

Bless the Lord, O My Soul

Psalm 103

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“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits...” These words are a perfect invitation to this season of Thanksgiving. We pause to remember our many blessings, and we pause to give thanks to the one who has given us these many blessings. The invitation is not to a superficial recitation of blessing, something like good bread, good meat, good Lord let’s eat...no, this psalm invites us to an exhaustive remembrance of God’s blessings...forget not all his benefits. Today our table has been set with a wondrous display of God’s blessings, the fruits of the harvest, the goodness of the Lord. I can just imagine those who graciously gave of their time to set this table holding the various items, the succulent squash, the colorful pumpkins, the crisp apples, the stacks of carrots, and finding inspiration in each and every fruit and vegetable. Maybe they even hummed one of our thanksgiving hymns, “Great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see...all I have needed thy hand has provided...Great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me.” Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. We who gather around this table on a regular basis know the blessings run far deeper than earthly abundance and material gifts. This is a table that tells of God’s great love for humanity, a love that gave of itself, symbolized by the bread and cup and the one who took them into his hands and said, “This is my body, this is my blood, given for you.” Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

I hope you do see Psalm 103 as an invitation. I hope you find some time this week to read this psalm and reflect on all God’s benefits. Maybe you’ll even take the psalm in your hands on Thursday, on Thanksgiving Day, and read it as you sit down to a meal that I pray is filled with warmth and love.

The psalm covers so much, from the forgiveness of God to the healing power of God, from the redemption in which God buys us back at a great price to crowning our lives with love and compassion. You will read of the God who satisfies your desires and renews your youth like an eagle. And you will discover that in a world of injustice, of wrong, of brokenness and division, that our God is the Lord who works righteousness, who is bringing justice to all the oppressed. If you know the story of the cross, of the victory Jesus won by his death and resurrection, a victory of the forces of evil and injustice and sin and hatred, you know he works a deep justice in the midst of a fallen world. You will walk with Moses and find that our God prepares a way for his people, that God has given us a book to guide our steps, to shape our community, to establish a rich and filling life of worship. This God forgives in dramatic ways, and this God remembers that we are human, that we are formed of dust, and our life can be blown away as easily as a flower on a hot

summer day. But God is not so easily put away. This is the one who is from everlasting to everlasting. So you will find yourself drawn to a soaring conclusion, as all creation is called to join the chorus of those who exult in praise, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, as we prepare for our national day of Thanksgiving, a harvest table filled with signs and symbols of blessing and abundance is a call to lift our voices in gratitude and appreciation to our God, the one who provides. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

This table before us is already weighted down with so much, I’m hesitant to add even one more thing. But the thought of what can happen at a table is heavy on my mind. A table can draw people together. We know that because of the communion table, where people come and find unity and community, where hearts are knit together through the bond of Christ’s love. A table can be a place that draws diverse people together. This seems to be a particularly important time in our life together as a nation, and as a world, to come together. So at the risk of loading down a table already groaning under the weight of all this harvest, I want to share with you the hope that people will come together at table and find reconciliation, healing from division, a common cause, and a love that binds human hearts as one.

As we gather for Thanksgiving in 2017, it troubles me that within our nation there has been a growth in the movement of white nationalism. That seems to me to be a move away from what a table like this represents, a table that draws people together in common awareness and appreciation that God is concerned for all creation and that blesses all creation for all creation belongs to God. I know it worries many of you as well. I read recently of a young man who grew up in a home that espoused white nationalism. The article describing this young man says, “From the very beginning, his life had taken place within the insular world of white nationalism, where there was never any doubt about what whiteness could mean in the United States. Derek had been taught that America was intended as a place for white Europeans and that everyone else would eventually have to leave. He was told to be suspicious of other races, of the U.S. government, of tap water and of pop culture. His parents pulled him out of public school in West Palm Beach at the end of third grade, when they heard his black teacher say the word ‘ain’t.’ By then, Derek was one of only a few white students in a class of mostly Hispanics and Haitians, and his parents decided he would be better off at home.” As his home schooling drilled these ideas into his mind and heart, he developed a website where he shared the story of white nationalism. “His website attracted all kinds of extremists: skinheads, militia groups, terrorists, and Holocaust deniers.”

The young man, Derek Black, eventually went to college in Florida, but he didn't let anyone know about his beliefs in white nationalism or his relative celebrity status within that movement due to his writings. He kept his identity a secret. He attended school for a semester, made some friends, and then went to study abroad for a semester. "One night in April 2011, Derek noticed a message posted to all students at 1:56 a.m. It was written by someone Derek didn't know—an upperclassman who had been researching terrorist groups online when he stumbled across a familiar face. 'Have you seen this man?' the message read, and beneath those words was a picture that was unmistakable." Derek had red hair and always wore a cowboy hat. The picture was of him. "Derek Black: white supremacist, radio host...new college student??? How do we as a community respond?"

I can imagine a hundred ways a community of college students would respond. Protests, anger, shunning, rejecting, fighting fire with fire. But I'm embarrassed to say I couldn't imagine the way one of the college students responded. The way one student responded has a lot to do with this table, and the hope it holds out. "Matthew Stevenson had started hosting weekly Shabbat dinners at his campus apartment shortly after enrolling in New College in 2010. He was the only Orthodox Jew at a school with little Jewish infrastructure, so he began cooking for a small group of students at his apartment each Friday night. Matthew always drank from a kiddush cup and said the traditional prayers, but most of his guests were Christian, atheist, black or Hispanic — anyone open-minded enough to listen to a few blessings in Hebrew. Now, in the fall of 2011, Matthew invited Derek to join them."¹ No one else had invited Derek over. A Jewish young man did. And he invited him to a dinner. He invited him to sit at a table. Over time Derek's life changed. He renounced his views of white nationalism. He came to see the value in people of all races, all colors, all cultures. It is a powerful story of transformation. Today as we sit with a table before us, I wonder if there isn't a lesson for us to learn about how we work toward transformation, toward healing, toward reconciliation. Might it be that so much of it can take place at a table, a table where we open our hearts, we open our homes, we share with others, we listen to others, and we take time to treat others as humans, we treat others with dignity, with respect, and together we seek a better world, a world where there is more kindness, more compassion, more gentleness, and more love. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. Among the benefits we must never forget is that God is the God of justice, and he works to reconcile, and to restore, and to rescue the ones who are oppressed, rejected, marginalized, and cut off.

¹ Eli Saslow, "The white flight of Derek Black", The Washington Post, October 15, 2016.

I have a particular fondness for the Thanksgiving table. My life was changed by what happened around the table in the home where I grew up. My life was changed forever and my life was changed for the better by what happened around the table in the home where I grew up. And it happened at Thanksgiving.

Back in 1844 George Williams founded the YMCA. He was living in industrialized London, a place of great turmoil and despair. For the young men who migrated to the city from rural areas to find jobs, London offered a bleak landscape of tenement housing and dangerous influences. Twenty-two-year-old George Williams, a farmer-turned-department store worker, was troubled by what he saw. He joined 11 friends to organize the first Young Men's Christian Association, a refuge of Bible study and prayer for young men seeking escape from the hazards of life on the streets. Although an association of young men meeting around a common purpose was nothing new, the Y offered something unique for its time. The organization's drive to meet social need in the community was compelling, and its openness to members crossed rigid lines separating English social classes.²

From its very beginning the YMCA has been about people crossing rigid lines that separate them from others. In London in 1844 it was rigid class lines. In the summer of 1966 it was a racial line that was dividing people. America in the 1960's was a place of racial tension and riots were breaking out and marches were held because of the line that divided blacks and whites. In the summer of 1966 two men met at a YMCA camp. One man was black and one man was white. They developed a friendship that transformed their lives. It also transformed the lives of their children. Interestingly enough the black man was named Mr. Green. His name was Preston Green and he and his family had moved from the deep south, from Louisiana, to a small town in Central California. The white man was named Carl Eberly. He was my dad.

Mr. Green and Mr. Eberly met working as volunteers at a YMCA camp in the summer of 1966. When the pages of the calendar turned to November my dad called up Mr. Green and invited his family to come join the Eberly family for a Thanksgiving meal. Remember there were racial tensions all across our nation. Remember there were dividing walls of hostility. There was a highway running smack dab through the center of our town and the blacks lived on one side and the whites lived on the other. But that Thanksgiving of 1966 Mr. Preston Green and his wife Margie and his daughter Jackie and his son Preston Jr. got in their car, crossed that freeway, drove down Fitzgerald Lane, and joined our family for a Thanksgiving dinner.

² From the YMCA website

When Thanksgiving rolled around the next year, Mr. Green called and invited the Eberlys over. So we crossed that same freeway, drove into the Home Garden neighborhood and had Thanksgiving with the Greens. And every year we would alternate between homes, the Eberlys and the Greens, always sharing Thanksgiving together.

A highlight of the meal was when Mr. Green would make his annual speech. The turkey had been whittled down to just a few bones, the piles of mashed potatoes had been consumed, we had feasted on Mrs. Green's famous Coca Cola Jello salad, and so much pumpkin pie had been stuffed in our guts that they were about to explode. It was then that Mr. Green would push back his chair and begin. It was always the same. Speaking to my father, he would say, "Well, Carl, I guess it was back in 1966 that the Eberlys first had the Greens over for Thanksgiving dinner. And every year we have been sharing this fine meal together." It was so predictable that when my brother and I got to be teenagers, we would have fun and mimic Mr. Green. When he would lean back, so would we. When he would say his speech, our lips would silently mouth the words with him in perfect unison, "Well, Carl, I guess it was back in 1966...."

I will never forget the first Thanksgiving after our oldest son was born. It was 1985. We drove down from Sacramento for Thanksgiving dinner. The Greens were there. We threw the football, we visited, we admired the babies. Then we sat down to eat. We whittled the turkey down to just a few bones. We consumed mounds of mashed potatoes. Mrs. Green's Coca Cola salad was as good as ever. And even though our bellies were full we kept stuffing our faces with pumpkin pie. Sure enough, Mr. Green leaned back in his chair. I knew what was coming. It was so predictable. It was like clockwork. Mr. Green leaned back in his chair...but now I didn't lean back and mimic him. Instead I watched with a strange wonder and awe, a profound sense of humility and gratitude. That year when Mr. Green said, "Well, Carl, I guess it was back in 1966 that the Eberlys first had the Greens over for Thanksgiving dinner," I didn't joke around at all. Instead I looked at my dad. Without ever making a big deal about it, he had helped me to accept people whose skin was a different color than mine. Then I looked at my son, just a baby boy. I said to myself, "I hope that when my son grows up, he will look at me and be able to say 'my dad taught me how to love and respect people of all races and religions, of all color and creed.'"

So here I am. Here we are together. The table is weighed down with so many blessings, and it is the same with our lives. We have gathered to say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not his benefits." And today we lean on this table. We add just a little more weight. Don't hold back. This table can support it. This table can sustain it. This table was made for it. We lean on this table and say, "Bless the Lord, o my soul, for he works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed." We lean on this table and as we lean we pray, and we dream dreams, and we share visions, of that great day when all creation gathers at such a table, when all creation rushes to a table that is open, that is welcoming, that is inviting, that is inclusive, a table where all are welcome, because all are created in the image of God. We lean on this table and as we lean we pray, and we dream dreams, and we share visions of that great day when people will come from east and west and north and south and sit at this table. At the head of the table will be Jesus. He has earned the right to sit at the head of this table. He came for the least, the last, and the lost. He came for you. He came for me. He came for us. He came for all. There are so many songs we could sing that day. Maybe we will have time for them all. But today let us sing one that we know will bring him glory and honor and praise. Let us say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."