

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 7.12.20, John 17:9-19,  
Psalm 23:5

Sermon Resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Le33lZaMOI>

One of my favorite comedians is Tim Hawkins, a Christian comedian, who talks about common phrases we use when praying, and one that he talks about is when we pray a “hedge of protection” around someone. I’m praying a hedge of protection around you! And Hawkins says, that’s nice and all, but really, a hedge? You couldn’t, say, pray for something sturdier? A wall, something made of steel? A hedge isn’t really much, it’s pretty easy to cut through with a pair of clippers. It’s a nice thought, but maybe pray for something more solid and helpful, for protection.

I have similar thoughts about Jesus’ prayer here. He’s talking about how the world is going to hate the disciples, going on about how they will never belong here, but also says “I’m not praying for you to remove them from the world”, and I think why not? Why not pray for that, the removal, from this, apparently, hate-filled world? The protection and prayer is nice and everything, but why not just remove us from the trouble that’s coming? Similarly, in our psalm, it says you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, which is nice, but why not set up the table somewhere else? Somewhere not right in the presence of enemies? Somewhere in the presence of friends, perhaps?

And that’s not something I have an answer for today. This will probably be one of those many questions I have at the pearly gates. A steel guard is nicer than a hedge of protection, and to be removed from trouble and hatred would be nicer, too. But, Jesus does not ask for that, he does not ask for his disciples to be removed. The world will hate them, they will be here but not really belong, and will not be removed. The table is set up and the cup is overflowing, but we are not removed from the presence of enemies, and that is a hard and mysterious thing.

But what little comfort there is, in it, is that Jesus sees what we're facing. His prayer shows us that he realizes what we're going through. And it acknowledges the difficulties we face, even sometimes the hatred. It's the same kind of acknowledgement we see in our psalm, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies". And while that's puzzling, it also acknowledges enemies, acknowledges that which we are fighting against and struggling with. These passages say 'you aren't imagining that it's hard to live this life, you aren't just weak or incapable, there are elements of hatred here, this world is tough, there are enemies, and sometimes we are having to fight just to get by'. Maybe you don't need that acknowledgement, but I know I do, and maybe you do, too. There are enemies, and hatred, and difficulties, and struggles in this world, and our God and our Savior see them.

But what these passages also tell us, and what I want you to know today, is that there are enemies, and hatred, and difficulties, but, and here's what I want you to know: The Lord is with us in them. The Lord is with us in the presence of our enemies, in the face of the world's hatred, in the daily fights and struggles, in the difficulties of this life, the Lord is with us, in those things. I wanted you to know that.

Now, maybe you didn't need that reminder, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded, and I think many of us do, because like some of the other things we've heard: God loves you, God cares about you, You're allowed to rest, and to doubt, they seem like obvious things, things we even say regularly, but sometimes we actually believe very different things, which makes this a necessary reminder.

Sometimes we say "Oh yes, the Lord is with me in this", but what we actually believe is that we have to get through the struggle and the fight, we have to run the race, and God will be there at the end, showing up later. That if we can deal with everything ourselves, if we can manage the hatred and enemies, if we can

vanquish and overcome, ourselves, then God will be there once we cross the finish line, and hand us a trophy. But that the Lord is with us, in the fight, in the struggle, step by step with us in the race? Maybe we don't actually believe that. So we start to believe it's all on us, our job, our work, our battle to fight and win. So, we have to be strong, capable, always prepared, always ready, we have to get our defenses set and our protections and precautions in place, because it's up to us, alone. And if we can get through it, THEN maybe we'll encounter the Lord, and our cups will overflow and we'll enjoy the feast THEN.

So, in the face of that, we are reminded, God isn't only at the finish line. The Lord is with us, in the face of the world's hatred, in the presence of our enemies. God is there, setting up the table, pouring out the oil. Jesus is with us, praying, protecting, defending. Our God and our Savior are not only at the end, and we don't have to get through struggles alone. The Lord is with us, in them, every step of the way, every struggle we meet, every challenge we face, from the beginning to the finish line.

It also means that encountering struggles, difficulties, enemies and even hatred, is not evidence that the Lord has forsaken us. It's not always evidence that we've made a mistake or a wrong turn. It can be, and that's a sermon for another time, but that's why we've got to discern and pray and be in our community of faith, to hear voices other than our own. But, for the purposes of today's sermon, encountering the world's hatred, having an enemy, feeling overwhelmed and overcome, struggling through the days and the difficulties, that's not a sign that God has left us. It's not proof that we've been rejected or abandoned, that we're displeasing or problematic. I know it can feel that God has forsaken us, and I'll talk more about that in a minute, and that's a very real feeling, but simply being in the presence of enemies, or dark valleys, encountering trouble and struggle isn't a judgment on us, it isn't a sign that God has left us. The Lord is with us in those

times, Jesus knew enough to pray and prepare us for those things, the Lord prepares a table for us, even in the presence of our enemies. We are not forsaken.

And maybe you were puzzled by such ways of thinking, and most of the time, we'd be horrified at the idea of thinking or saying those things to other people. If someone came to us, struggling, encountering difficulty or even enemies, we probably wouldn't say, "Well, you'd better find a way through it, so you can get back to the Lord", or "The Lord probably isn't with you in this". And most of us wouldn't look at someone else's life and say the reason they have all those struggles is because they've messed up in God's eyes, the Lord has left them. Usually when people come to us in distress, even in the face of hatred and enmity, we don't tell them that the Lord has left them, or that they've got to battle through on their own.

But, sometimes, deep down inside, we're saying it to ourselves. We think that we got ourselves into this mess, so we've got to get ourselves out, and the Lord's definitely not here with us, definitely not going to help us out. We tell ourselves that this struggle is our own fault, this difficulty is ours to carry alone. We tell ourselves that we must have messed up, or we must deserve it, or the Lord must have turned away from us, and that's why we're struggling, that's why we're having to fight so hard, that's why it feels like we're in the presence of enemies and the world hates us.

And listen, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and we confess our sin every week, we don't believe we're perfect and without blame. But that's not today's focus. Jesus tells the disciples, in his prayer, that they will encounter the world's hatred, and doesn't say it's because they messed up, or they are terrible people, or they are rejected by God. Sometimes there are just fights and challenges and difficulties in this life. And, our psalmist doesn't say 'here I am in the presence of my enemies, all on my own, have to fight them off myself, hope I

can manage it', it says that God prepares a table, and pours oil, and lets the cup overflow, that God is present, too, in the presence of enemies. So simply having a struggle, or having to fight, or encountering the presence of enemies, doesn't automatically mean you've messed up, and you don't have to survive this on your own. No matter the situation, or the reason for it, you don't have to fight it out, or overcome it, alone. The Lord is with you in the struggle, the difficulties, the world's hatred, the presence of enemies. The Lord is with you, whatever you are facing, the whole time you are facing it.

And I know this whole thing about enemies and hatred is unsettling. We'd probably prefer to be removed rather than have to face it, rather than have to fight and battle it out and struggle day by day. I would. But, we are not alone in it. God is not only at the finish line, God is right here and now, in the presence of our enemies, the Lord is with us in whatever we are facing.

And this thing about enemies—well, in the psalmist's time, and certainly in Jesus' own life, the enemies were clear. That person over there with the big sword, charging at me, probably an enemy. Jesus had known enemies, people who overtly and obviously hated him and were plotting against him until his death. The concept of enemies may be a little trickier for us. For one thing, and this is just worth noting, we may have decided something or someone is an enemy, when they are not, when we are just being stubborn or prejudiced or narrow-minded. God is with us, but God may be trying desperately to get us to open our minds and hearts, so that there isn't an enemy anymore. But, the other thing is that our enemies may not be external. The hatred may not come from an outside source. Sometimes our enemies are inside. Like writer Ann Lamott says, "my mind is like a bad neighborhood". Sometimes our fight, our struggle, is with mental and emotional enemies. Sometimes our battle and difficulty is with depression or anxiety, mental, spiritual, emotional illness. And they are illnesses, but it doesn't make them less of

a fight. It doesn't make the struggle any less. It doesn't make it feel any less like an enemy or a voice of hatred. And even with those enemies, the kind that are invisible, but insidious, we don't have to fight through on our own and wait to meet God at the finish line, nor is this a punishment or a judgment or a sign of God's rejection. Now, it can feel that way, quite strongly, in the face of such an enemy, in the face of hatred that comes in the form of our own anxieties, our own voices. It can be hard to sense God's presence. But that's why I want to say to you again, even if you don't feel the Lord's presence, even if it seems like you've been abandoned, there is no place God doesn't go, and the Lord is with you in those struggles, the Lord is with you, during them, not just at the end, and is preparing a table for you to feast, even in the presence of your enemies—all kinds of enemies.

Whatever you're going through, whatever struggles, whatever daily battles and fights, whatever hatred you feel and enemies you face, you are not alone. God is with you, in it. You are not removed, but you are not alone. You are not abandoned or forsaken or judged. The Lord is with you in whatever you are facing, and whatever struggles you endure. The Lord is with you, preparing a table, even now, even in the midst of the fight. God has not abandoned you to the presence of your enemies. So, whatever you are facing, know that the Lord is with you in it, and even in the presence of our enemies, the table is prepared, the oil is poured, and our cup will be filled to overflowing. Amen.