



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

## *Treasures*

**November 10, 2019**

**Text: The 23rd Psalm** (Interpreted by Bobby McFerrin)

The Lord is my Shepard, I have all I need. She makes me lie down in green meadows, beside the still waters, She will lead. She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs; She leads me in a path of good things and fills my heart with songs.

Even though I walk, through a dark and dreary land, here is nothing that can shake me, She has said She won't forsake me, I'm in her hand. She sets a table before me, in the presence of my foes. She anoints my head with oil and my cup overflows. Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will live in her house Forever, forever and ever.

Glory be to our Mother, and Daughter, And to the Holy of Holies. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be World, without end Amen.



### **Sermon:**

It wasn't until a few weeks after her death that we discovered her treasure chest. She had lived in that same farmhouse for more than forty years. In fact, my father and my aunt helped her build that house, and yet, neither of them knew that that treasure box existed either. Down in the basement, built right into the wall of the canning cellar on the second row from the floor behind some green beans and pickles (not something tempting like peaches or preserves) was a dull metal door that secretly hid my grandparents' earthly treasures. In that small box built into the wall, were things that you would expect, such as titles, deeds and certificates of deposit. But there was something else in that box that blew my mind. There was a small, relatively simple, but absolutely stunning piece of jewelry.

My grandmother is one of the most profound influences in my entire life. I spent so much time with her, and I cannot remember one single moment—not at a wedding nor a funeral nor any other occasion—I cannot remember a single moment when she wore any jewelry except for her wedding band. Yet, here in this treasure box was something objectively gorgeous. I can only imagine how it would have changed that beautiful smile, simple, earth-worn face of a farmer that she had. I don't know why that piece of jewelry never made it out of the box. Maybe she was afraid if she took it out of the box, she might break it. Maybe she might worry how others might look at her for wearing something so fancy. Instead, and this

is what I tend to believe and what my dad tends to believe is that this piece of jewelry was her mother's and her mother's before that, and so it was something that had been passed down from generation to generation, and all she knew was that it was her job to keep and protect that piece of jewelry for the generation that would follow. In truth, though I don't know the answer why something so beautiful never came out to make the rest of our lives more beautiful. But sadly, the value of that treasure is only found and only increased when a treasure is used—when it's put out there for everyone to see or hear—that it might evoke something new or that we might see everything in a new way.

That fact that my grandmother safeguarded that treasure but in doing so kept it away from all of us got me thinking. It got me thinking of what kind of treasures I may hold so close to my heart and guard so carefully that I don't let them out to do their work. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is an absolute treasure of the church, of our faith and even the whole world. When I do a funeral and we're gathered out at the graveside, we recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. And whether people there are lifelong members of the church or may have never even gone, it is amazing how many people know the words to this treasure. The New Oxford Annotated Study Bible is not exactly a book given over to subjective reflection. Instead, it dives deeply into objective truths, or so they claim. But I was stunned that when you read their footnotes to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, it starts simply this way, "The most beloved of all Psalms." It is so uncharacteristic for that heady, intellectual book to make that claim about the psalm and what a treasure it is.

Among the corpus of all the psalms it is a treasure—or what Walter Brueggemann calls *our* treasure box. And he says this about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "Don't you dare leave it in that box, even to protect it. For the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is not meant to be protected but rather to offer us protection." It is not meant for you and me to go home on a cold day like this and light a fire in the coziness of our living room only to secretly take it out and enjoy its warmth. Instead, Brueggemann claims, it is meant for people who are walking through fire—and especially in that Valley of the shadow of death, that we all know to be so poetically true. The psalms are a treasure because they bring us the truth; they are a treasure because they have been passed down from our mothers and the mothers before that and the mothers before that and the mothers before that. We were told to let the psalms be on our lips—to let them be out in the world and never to keep them hidden away.

The psalms were written by those who were transformed by the holy and shared so that they might transform us as well. We take this 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm out a lot. I'm amazed that we read it at weddings and funerals too. We rely on it for baptisms and ordinations; we know it by heart, and every time we hear it, our hearts warm to it. I sat there watching your faces as the choir sang it and I witnessed emotions arising at the familiarity of it all. It is so precious and sacred, I wonder if we sometimes consider it as sacred rather than reminding us that it points us **to** the sacred. I wonder if we sometimes limit it by only choosing to hear it by one translation, such as, for instance, the familiar King James Version. There are those who would claim that King James wrote it that way and therefore we ought to read it that way, and is amazingly poetic. I sometimes wonder if those words simply wash over us because we've heard it so many times and heard more sermons about than we can count (and add this one to the list).

You see, if I could have seen my grandmother wear that jewelry, I would have seen the jewelry differently—but I would have seen her differently too. But that's because it would

have been such a rarity, it would have stood out to me like what happens when we evoke these wonderful words. Bobby McFerrin is an artist who believes he has a sacred responsibility. That responsibility is one of interpretation—it is a responsibility that contains both the possibility for redemption and the reality of transformation. He muses that his job is to bring words to life that they might bring new life to people—that’s what we do! That’s what happens when we read something like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm—living words—not confined but alive and transforming—transforming for the good. You see, McFerrin knows this—interpretation if it’s done well, means that those who come to his concerts angry can leave forgiving. Those who come to his concerts bitter might leave wrapped in mercy. These living words meet us in the midst of our lives, and they change the very course of our lives. In a recent interview, McFerrin shared that he reads the Bible a lot. He reads it multiple times every day, and he does so because he knows he can read the same passage in the Bible 1000 times and see the same meaning peeking through, and then on the 1001<sup>st</sup> reading he sees something in that passage that he never noticed before.

How many times have you read or heard the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm? I wonder if this version sung by our choir today might be that 1001<sup>st</sup> version that reveals something new to you. I hope so. But truth be told, this psalm is not only the most beloved psalm—it likely has more interpretations than any other psalm. In fact, in chapter 34, the prophet Ezekiel takes this idea of a shepherd who leads—the one who sets that table before us in the midst of our enemies, but he adds something to this description. You know those enemies in Psalm 23? Ezekiel says that God’s going to feed them too. But God’s going to feed them with justice. Such words brought to life give new life to us. In fact, Jesus would take this very mantle of shepherd on himself—giving us not just an abstract view of what a shepherd does but describing this table right here—this Communion table and its literal presence every time we gather around it in the presence of loved ones. Jesus also decides to show us just how far the shepherd will go for the sake of the sheep—offering living words and new life.

Even the King James Version—the one so many of us love when we read it—it too is an interpretation. That phrase “the cup runneth over,” is a beautiful poetic interpretation; but the literal Hebrew doesn’t talk about a cup running over but rather a cup that is fully satisfying. And yet those words brought forward show how much life that cup and this table offer. You need to know that this interpretation by McFerrin, like all of the others, is brought to life within a specific context, or rather a convergence of contexts. I bet one of the first things that jumped out at you in this text that he dedicated to his mother, is the feminine language used to describe God. Sometimes in the world, that feminine language can be jarring to people. It can pause us to think. It can even be a roadblock, although it should never be because God is both mother and father. And just in case you think that McFerrin grew up in an environment that lacked a proper orthodox foundation,, think again. His father was a Southern Baptist, and they went to a very high Episcopalian church throughout his life.

On the night this version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was written, he had been rehearsing with one of his singing groups in church. He shared with Crista Tippet in On Being interview that that beautiful Anglican setting got the people in the choir, most of whom weren’t *churched*, to start talking about the heavy patriarchal element of “religion and all that stuff,” as McFerrin put it. At that time he was in a practice; each morning he would get up and write a new piece of

music, and the very next morning it was this psalm that came out. But it wasn't just the effect of that conversation. McFerrin also shared that the morning he wrote it, he had been thinking about his mother—the one who sang in a church choir very much like this one. He was reading a passage that morning about the unconditional love of God, and he went out from his reading to watch his wife interacting with their very young child. He said that all of those things came together in that moment—his mother's love, watching his wife's love for their child, and he realized that one of the glimpses of unconditional love God shows us comes through our mothers. They cherish our spirit, he said; they demand that we become our best selves, and they take care of us. He wrote it in the feminine because he thinks God's love encompasses the best of both masculine and feminine love—not an either/or but a both/and. It provides a beautiful treasure for our living too. In some ways it was a completely radical thing he did in 1990, and yet it's a completely normal thing McFerrin did-taking this treasure and bringing it to life.

I recently played this version of the song for Father Sam down at St. Paul's Church. He immediately remarked about it, "Oh my goodness! That's Anglican chant I hear!" This new version coming out of a most ancient tradition. And then you notice that doxology at the very end—giving praise to God—it turns out that at the end of morning prayer in an Anglican setting, the song would be followed by that very doxology. Old things bring in new life.

One line in this psalm has stuck with me over this past week of studying it more in depth. I love how McFerrin takes the first lines of that stanza—the one talking about restoration of soul, the one talking about walking in the paths of righteousness and turns it into this: "She restores my soul. She rights my wrongs. She leads me in a path of good things and fills my heart with songs." Perhaps, only a musician could do that. But it is such a deep and positive and powerful affirmation of what God does in our lives if we just let her.

I wonder what would have happened if we had discovered that treasure box in my grandparents' basement. I wonder how it would have changed how we looked at them? I wish I could have taken that jewelry and put it on my grandmother, seeing how it changed her and me and that piece of jewelry. I am deeply grateful that Bobby McFerrin took this jewel out of the psalm's treasure box, interpreted it, and put those words to life because now I will never hear those words in the same way again. Music, like psalms, have the power to rearrange who we are—to stir us up and to heal. McFerrin shares that of all of his concerts that he has ever done, the most profound movement that ever happened for him was when, in the midst of a concert, a woman sitting in the audience who heard this particular piece of music stood up. In the middle of the concert, with tears in her eyes, she simply said, "I feel so good now! Thank you."

Friends, that is why we open up passages like this one—not just to cling to ancient treasures but to find our lives rearranged and to feel good—that our feelings might change—that our anger might turn into forgiveness and our bitterness might be bathed in mercy—and that we too might feel *so good* once again. May this treasure stay with you this day and every day.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*