
Have A Seat!

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Do you remember the first time you felt like you weren't quite enough? Not good enough, not strong enough, not smart enough, not brave enough? The first time you sensed you might not have what it takes to do what was being asked of you?

I had arrived home for Christmas break my freshman year of college anticipating several glorious weeks of staying out past 3 a.m., then sleeping in until noon while the smells of my mom preparing my favorite holiday foods wafted up from the kitchen. On December 22nd, though, my mother came down with pneumonia. Heading back from the doctor's with a bag full of prescriptions and firm instructions to go straight to bed and stay there for at least a week, she began telling me what I must do to prepare for all the guests who would be coming to our house for gumbo after church on Christmas Eve. I stared at her incredulously while she croaked out her instructions: *Everything you need is in the pantry or the fridge, except the seafood; that'll be delivered on Thursday. The oysters will already be shucked. All you have to do is follow the recipe. Maybe Dad will help!*

I knew better than that. For as long as I could remember, my father's tradition had been to spend the days leading up to Christmas ensconced in his study alternately contemplating the mysteries of the Incarnation and calling old friends to reminisce about their exploits pledging Alpha Tau Omega in the 1950s. I was going to be on my own.

So it was that at the crack of dawn on December 24th, I unfolded a brittle, grease stained sheet of paper from my mother's recipe box and got to work. "Boil water" seemed self explanatory enough. I felt far less certain, though, about how to "devein the shrimp," and the worst was yet to come. About halfway down the page, my great aunt Margaret's tiny, immaculate cursive told me simply, "Make your roux."

No one is asking the disciples to prepare gumbo from scratch in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John. Nonetheless, you can't miss their sense of inadequacy and helplessness in the face of a seemingly impossible task. A huge crowd of people have come out to a remote area to see Jesus, and now it's suppertime. So Jesus asks his disciples, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip states the obvious: Even if there were a QuikStop nearby, Jesus, we don't have the money! "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Andrew spots a boy with five loaves of barley and two fish, points him out to the others, only to wonder, "but what are they among so many people?"

What are they among so many people? It's hard to think of a question that expresses the human plight more poignantly. The plight of knowing you are in over your head. Of sensing that you don't have enough, that you are not enough. Of being asked to carry a burden that feels far too heavy to bear. Of having to go on in the face of paralyzing grief and loss. Of learning to live with a grim diagnosis. Of seeing photos of the bodies of children in the rubble of a bombed out building and wondering, what on earth can I, can we, possibly do that would make any kind of difference here? Of reading statistics about teen suicide rates and the lack of adequate mental healthcare in our country and assuming that this is the end of the story, this is just the way it is.

We live in a time of great social and moral stagnation. You can see this not only in the cynicism and defeatism that pervade so many of our civic conversations but also in the excuses we make up for some of our worst social ills. People are poor, it's frequently claimed, because they are lazy. A more accurate assessment would acknowledge that people are poor because they are so often exploited by employers, banks, landlords and corporations. Instead of focusing on what might be possible if we started asking ourselves hard questions

about how we, and the companies and organizations we support, contribute to poverty, we persist in pretending we are helpless. *What are they, what are we, among so many needs?*

Speaking of this malaise and the need to break through it, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann once wrote, “We [all of us] must ask [ourselves] if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by [the established order] that we have been robbed of the courage or power to think an alternative thought.”^[1] Translated: We must ask ourselves if we have become so despondent about the ways things are in our world right now that we have lost the capacity to hope for what they might yet become.

Which is precisely what this morning’s gospel lesson is inviting us to do! It is inviting us, like the first disciples, to allow ourselves to be coaxed out of our despondency so that we can trust again in the One who longs to show us the power of dreaming and of thinking alternative thoughts. Of preparing for, and expecting, God’s radical healing and salvation in the most unlikely of places and among the most unlikely of people. Of preparing for, and expecting, God’s bounty to descend as foretold by the ancient prophets: *On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well aged wines strained clear.*^[2]

How do we get ready for such a feast in a world that persistently says there’s not enough ? Sometimes, apparently, just by taking a seat. That’s right. Did you notice that about today’s gospel reading? How the miracle in the story really begins when Jesus tells the disciples, “Make the people sit down?” *Make the people sit down.* In other words, help the people adopt a posture not of privation but of possibility. Nudge them from a stance of fear and withdrawal into one of hopefulness and receptivity. Get them ready for something transformative to occur!

In his memoir *Lives Other than My Own*, French writer Emmanuel Carrere describes his experience in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. He and his girlfriend and their respective sons are among a group of survivors on vacation when the disaster hits. In the days that follow, these individuals all go their various ways trying to find the missing, identify the dead, find a working phone to call relatives, negotiate transport home, etc. They are separated by a huge chasm, Carrere notes—there are those who have lost loved ones and are going through hell and there are those who haven’t and aren’t. Each evening, though, these individuals return to their hotel’s restaurant, eating together and comforting one another as best they can. It is hard for the mother whose four-year-old daughter was swept out to sea while splashing in the surf—it is hard for this mother to raise even one fork full of rice to her mouth. And so the others help her. They help each other, too, each time they sit down. There is love at that table, Carrere reflects. There is love at that table, where there might have been only bitterness and resentment. There is love; there is caring and support. There is enough. There is enough generosity of spirit so that on the evening when the young bride in the group receives word that her husband of only one week, whom she had given up for dead, is in fact alive—on the evening when the young bride receives this incredible news, it is the grieving mother of the girl swallowed by the sea who is the first to rejoice with her. And all of this because they have kept sitting down.

Let’s keep sitting down, too, all of us. At the table prepared by our Lord, yes, and at those other tables, too—the ones to which the outcast and the lonely and the dejected are drawn, where scarcity seems to reign but where a great feast is being prepared. Even if the chef isn’t sure how to make a roux. Amen.

^[1] Quoted in Desmond, Matthew: *Poverty, by America*. Crown: New York, 2023, pp. 135-136.

^[2] Isaiah 25:6