

“Come, You That Are Blessed”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Every Thanksgiving with the Fowler family, it is the *right*-handed people who have to find the awkward corner of the table where they won't bump elbows with the lefties. My sister Alice, our dad, my Aunt Martha, and I are all left-handed, and it is a joyful thing that there are several seating arrangements that can happen where I can still ease between two people knowing I won't crash into them while I am buttering my biscuit. Of course, we won't be traveling this Thanksgiving, so I will be the only lefty bumping elbows with my right-handed family members here at home. I will miss the blessing of gathering with my family down south in Georgia, and I know many of you will miss being with your loved ones over Thanksgiving, too.

And yet, today we receive another kind of invitation: “Come, you that are blessed.” Not only that; the invitation comes from a king! We receive this invitation from Matthew's gospel on Christ the King Sunday. I didn't realize this, but Christ the King Sunday only came into the liturgical calendar in 1925, when Pope Pius XI envisioned a King of Peace coming into the world to reconcile a chaotic world.

Libby Howe notes what was going on in 1925:

- Benito Mussolini dissolved the Italian parliament and became a dictator.
- US president Calvin Coolidge proposed phasing out the inheritance tax.
- In Munich, Adolf Hitler resurrected his political party.
- Teacher John T. Scopes was arrested for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in Tennessee.
- A strike for higher wages at a Japanese-owned cotton mill in Shanghai resulted in the mill's management committing brutalities against strike supporters.
- Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was published.
- As many as 40,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan paraded in Washington, DC. The Klan had 5 million members, making it the largest fraternal organization in the United States.

And the Spanish flu pandemic had ended just seven years prior.¹

¹ Libby Howe, “Living by the Word: Matthew 25:31-46” in *Christian Century*, October 27, 2020
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/november-22-roc-matthew-2531-46>

In a year when we have suffered through a global pandemic that is creeping towards the impact of Spanish flu, the questioning of whether Black lives really matter, the growth of cancel culture, and a political season so tumultuous that some cannot even agree on who will rightfully be the next president, I too long for the reign and reconciliation of a ruler who stands above the troubles of this world, but also enters into it to set things right.

Yet Matthew 25 makes it clear that Jesus needs our hands and feet to help do that. “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me...” -- “But when did we see this happen?” Those seated at the king’s right hand are replaying their lives, trying to picture the moment when they served the king. Their memories are a blank. The king tells them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me.”

Just like my Fowler family gatherings, where we take notice which is a left-handed seat, and which is a right-handed seat, those gathered at the right hand of Jesus are more focused on whether they might be a sheep or a goat than the fact that they are seated before Christ himself.

I have one church member who tells me that they like doing the right thing, but they are afraid they are only doing it so that others will notice how generous, loving, and righteous they are. They asked me, “I wonder if it still counts if I am doing this to collect the admiration from my peers.” I can relate to that sentiment; I have had moments when I spend time seeing my experiences through others’ eyes instead of being in the moment of the experience itself. An example of that is when I went paddle-boarding for the first time, on Lake Michigan in Chicago. I had gone by myself, and since I was hovering right over the water, I had no phone to take pictures of myself. And in this day and age, if you don’t have a picture, you might as well not have done it. As I glided along the water, feeling a little bit like Jesus walking *on* the water, I imagined those I wished could be with me, either to watch me or to enjoy this activity with me. And as I imagined how I might look through someone else’s eyes-- which, thanks to my superpowered daydreaming skills, looked just like the celebrities in US Weekly showing us regular folks how they spend their free time-- the wind turned, curving a wave under my board, and all of the sudden my arms and legs were akimbo and-- splash! I was in the water.

Jesus tells us, “Come, you that are blessed” because we are already blessed, for we have already been in the presence of the holy, whether or not we noticed, and whether or not someone else was noticing us. Perhaps we are paying more attention to who is seated on the right, and who is on the left, and who is with the sheep, and who is with the goats, to see how infused our world is with Jesus’ sacred presence. Chances are, we are already engaged in caring for his body in the world, and didn’t even know it.

Each week I watch my daughter take her violin lesson on Zoom, and I have picked up some knowledge of my own. One thing I learned from her teacher is that the violin has something called sympathetic vibration. That is, when the violinist plays one string, other strings resonate on their own, without even being touched by the bow.

The Stott family sings their blessings before meals. I learned this fact when they sent me a picture to include in the Call to Worship. Just looking at that silent and static picture of them gathered around a table, mouths open in song, I can hear and feel the vibrations coming from their blessing and joy. I suspect the sounds they make are even greater than four voices put together, for something holy most likely joins them in singing along.

But some of us may feel the loneliness of being just one string, especially in this time when social distance is so necessary. I wonder if Paul felt that loneliness of distance when he sent letters to the churches he visited throughout Asia Minor. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul-- or whoever may have been writing in Paul's name-- activated the sympathetic vibration of the Christians back in Ephesus. Though they could not be together, Paul remembers them, gives thanks for them, and encourages them in faith. Paul's reaching out created a sympathetic resonance that still encourages followers of Jesus today.

Our church has that power of sympathetic vibration. When we tend to the lonely, or feed the hungry, our actions invoke the vibrations of the holy to join us in a sacred harmony. And when one person in the church does a good thing, it inspires others to do so as well. There have been many times I have seen your good acts multiply. And while I know some who I did not expect to lose income have struggled, I have also seen people I did not expect to be able to give surprise me with their amazing and sacrificial generosity. Those around us catch on too. Last week, I got two messages-- first, a message from someone in the neighborhood who wanted to make a donation to the church. She said she has never been to our church, but she likes what our church does in the community. Another message was from the Leonia Arts Council. Since they have not been able to spend their money in usual ways, they looked to us to help them give money to the hungry and the homeless in this community.

Come, you that are blessed. Even if this year finds you to be a lonely string, you have the invitation to be blessed in ways that resound with glory and holy presence when you take part in the generosity of the church as we act together to serve the body of Christ.

I want to share with you a testimony we have from a member, Deacon Melinda Koo. She is a beloved blessing to the church, and she will share with you how the church has mattered in her life during an especially difficult but transformative year.