

⁴²[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

I remember learning in elementary school the difference between a want and a need. In my household, there is currently a lot of confusion between the two, especially when wants are expressed as needs for more emphasis. That toy over there; “I need it.” I don't know how prevalent this phenomenon is in other languages, but everyone I know has gone through this phase of exaggerating our wants into needs. It takes some time and I suppose some life experience to better understand our own desires, and to mentally sort out what is truly a need and what isn't.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Psalm 23 is a beautiful composition that has sustained many people throughout the centuries, and of course it is a metaphor: you and I are not going to be sheared for our wool anytime soon. So, like all metaphors, we are supposed to think about the true meaning that lies gently between the words. There between the words, people have found in the psalm’s imagery a source of hope, peace, and comfort. However, one interpretation of the psalm’s opening is less about comforts, and more about our outlook on life.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” We tend to hear this phrase is as a promise of sorts, as in “With the Lord as my shepherd, all my wants will be met.” That comforting message is a valid interpretation, but is it the only interpretation? Allow me to ask this question: when I say the word combo of “shall not,” what other portion of scripture comes to mind? The commandments. What if we tried to hear this first verse of Psalm 23 as a commandment, and not a promise?

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Hmm... that changes things. As I hear it, that interpretation is more about one’s commitment to a certain outlook on life. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Of course this path of interpretation raises questions. For starters, how far are we supposed to take this metaphor? It is in line with the commandment to not covet a neighbor’s possessions, but does it mean we can’t have any “wants” in life? Does it mean that someone who is oppressed – and who wants the same liberties that other people have – should go without those freedoms? Those conclusions would be stretching the metaphor beyond its original intent. What the first verse means if we hear it as a commandment is that with the Lord as our shepherd, our worldview will not be one of scarcity; it will be one of abundance. Instead of living in a constant fear that there is never enough, our view with the Lord as our shepherd is that there is enough to go around.

How then would that look if this outlook were lived out? We look no further than our first lesson. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” Did they have a worldview of scarcity? No. Abundance was a part of the primary vision of the whole community. “I shall not

want” came to fruition because they were convinced that God was active and doing something new. The ministry of Jesus was centered on a proclamation that “the kingdom of God” was something people can experience on earth. It is setting aside the mentalities of scarcity and the kingdom of Caesar in order to live how humans were intended: life together in God’s abundance and God’s kingdom. After the unexpected resurrection of Jesus, the people thought, “Maybe – just maybe – this ‘kingdom of God on earth’ thing that Jesus always spoke of just might be possible.” As they saw it, if God could lead Jesus through death into new life, then God could lead them through trying this new way of life as well. “Shepherd them,” you might say. The green pastures and the still waters that the shepherd leads them to are no longer part of a metaphor. Rather, God literally led them to a community, one where abundance in life can be found.

This brief reading from Acts makes it look like there were no problems at all in the community. Well, other passages in the New Testament definitely portray the early church as butting heads over different issues. We also know from our own experiences that disagreements are inevitable. By admitting that, it doesn’t mean we are saying something special didn’t happen, or that this depiction in Acts is a complete fabrication. Rather, it is saying that the community was able to rise above those social tendencies to not always see eye-to-eye, and they did so in order to do some extraordinary ministry.

It is very good that All Saints is able to have a combined service today; to sing together, to pray together, to have joy in one another’s company, and to also welcome new members into our community. We have seen God shepherd our congregation through the years, and most recently through the worst of the pandemic and through our building renovations. At the end of 2018, our All Saints Council prayerfully set forth a vision to accomplish four goals in five-year’s time. Despite some challenging world-changing circumstances that no one was anticipating, God has led us to accomplishing these goals that were set before us five years ago. One thing that your congregation Council is working on this year is establishing the process to create a vision for All Saints over the next five years. We believe that All Saints is situated for growth in our spirit, growth in our work together, and growth in our welcoming of all people. Like I said, we are still working out the exact vision for the congregation. Regardless of what those goals will be, I know that we will have to reach

them together. We can't just say that the work to achieve these goals is on the shoulders of the pastors, or the staff, or a small selection of members. All of us – from the youngest to the oldest, from the newest members to the most established members – all of us will have a role to play in achieving the vision. That vision will be rooted in a belief of God's abundance. Not in the sense that material blessings will rain down on us, but in the sense that God has blessed our community with the talents, the insights, and the people to do something beautiful and life-giving. We cannot be so lucky to aimlessly stumble into such a future. Rather, like the early church, it will require a vision for what it means for All Saints to live into the promises of the kingdom of God here on earth.

I was visiting a member this past week, and somehow we began discussing how the broader Church has a calling to do good in the world. She rhetorically asked, "Aren't we supposed to rise above our differences? Aren't we supposed to do better than succumb to the heated debates and the fear mongering, and instead work together to make a better world?"

"Well, let me tell you about the lesson we are reading from Acts on Sunday." And when so many people in our society say that what they want most is authentic relationships, and a sense of purpose or vision, can All Saints be a community that meets that need? I believe so.

May we set our hearts and our hopes on God and on God's work with and through us. God is with us, on this joyous day together and on our journey into the future. May we lift our voices together in praise and may we give thanks that with the Lord as our shepherd, we shall not want. Amen.