

“Doers of the Word”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Picture the lunchroom where you go to school, or where you went to school. In elementary school, we were assigned to tables, and in the fourth grade, the principal put in a traffic light that would change according to sound level: green meant you could talk freely. Yellow meant you had to whisper. And a red light meant silent lunch. The traffic light was often yellow or red. As an adult, I am convinced this principal didn't like children very much.

When I was older, I changed school districts, and we had more freedom in lunch period. We could talk as much as we wanted, and we could choose who to sit with. At first that was scary, because as the new girl, I didn't know *anyone*. But I made a couple of good friends and ate with them through middle school. In high school, there was a stereotypical layout of the lunchroom- sporty jocks, band and music people, those who studied while they ate, and those who dared each other to eat gross concoctions of food for money. I had a small group of friends that were a cross-section of school: they were nerdy, musical, and athletic, and I liked the fact that you didn't have to have complete allegiance to any one identity to be part of this group. We liked to eat outside when the weather was nice, which in Atlanta it usually was.

Today's gospel story brings me back to the lunchroom. Jesus and his disciples have been teaching and ministering, but now it is time to eat. Those who came from fishing families pulled out some dried fish to eat. One of the women in their entourage offered up a basket of figs, and some cherries. A shopkeeper in the square pulled out some bread, hot out of the clay oven, to share, as well as some wine. The disciples were hungry, and a couple of them tore into the bread right away, while others popped figs into their mouths. There were also disciples who stood to the side, and poured water over their hands while they chanted the proper ritual prayers.

By now, Jesus and his disciples had become minor celebrities, and everyone watched closely what they did— sort of like how there are certain people in

school— a favorite teacher, a feared bully, the class clown, the star student, who are always *watched* to see what they'll do next. In fact, this experience of being watched and noticed is both a hope, and a dread, of many students. They want to be noticed for things like getting a homerun in kickball, or having a brilliant science fair project, or for the little ones, getting to be the line leader for the week. But there are other things that make you want to shrink into your desk. I remember when my daughter was sent home after she got sick at school and vomited. She said, "Mom, no one forgets something like that," and she proceeded to name every student from her class who had ever vomited at school since kindergarten.

Well, *it was noticed* that some disciples did the proper cleansing rituals before they ate, and some did not. People started whispering, and pointing their fingers. Would this become a deciding moment, when some disciples would get recognized and elevated as righteous leaders of the faith, and others pushed out in a cloud of shame?

That's not how things happen at Jesus' table. And while I know it's generally a good idea to wash your hands before you eat, Jesus knew that the successful building of God's beloved community was not going to hinge upon whether Simon and Andrew had washed their hands. Quite frankly, there are more important things at stake, such as caring for the widows and the orphans and the poor, and preparing the people for how to love God more fully.

Jesus warned about the hypocrisy of a faith that rigidly values *rules* over *relationship*. What good are the rituals of our tradition, if we follow them exactly... but then turn to treat our neighbor with cruelty? The kind of table Jesus set is one where all would be welcomed, and from their experience at table with Jesus, they would leave transformed.

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." What are we doing when we leave the sanctuary to show the love of the God we worship in word and song in this place? What are we doing when we leave the Communion table to show that Christ is inside of us?

Last Thursday afternoon, I had to do a church errand out in Lyndhurst. And so, I had the enviable experience of driving Route 17 south just before rush hour the

day before the start of Labor Day weekend. As I numbly observed the many different layouts of the New Jersey strip mall, I came to yet another stop light. A movement caught my eye, and I could see the car to my right was shaking. In it were two women, I'd guess in their sixties, and they were dancing so enthusiastically that it was making their car rock.

I let a moment pass by. But I decided not to let another moment pass by without adding something to it. I'm not sure if they were listening to the same song as me, but their movements seemed to go along with my radio music. And so, I danced too. The driver did a double take, tipped her head back in laughter, and then beckoned her friend to look. They both pointed at me, nodded their approval, and there we all were, on Route 17 south, dancing in our cars, together. When the light turned green, the driver rolled down her window and told me, "Keep dancing!"

You know, I purposefully do not put bumper stickers on my car, mostly because I don't want people to think poorly of a political candidate or religion represented by my bumper sticker in moments when I'm not the best driver. But as I drove away from those stoplight dancers, I thought that a "Honk if you love Jesus" would have added a nice touch.

It is rare that a situation lines up like that where you can notice joy in a stranger, and rarer when you feel bold enough to open up that moment and enter into it and be welcomed. Jesus understood that, and therefore he tried to transform judgment or ritual barriers that get in the way of people being together and sharing food together.

The truth of the matter is that we live in a lonely world. If you are heading back to school, I know you may be thinking: will I have friends in my classes? Who will eat with me at the lunch table? Will people think that what I bring to eat at lunch is weird? Will people make fun of me because of what I wear, or if I do not speak English well, or if they think that I am different? If you teach, you may wonder if your students or principal will respect you. If you serve lunch in the cafeteria, you may wonder if the hungry people you feed will thank you or learn your name.

You aren't the only ones who have questions like these. Everyone feels them. Jesus knew this. He knew what loneliness can feel like. He also knew how

powerful human connection could be. And he showed us that each moment carries with it a chance to be connected to one another, and also to God. We can look at our religion as a “traffic light faith,” telling us what we can and cannot do, and warning us when we are about to go too far, and telling us when we must stop. That is one way to see our faith. But if we only focus only on the traffic light— what we can and cannot do— we may also miss the moments God puts before us, which can open up the fullness and even joy of following God, and on feasting with Jesus Christ. We miss the connection that comes when the Spirit draws us to dance with someone else.

So whatever you are returning to this fall, be *doers* of the word. Find ways to be a friend first, rather than waiting to see who will reach out to you in friendship. Try not to add fuel to judgment and gossip, and certainly try never to be cruel. Be caring towards those who may be on the margins. Your actions may not immediately green-light you to popularity. But at the end of the day, you will be able to look in the mirror, and then walk away remembering that you are a child of God.