

## **THE OVERFLOWING CUP**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Oct. 28, 2018  
Based on Psalm 23:1–5; II Corinthians 9:7–15***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm entitled, "Beside Still Waters." Last week we considered the first part of verse 5—"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies"—and we noted how David, having begun the psalm with the picture of God as shepherd, now shifts in verse 5 to the image of God as a gracious host. We noted that these two images fit together, since a shepherd in ancient times often would serve as a host to any visitor or traveler who came to the shepherd's tent. Following the image of an abundant table, verse 5 continues: "thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." {prayer}

People often talk about whether the cup is half full or half empty. David says, "My cup runneth over." Some people might say, "Sure, his cup runs over. He's king. He's powerful, successful, and rich." But in the past weeks in this sermon series, we have noted that at the point when David wrote Psalm 23 he was at one of the worst moments of his life—when his son Absalom had mounted an armed rebellion against him. David had been forced to flee from the palace in Jerusalem; and as he sought to gather his followers in the remote town of Mahanaim, Absalom was approaching with an army. David at this juncture faced the loss of everything, including his own life. He might very well have said, "Lord, my cup is getting rather empty!" But instead he proclaimed, "My cup runneth over."

How could David say that? It is because he measured his life not in terms of earthly fortune but in terms of God's goodness. He knew that God was with him, with overflowing grace and blessing and promise; and by that measure, even in a time of trouble, he could say "My cup runneth over." The apostle Paul made similar statements. In numerous places in his letters he referred to the many sufferings he endured on his missionary journeys, yet he always praised God for the abundance of God's goodness and what he called "God's surpassing grace." (II Corinthians 9:14)

We deal with times in life when it may seem that our cup is getting quite empty. In such times the pleasant imagery of Psalm 23 may appear irrelevant. Who can relate to a picture of still waters when the waters in your own life are frighteningly rough, or the picture of an overflowing cup when yours seems to have nothing? This is why it is so important to realize the circumstances in which David wrote the psalm—he was in the midst of horrendous troubles! The images of peace and abundance in the psalm do not depict the outward circumstances in his life; they speak to the condition of his soul. The psalm tells us that, even in rough times, our cup can overflow with strength and peace when we put our trust in God.

All this relates very much to the previous image in the same verse, where David says, "thou anointest my head with oil." For modern readers, this phrase is perhaps the most

obscure phrase in all of Psalm 23. We don't anoint each others' heads with oil, and most people when they hear these words are not at all sure what to make of them. Ancient people, though, would have known exactly what David was talking about, because anointing with oil was a very common ancient practice. In the ancient near east, if a host wanted to be especially gracious to a guest, the host would place a perfumed oil—generally olive oil with natural fragrances mixed in—onto the guest's head. People at the time felt that having copious oil poured over your head was something just wonderful. You can find an expression of this, for example, in Psalm 133, which says, "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity; it is like precious oil on the head, running down the beard . . . running over the collar." [Psalm 133:1–2] This sounds to me like a mess. I read a passage like this and think that I would immediately want to take a shower. But in Biblical times, it was precisely because people did not so often take a shower, or a bath, that they loved oil like this. Rich people would use perfumed oil in the morning to freshen up; and if a traveler came into a house or a tent after a journey—dusty, wind-blown, sweaty, one's long hair a tangle—having a nicely scented oil applied to one's head was experienced as especially refreshing. It was also experienced as especially gracious, since perfumed oil was expensive, and hosts did not do this for everybody. To be anointed with oil was to be honored.

In the gospels, there are two significant moments when Jesus was anointed with oil. Once when Jesus was in the home of a Pharisee having dinner, a woman of poor reputation entered the house, and she began to anoint Jesus' feet. *[A woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment . . . and began anointing Jesus' feet with the ointment. Luke 7:38–39]* People would normally wash their feet, but they would not waste oil on their feet; the fact that the woman poured oil on Jesus' feet was an expression of her humility and an expression of the extravagance of her gift. The Pharisee thought the whole thing to be unseemly; but Jesus said to him, "You did not anoint my head with oil [the Pharisee was not very gracious toward Jesus], but she has anointed my feet [the woman exemplified a humble graciousness]." [Luke 7:46] In another account, shortly before the crucifixion, a woman came up to Jesus and anointed his head with expensive oil. *[A woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on Jesus' head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum Matthew 26:7–9]* Some of the disciples complained that the oil could have been sold for a good price; but Jesus said that the woman had anointed his body for burial—a sign of his impending self-sacrifice—and he affirmed the woman. *[But Jesus said, "She has performed a good service . . . she has prepared by body for burial. Matthew 26:10,12]* In each case, the anointing with oil was recognized by Jesus as a beautiful expression of extravagant love and honor, and in each case Jesus in return blessed the woman with grace.

So when David said of God, "You anoint my head with oil," he was saying that God is like a gracious host who extravagantly welcomes us with honor and love and blessing. But what happens if we are sinners, unworthy of God's honor? We noted previously in this sermon series how David himself had been guilty of very serious sin. How does God view us if our life has been far from spiritual perfection? Does God look at us as the Pharisee might, and decide to withhold His blessing, or as those grumbling disciples might, and decide His blessing is better spent elsewhere? When David, himself a sinner, said of God, "Thou anointest *my* head with oil," he was saying that God meets even the worst sinner with abundant grace; God meets us in our weakness and imperfection and need, and pours out His mercy and promise upon us. This is something that we can each experience today through Christ, as God is at work to freely and extravagantly bestow God's love upon us.

But God does not bless us so abundantly just so we now can sit back and think how nice it is to be blessed by God. There is another key aspect to God's anointing. In Biblical times, there were actually two kinds of anointing. One kind was the sort we have discussed so far—the anointing of a guest by a host, which was an expression of gracious favor. But if you look at the story of David and ask, "Where specifically do we have a story of David being anointed?" you come upon the second kind of anointing. We find this described in the book of I Samuel, when the prophet Samuel anointed the young David to be the future king of Israel. In I Samuel 16 we read, "Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed David in the presence of his brothers, and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." [I Samuel 16:13] This anointing was a consecration of a person for service. Kings and priests were all typically anointed in this way. Here the pouring of the oil was a symbol of God's Spirit being poured into a person. David as he was anointed by Samuel was empowered by God to serve the people of Israel and to eventually become their king.

The ultimate Biblical example of someone being anointed for service is Jesus. The word "Messiah" means "the anointed one," and the New Testament speaks of Jesus as having been anointed by God, as in Acts 10:38, where Peter declares, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and He went about doing good and healing."

To be anointed in this sense is to be empowered by God's Spirit to serve God in the world. The New Testament declares that God through Christ is at work now to anoint each of us in this way. As it is said in I John, "You have been anointed by the Holy One." [I John 2:20]. God's anointing would thus not only bless us, but would move us to join with God in carrying God's blessing to others. This is what Paul was talking about in the passage we heard from II Corinthians, when he said, "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything, and may provide in abundance for every good work." (II Corinthians 9:8) Believers, having experienced God's great generosity, would themselves become generous givers—through their material gifts (

Paul was taking a collection in Corinth) and through their service. And believers, having received God's unlimited graciousness, would now show boundless graciousness toward others; and how much do we need that message today, when we see so much hatefulness expressed—through pipe bombs, and that terrible shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, and all sorts of hateful rhetoric. We are called to be instruments of God's anointing—to reach beyond barriers to touch others with the gracious compassion of God.

All this connects back to the image of the overflowing cup. If we experience God's grace as overflowing, it will overflow from us to bless others, and as we generously share God's blessing, it overflows yet further. Paul described this dynamic in II Corinthians when he said, "The rendering of generous service not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God." (II Corinthians 9:12)

In the twenty-third Psalm, David is clear that God is the source of wondrous blessing—it is God who provides an abundant table, who anoints us, and who fills our cup to overflowing—and he is clear that the purpose of this blessing is so that we ourselves can carry out God's good works in the world. But if David is a picture of a person whose life finally is directed toward God, we find the opposite and sharply contrasting picture in the figure of Absalom.

David, as we have noted, was anointed by God, who chose him through the prophet Samuel, and David knew that his anointing was a commission to serve God. Absalom, in contrast, anointed himself, and he saw the anointing as his pathway to personal grandeur. In the book of II Samuel, in a passage we heard last week, there is the account of how Absalom gathered his followers in the city of Hebron and had himself anointed to be king. His aim was to usurp the throne from his father David, because he wanted the wealth and the glory for himself. Absalom is a picture of human pride and the quest for power—the way that many people try to advance themselves in this world with no thought for God, or what is truly right.

It should be no surprise that Absalom was especially known for his vanity; the Bible notes that this was particularly expressed in the attention he gave to his long flowing hair. As the book of II Samuel reports, "Now in all Israel, there was no one to be praised for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it, when it was heavy on him), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight [that is, about five pounds]." (II Samuel 15:25–26) Absalom could have been the inspiration for Gaston in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*; he thought a whole lot of himself, he managed to impress other people, and he was all about elevating himself; but he ultimately would become an illustration of Jesus' saying that those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

The rebellion led by Absalom came finally to a climax in the forest of Ephraim, where a great battle unfolded between the forces of Absalom and those of David. David's forces,

trusting in God, prevailed over those of Absalom; and Absalom fled, riding on a mule. But the book of II Samuel reports that as he sped through the forest, as fast as one can go on a mule, his head got caught in the branches of an oak. *[For Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And his head caught fast in the oak, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him kept going. II Samuel 18:9]* The implication is that his long hair, that he so treasured, got so entangled in the low branches that he was left dangling by his hair as the mule ran on. In that most inglorious position he was found by David's hardnosed general Joab, who ran three spears through him, bringing Absalom's quest for glory to a most ignominious end. Absalom finally is a picture of the self-focused life, which ends in emptiness.

The figures of David and Absalom thus present two radically contrasting approaches to living. Those who follow in the way of Absalom are always obsessed with what they think they lack, and they spend their lives grasping, sometimes shoving others out of the way in the process; but they find that their cup never gets full. Those who gain the spiritual insight of the twenty-third Psalm look to God and find, along with David, the anointing of God's grace and the cup that truly overflows.