

Cultivating Green Pastures

Acts 2:42-47 Psalm 23

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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The baseball season has begun. George Carlin has made some insightful comparisons between culture of baseball and the culture of football.

Baseball is played in a park - a baseball park.

Football is played in a stadium - often called Soldier's Field or War Memorial Stadium.

Baseball begins in the spring, the season of new life.

Football begins in the fall, when everything is dying.

Football is concerned with downs. "What down is it?"

Baseball is concerned with ups. "I'm not up. Is he up? You're up!"

In football, you receive a penalty.

In baseball, you make an error. Oops!

In football, the specialist comes in to kick something.

In baseball, the specialist comes in to relieve someone.

Football has hitting, clipping, piling on, spearing, personal fouls and unnecessary roughness.

Baseball has the sacrifice.

In football the objective is for the quarterback, sometimes called the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense, hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy, in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use the shotgun, with short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial attack with a sustained ground attack, which punches holes in the front line of the defense.

In baseball the objective is to go home and be safe.

United Methodist Night at Dodger Stadium this year is July 11th. If anyone is interested in coordinating a group outing to the ballpark let me know. Rest assured than in addition to contributing to mission, you will be attending a theologically correct sport.

The 23rd Psalm speaks to us about being safe even when we are not at home. God, the shepherd, takes us to green pastures, leads us by still waters, and keeps us safe through dark valleys. God, the host, greets us as an honored guest, sets a fine feast before us and fills our cup. We are safe as we journey with God, for in fact with God we are always at home.

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." How different that is from the message that the world daily proclaims. "Buy and consume more and more, and it is never enough!" Psalm 23 says "I shall not want". Everything around us is saying "You will never be satisfied."

Friends, the love of God is ours this day. This free gift is our "all in all." Finally, God's love is the only thing that fully satisfies us.

In times of peril we are comforted by the 23rd Psalm. But let us hear these words not only as our source of assurance, but also as our call to ministry. Our assurance is that

God has provided green pastures. Our ministry is to cultivate green pastures for all God's children. Our assurance is that God has set a table before us. Our ministry is to prepare a table where all can feast in peace.

This Sunday and next we are lifting up the vital connection between Christian faith and the global observance of Earth Day.

God has given us green pastures. We have a ministry of cultivating green pastures. God's creation includes abundance for all, where the table is set and our cups overflow. Our ministry is to issue invitations and share the feast. And the way that we cultivate green pastures and share the feast is by following Jesus.

How do we cultivate green pastures? How do we set a feast at which there is plenty for all? We follow Jesus.

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, 5, Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'

Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!

No, you be Jesus!

The poetry of Psalm 23 centers around two metaphors: shepherd and table host. We see both of these images clearly in Jesus. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," and he is constantly playing the role of table host. He does both with the same style. He is the table host that washes the feet of his guests. He is the shepherd that lays down his life for the sheep.

Environmentalists advise us that ecological concerns require a change of lifestyle. But this ecologically friendly lifestyle is fully included in the ancient teachings of our religious tradition: to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God; to love our neighbor as ourselves; to stop building ever bigger barns; to live in loving community; to share one of your two coats with the sister who has none.

If there were no ecological crisis, our faith still calls us to live what is today defined as a sustainable lifestyle, that is, a lifestyle that all the people of the earth can live without depleting the earth's resources. If there were no ecological crisis, our faith still calls us:

- to move from extravagance to simplicity;
- to change the pace of our living from faster to slower;
- to move from accumulation to generosity.

Jesus leads the way with a life of loving service. Lives that follow Jesus are lives that heal the earth.

Karen Young retells a familiar story about a feast of sharing. In a land where the wounds of a recently ended war were still unhealed, a soldier marched down a road. He was going home! His hands ached to hold a hoe instead of a weapon. But the greatest ache was in his empty stomach.

Rummaging in his pack he touched something round and cold. A loaf of bread? No. Only a lovely stone he had found as a gift for his wife. "I wouldn't be hungry if I could eat stones."

When the soldier reached a village, faces peeked out, but his smile was met with frowns and slammed doors. He knocked on the closest door. "I'm hungry."

"We have no food to share. Go away!" a woman exclaimed.

He kicked a stone at a big iron pot. An idea clanged in his head. He dragged the pot to the village square, filled it with water, and built a fire. Benjie, a young boy, stopped and saluted. "What's ya doing, General?"

The soldier dropped his wife's gift into the pot. "I'm making Stone Soup. And I am not a general. You can have as much as you like when it's done, although it would taste better with some potatoes."

The boy returned with an armload of potatoes and a friend. "Melissa, we're making Stone Soup. Captain, does it need something else to make it yummy?"

The soldier laughed. "Captains don't cook, but I think some onions might help."

"My mama grows the sweetest onions," bragged Melissa. In they went. Like the Pied Piper, the Stone Soup lured the children outside. "Sergeant needs more yummys for the soup," announced Benjie.

"I'm no sergeant, but my Stone Soup does taste better with carrots, turnips, a meat bone or two. Barley for thickening and herbs for flavor."

The children ransacked their parents' pantries, raided the gardens, and raked the fields. Food splashed into the bubbling pot. Following their noses the adults found the source of the mouth-watering aroma.

"How dare you steal from us!" accused an old man point a rusty musket at the soldier. "Hasn't this war taken enough from us already?"

"I've taken nothing that was not freely given. The children and I are making Stone Soup. There is enough for everyone."

Benjie added, "We're making a feast like we used to before our papas went to war."

Soon the square was filled with tables covered in food. The old man traded his musket for a fiddle, the children giggled, the grown-ups danced, and the soldier ladled out Stone Soup. Each spoonful brought back memories of meals shared with loved ones. They were laughing and talking so loudly they almost didn't hear Melissa howl, "Strangers!"

Murmurs of fear became cries of recognition. "Papa!" "Husband!" "Son!" When the children introduced them to the soldier, he handed each a bowl of Stone Soup. "Welcome home."

By the time the moon rose full, the soup pot was empty except for the stone. The soldier washed it off and placed it in his pack. Every family begged him to stay but he refused.

"I have a bright moon to light my way, strong legs to carry me home, and stone soup to share along the way."

Green pastures are cultivated when we uproot the seeds of fear and sow the seeds of love. God's creation sets a table with a feast of abundance for all when we live with open hands and hearts. Let us cultivate green pastures and set welcome tables by following Jesus.