

“A Feast in the Presence of Our Enemies”

As mentioned in today’s program, we will start a thing called the “cup noodle fellowship”. You may be wondering what this cup noodle fellowship is about. When I was still a student at seminary, I was sent to intern at a Korean church in Ichigaya, Tokyo. The day began with Sunday school, then we had our worship service, and various meetings followed afterwards making it a hectic day, but every Sunday during lunchtime each staff member received a cup of instant ramen. I can still remember how after a busy morning, I couldn’t wait to pour that hot water and eat ramen with the other staff. Recently as I was reminiscing over those days, it dawned on me that perhaps we don’t always have to take so much time and preparation just to enjoy lunch at church.

This church’s slogan for the year is “To Cultivate Friendship”. Many of you are living on a busy schedule. You may find it difficult to meet with a friend from church during the weekdays. I am reminded of this when after service, I would see a church member calling out to someone in the parking lot to give them some fresh produce from their backyard, while another person is seen carrying a stack of borrowed DVD’s, and the church seems like a lively marketplace. We talk to each other after service about what happened over the week and I would often see people praying together.

For most Sundays, I would like you to go home as early as possible so you can spend time with your family. But there are times when we want to stay a little longer so we can talk to someone, pray together, or spend time in the Word. And sometimes it’s a hassle to change location just to have lunch together. So if you find yourself wanting to hang out a little longer, get yourself some cup ramen. I hope this will enable us to spend more time in cultivating our friendship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

For this new fellowship we bought some Maruchan brand “Midori no Tanuki” and “Akai Kitsune” noodles. I’m aware that there are two kinds of people in this world, those who favor the Tanuki noodles and those who prefer the Kitsune (Tanuki is soba with tempura, Kitsune is udon with fried tofu, Pastor Okura prefers Tanuki). Because we have a limited supply we can’t provide the noodles for free, but we are hoping to provide them for a very reasonable cost. Please let me know if you are interested. Okay now let us continue from last week and turn to Psalm 23:

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"¹The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:1-6, NIV)

The focus of today's message will be the words "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies". This psalm shows the relationship we have with the Lord as our shepherd and we His sheep. David says that the Lord our shepherd prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

During my sabbatical I read a book on how geography shaped the mind and culture of the Japanese people. The book describes how most nations in the world are connected by land to neighboring countries, and that they have a long history of invading each other because of this, which has resulted in the loss of countless human lives. In contrast to these nations, Japan is surrounded by water and so has been protected from invasions by other countries and for the Japanese people, natural disasters were a greater threat to their existence. As I read this book, I thought of the difference between Japan and the rest of the world in their views on topics like war and gun control, and I'm beginning to think that unless our countries trace back and learn each other's history, it would be difficult to understand one another. Our thoughts and value systems are often the product of our past experiences and the history of the cultures we belong to.

Throughout his life, David literally lived in the presence of his enemies. He lived during a time when the threat of being invaded by enemy nations was always present. As the king of Israel and the supreme commander of the military, he had to face enemies who were always looking for a chance to assassinate him and his life was constantly in danger. If he was defeated by his enemies, it would mean death for the entire nation of Israel, so the pressure he faced was enormous. We must remember these things as we read this psalm in which he says "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies".

But it is also true that for most of us, the enemies we face today are different from the enemies David faced. Of course we still have wars and our nations have to fight enemies

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who pose a threat to our existence. But generally speaking, most of you don't have a specific enemy that is targeting you personally and literally trying to take your life.

At the same time, we live in a society full of complicated human relationships, in which we experience various kinds of personal attacks and deception, and there may be people in our lives who are intent on doing us harm. Also we may take the various problems that we face in life and consider them our "enemies". And the psalm is saying that the Lord prepares a table before us even when we find ourselves in these circumstances.

As I mentioned in my last message, David's son Absalom plotted against him and he had to flee from the capital, and it is recorded that as David was fleeing, a servant of Mephibosheth provided a large supply of food for him (2 Samuel 16:1-2). Also when Absalom and his soldiers were closing in on David, an Ammonite provided food for David and his people to eat (2 Samuel 17:27-29).

Both of these incidents occurred as David was being pursued by his enemy, and to make matters worse this enemy was his own son. If it were today he might have at least been able to find a restaurant to walk into but in those days, finding food to eat while being a fugitive must have not been easy. Although the food was given to him by human hands, David knew that it was God who prepared a table for him in the presence of his enemies.

In the Bible we find that David was not the only one who experienced this, as it is recorded that when the people of Israel escaped from Egypt and was wandering in the wilderness, where they faced threats from their enemies, God provided manna for them to eat every morning.

Also it is recorded that after the prophet Elijah fought and won against the prophets of Baal, Ahab's wife Jezebel sent him a death threat which terrified him and made him flee into the wilderness. Though Elijah came out victorious against them, this new threat filled him with fear and discouragement, and he says to God "I have had enough, Lord...Take my life" (1 Kings 19:4). We can tell from these words that Elijah was on the edge of despair. So what did God do in response? As Elijah lay asleep under a bush, God sent him an angel:

"⁵...All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.⁷ The angel of the Lord came back a second time and

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touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God." (1 Kings 19:5-8, NIV).

As Elijah lay there exhausted and in fear, God sent an angel who told him to "Get up and eat". He woke up to find some baked bread and a jar of water. If it were today this would probably be some hot toast and a cup of coffee. He ate the meal and again fell asleep. After a while the angel came back a second time and said "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." Though Elijah was in such a state of hopelessness that he no longer wanted to live, the Lord prepared him a meal before his enemies and Elijah was renewed and strengthened.

As I read this passage, I was reminded of how we too experience the same kind of desperation when an enemy is against us, or we face an obstacle that seems too great to overcome. Fear and anxiety fills our hearts and takes control of us. Like Elijah, sometimes we too become so overwhelmed that we feel it would be better if we were no longer alive. But even in these great trials of life, God will give us the strength to get through it. Elijah was exhausted both physically and spiritually, but after he ate the food that the Lord prepared for him and got some rest, he got back on his feet and kept going.

As we see in this passage, our God is a loving God who says to us, "The journey is too much for you, you must be exhausted physically and spiritually. Though your enemy is before you, I have prepared a table for you so that you will have more than enough strength to go on. So get up and eat."

When we see a sheep, we can tell that it does not have any strength on its own to protect itself out in the wild. They are an easy target for wild beasts. But they still need to find food and get rest in order to live. If there is one thing that would guard them from being attacked and keep them safe as they lay down to sleep or feed on the grass in the fields, it would be to have a shepherd watching over them. If a shepherd is there to protect them and give them food, the sheep are able to eat even if they are in the presence of their enemies. There are times in our life when we are overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. But if we know that the shepherd is by our side, we can go to Him and receive the food that will nourish our souls and fill us with peace.

For the Jewish people, sharing a meal with someone has been the greatest expression of fellowship and this holds true even today. By inviting someone for a meal, preparing the

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food, and eating that food together, they showed their guest how much that person meant to them. As you know, the Bible records many instances where Jesus is sharing a meal with someone. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, and He often shared a meal with His disciples. We can imagine how excited they were to share a meal with Jesus. The food nourished their bodies, but they were also nourished by the words Jesus spoke to them. Jesus gave them plenty of spiritual food for their hungry souls. When they got up from the table, they must have noticed a change in their hearts from when they first sat down to eat. And today, the Lord has a table prepared for us 24/7 and is inviting us to sit down to eat with Him.

When Elijah had to face his enemy Jezebel, God did not choose to remove Jezebel away from Elijah. Of course, it would have been easy for God to do so. But instead, God provided Elijah food to strengthen him before his wicked enemy and helped him get back up again.

If you remember from last week, I spoke on how the characteristics of both a mother's love and a father's love can be found inside the supreme love of God, and one of the characteristics of a father's love is the desire for a child to accomplish a goal. A mother's love may try to take remove any enemy that troubles or causes pain for a child. But a father's love expects and hopes that a child will overcome this enemy. But the father does not leave his child alone. He is always there for the child, and gives the child strength and wisdom to conquer the enemy. This is because the father knows that there is a greater reward that can only be won by overcoming the enemy.

Dear brothers and sisters, are we seated at the table that the Lord has prepared for us? When we have to face our enemies, are we strengthened by the food the Lord gives us? You may be wondering why I asked these questions. Jesus once told the following parable:

¹⁶... "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'¹⁸ "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'⁹ "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'¹ "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the

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crippled, the blind and the lame.'²² "'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'²³ "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"' (Luke 14:16-24, NIV)

Ironically, when we are facing a great obstacle, we have a tendency to let it take control of us and we refuse the very thing we need the most, that which the Lord has prepared for us. You may be thinking, "Oh not me, I would never do that". But when a problem arises and you are overwhelmed by it, do you really sit down at the table that the Lord has prepared for you before doing anything else? Oftentimes our first reaction when something happens is to think of our own solution to the problem or to make a phone call to someone we know, and by doing these we ignore and hurriedly walk past the table that the Lord has prepared for us, where Jesus Himself is waiting for us. Even though the first thing we need to do is sit down with the Lord to listen to His Word and receive the food only He can give us, we instead make excuses and refuse His invitation.

When cup ramen was first introduced in Japan, the event that made it a staple food was the hostage crisis known as the Asama-Sansō incident. As they waited outside in the freezing weather for the communist radicals to come out and surrender, the members of the riot squad were sustained, both physically and mentally, by the cup noodles that were supplied to them. We can imagine how those steaming cups of ramen warmed their hearts and bodies and gave them strength as they prepared to go back and face their enemies.

Even when there is an enemy right in front of us, we must first sit down at the table that the Lord has prepared for us. As we sit at His table, let us talk to Him in prayer. And let us receive spiritual food by reading and listening to His Word.

Today is the first day of a brand new week. Maybe you are thinking about a problem you have to deal with or a certain person who might be giving you trouble this week. But listen to the Lord who is saying to us, "Do not fear, for I have prepared a table for you in the presence of your enemy. The journey is too much for you to bear, so come and eat with me".

And we have yet another blessing from the Lord, that we can sit at His table with our fellow brothers and sisters, and there at the table we share our burdens, pray for and

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encourage one another, and with renewed strength, we can return once again to the frontlines of our daily battles. As we go out into the world from this sanctuary, let us remember that the same Lord who strengthened Moses, David, and Elijah before their enemies is with us today. Let's pray.

Translated by Keita Machida