

My Turnip Greens Runneth Over
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

“My cup runneth over.” In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

During a winter awhile back, I joined volunteers one Monday to serve a hot lunch at the Stewpot Ministry in Little Rock. My assignment was to be the server of turnip greens. After we served everyone, any who wished were invited to come back for seconds. One man came up to me with a plastic bowl that looked like an old Cool Whip container. He gave it to me and I put in the usual serving I had been giving out – two spoonfuls of turnip greens. He paused and looked at me and said, “It’s gonna be cold tonight. Could you fill up my bowl to help me get through the night?” As I filled up his bowl, he said, “Oh, and if you could get a little of that juice in there. Now that’s what I’m talking about. Oh, and if I only had a piece of cornbread to go with it, then I could really make it through the night.”

In the King James Version, the 23rd Psalm proclaims, “My cup runneth over.” When we really look at our lives, at all our blessings from God, our cups do truly runneth over. That day at Stewpot, even after serving 184 people, we were blessed with an abundance of second helpings, thanks to the generosity of lots of groups and churches. In that big pan, there were still plenty of turnip greens. Why then, was my initial instinct to serve this man only two spoonfuls? Part of it was habit. That was the amount I usually served. Part of it was fear. What if we run out?

Such withholding would have robbed my companion of a little more warmth and nourishment that may have made the difference in getting him through a cold night. Such withholding would have robbed me too, of the gift of giving thanks for and sharing God’s abundance, the gift of giving all I could give in that moment. When we say, ‘my cup runneth over,’ we acknowledge that God has given us an abundant life – a life in which blessings overflow.

In the Twenty-Third Psalm, God is both a shepherd and a host. The Lord is our shepherd who provides our needs – not just our physical and financial needs, but the deepest needs of our hearts and our souls. Each day, he gives us the gift of renewal. When we stumble and when we hurt, he brings us to green pastures and still waters. He restoreth our souls. And we are called to use this overflow of refreshment in our hearts to bear one another’s burdens, to be his instruments of restoring one another’s souls.

Our shepherd is with us even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It feels like we have walked through that long and lonesome valley throughout this past year. While we are beginning to see the light on the other side, we have all experienced loss, some of us at the deepest level imaginable.

Throughout this past year and in the time going forward, it means everything to know that the Lord is with us, and that his rod and staff comfort us. We are called to share this comfort with one another, to help each other find and go down the right paths, to wipe away one another's tears.

The Lord is not only our shepherd, but is our host. He spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies. He anoints our heads with oil. He touches us with a balm that soothes and heals us, and he gives us each a little touch of both his authority and the high responsibility that goes with it. He calls us into being hosts like him – hosts who feed, who heal, who share with all our guests, and who graciously give our guests a chance to share their gifts with us - like the man with the Cool Whip bowl who took a risk and gave me his candid feedback about how to be generous on a cold day.

Like all great poetry, any line can have layers of meaning. There is a darker side to 'my cup runneth over.' It also means this is a cup filled with sorrows. Before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed, 'Let this cup pass from me.' Yet, he obediently drank from the cup of sorrows to take on our sorrows. He takes our sorrowful cup filled with the burdens and tears of this world, and somehow turns it into a cup overflowing with his blessings. That is resurrection. It is not only new life. It is a new life filled with abundance. Abundance for which to be thankful. Abundance to be celebrated. Abundance with which to share.

The Psalm closes with a promise- 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.' And our response is one of thanksgiving for this gift – 'And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.' That is what faith is all about. It is about expressing thanks that our Good Shepherd takes us into the intimacy of his home, and gives us a seat at his table.

He fills our cups to overflowing. We are invited to offer a toast of these cups back to our gracious host. We do that by serving as hosts that offer and receive cups filled to the brim and beyond through his Church, to and from one another, with our neighbors in this city, and with people throughout the world. Through God's love and gracious provision, my cup does runneth over. Even if my cup happens to be an old Cool Whip bowl filled with turnip greens. Amen.