

**Psalm 23 & John 10:1-10**  
***“Above all else and if nothing else”***

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Some of the most well-known and beloved words in all of literature: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters.” We’ve seen it in paintings, heard it in song. I’d be willing to bet a few of us have lied awake in bed at night saying it over and over again.

The Lord is my shepherd. I am not alone. I will not be left to wander off the deep end.

I shall not want. It’s not just that I’m going to try to want less so others can have more, it’s that I shall not want more because I don’t need anything more.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. When I can’t slow down, when I can’t make it stop, the Lord shows me how.

He restores my soul. Not just my hands and feet, but right down to my weary bones.

I would bet that most of us have probably experienced the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as nothing short of comforting. Indeed, whenever I’m working with a family to plan a funeral service and I ask them if there are any particular readings they’d like to hear, they almost always say the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I find this is especially true with families who don’t know what else to say. Maybe they’re overwhelmed by their grief and just can’t think straight. Maybe they just haven’t read much of the Bible or of anything else, but they know they can ask for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. It’s the assurance that God will show us kindness even when we don’t ask God to.

But in this God is also maybe...not so kind. I never thought of God as being unkind in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. This past Thursday, though, I was at a conference with about 20 other clergy from around the state of Rhode Island. For our sake, what the conference was about doesn’t matter. As part of our time together, though, we read Psalm 23.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for

his name's sake," and someone around the table shut their Bible and announced, "I'm done."

"What?" someone else in the group asked. "What's the matter?"

"I've heard and read these same two lines over so many times. I can't take it anymore."

"Can't take what?" I asked.

"God, making me lie down in green pastures and leading me beside quiet waters and in right paths, while whole nations die from bombs and children are left to the streets because their parents are deadbeats. What about them?"

I wasn't sure that she wasn't reading a bit much into the passage, but then again it reminded me of what a young French girl wrote to her father in 1942—at the height of Nazism—about why she could not be part of the Christian church.

In any case, when I think of the acts by which I should [be part of the church], nothing gives me more pain than the idea of separating myself from the immense and unfortunate multitude of unbelievers. I have the essential need...to move among people of every class and complexion, mixing with them and sharing their life and outlook...merging into the crowd, disappearing among them [and not keeping separate from them], so that they show themselves as they are, putting off all disguises with me. It is because I long to know them so as to love them just as they are. For if I do not love people as they are, it will not be they whom I love, and my love will be unreal.<sup>1</sup>

These words were written by 28-year old Simone Weil, just 5 years before her death. The people she speaks of needing to love were the poor working class, as well as those whose faith and religious practice did not fit the national Christian brand of her day. Though Weil herself was raised in affluence and held to what she called a "Christian" belief, when she looked around at the Christian churches of Europe she saw places that were full of un-belonging. At a time when Hitler's government had taken to propagating the idea of one race, one faith, one people at the expense of all others, it was time for the Christian church to speak out and say, that's not Christian at all. To be Christian, said Weil, is not to play the mistress. For fear of not being loved enough, of not belonging, the mistress runs off in the night following the first voice that promises safety and protection. But the

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<sup>1</sup> Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*, p. 52.

Christian church must resist every temptation to seek protection from those who would use their power only to protect themselves. For to do so is to find ourselves standing on the sidelines of holocausts and genocides, lying down to rest in green pastures while others are left to suffer the streets alone. I'm done with that kind of Christianity, said Simone Weil 75 years ago in France. I'm done with that too, said the woman at my clergy conference this past Thursday in Cranston. But then another person at the conference pointed out what comes next in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, after the green pastures and quiet waters.

"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."

"There," said the first woman. "Now that I like."

"What?" someone else asked. "What do you like?"

"Sitting at a table with all my enemies and there's plenty of runoff. So that what's given to me is also given to them, and what's given to them is also given to me. Because if you think about it, if you're sitting down at table with your enemies then what does that make you? An enemy as well. But what happens when enemies share bread? For bread is not the gift of enemies but of friends.

In the church we have a name for people who would try to win us over with the bread of kindness. We call such people deacons. If you've been listening to the announcements in church the past couple of weeks you might have heard mention of the deacons and how we'd like to add a few more deacons to the ministry here at Four Corners. Given this I thought I'd share a couple of my own thoughts and hopes for this ministry with you. First, it's necessary to know that if you look across the pages of scripture we find the word "deacons" used only five or six times, mostly in the book of First Timothy and once in each of Philippians and Romans. In each case we find a description for the kind of person a deacon ought to be.

Deacons should be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money. They should be blameless, married only once, and they should have a good grasp on their family and household matters.

Now, I'm sure we could have a very interesting debate about what the words "blameless" and "married" are doing in the same sentence, and perhaps you'd like to know exactly how much wine is too much for a deacon to drink, but that's a sermon for another time. For now what we need to know is that the reason deacons ought not to drink too much or love their money too much, and the reason they should have their personal lives in order, is because the ministry to which they are called can't afford distraction. It demands that they have their head in the game. Too much wine and you can't think straight, you lose your grasp on reality.

Second, it stands to reason that the work of deacons varies from church to church and that as churches change—as the needs and demands of our own lives change—the work of deacons must change some as well. Here at Four Corners Community Chapel the ministry of deacons right now is largely one of hospitality. Every Sunday a team of 3 – 4 deacons show up early to unlock the doors, to turn the lights on, to set the communion table and to make sure there is enough to go around for everyone, and if there's not they'll find a way to make more. In short, like the shepherd of Psalm 23, the deacons watch over us. They provide this space for us to come in, to sit for a while, to have our bodies and our souls restored. It's an extraordinary, joyful work that I hope will grow in the months to come to include not only those of us who are here but also those of us who can't be here on a Sunday. Like those in nursing homes, in our prisons, in our homeless shelters, and those who being so crippled in spirit just can't bring themselves to leave the shelter of their own home. Because they too need the bread of kindness.

Third, it's worth noting that it wasn't until the first church was first formed that deacons were first named. This isn't to say that the spirit of deacons wasn't alive and well in the time of Jesus and in Old Testament times too. But it wasn't until the church started to take on shape that the need for recognized deacons came about, and as far as I can tell, here's why: it wasn't because churches suddenly had buildings and those buildings suddenly needed to be cared for. It's because in the midst of all the preaching and the planning and the organizing of committees and ministries, it didn't take long before the church forgot about the poor, before we lost sight of compassion, before it never crossed our mind to invite the hungry to our table. And that's when deacons were first named to be watch guards, to make sure that above all else and if nothing else, everyone—the hopeful

and the sorrowful, the friend and the enemy—can find their way into this place together, to eat the bread of kindness, to drink from the cup that overflows.

And finally, it stands to reason that not everyone can serve the church as a deacon and that among those who do, they can't serve forever. That even the deacon needs to rest. I wonder though if any of you here today might be hearing the call of God to go beyond your pew, to take the bread of kindness that you have received and to share it with the world around you. Whoever you are, the table is set, and the bread is ready. Come then and take your rest. Come and serve. Come and be filled of God, that you might want no more.