as they work side by side, their illusions of their differences are eventually obliterated.

According to Father Boyle—Love is the answer, community is the context and tenderness is the connection.

As an introvert, I know that I will continue to reflect on my experience last weekend for quite some time. I will read and re-read my journal notes. I have downloaded Father Boyle's book "tattoos on the heart" on my kindle. I will continue to ask myself the question – who is God placing in my life to whom I am called to prepare a table?

I do know that in the simple act of preparing the candles that we use for our Christmas Eve worship and Easter Vigil worship, I was moved to tenderness of heart for our neighborhood. The candles that I took to Emerald Park were all passed out—they were all burned down to the wick, in the midst of a windy, stormy night.

You know as I recall that joke about the child telling the pastor that she was the sheep dog- rather than the shepherd—I find myself saying amen. My job is not about

saving people but about guiding people. The sheep dog stands guard, the sheep dog listens to the voice of the shepherd, receiving directions and helping to guide others. Perhaps in a small way, I was doing the job of the sheep dog that night—passing out candles, attempting to light candles and helping people keep them lit- standing with those who were deeply hurting. Perhaps we are all called to be the sheep dog, listening closely to the voice of the shepherd.

May we as a community, courageously sit at the table that is prepared for us..

May we as a community, courageously invite others to the table.

May we as a community, know ourselves and share the gifts that we have been given.

May we be a community where all belong.

May it be so. AMEN.