

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Setting the Table for Jesus

Luke 3:7-18

A few days after Thanksgiving, our extended family gathered at a restaurant for a birthday celebration. Granted, there was still some leftover turkey and a few side dishes in the refrigerator at home, but it was nice to have a change of menu to wrap up the holiday weekend. During the course of the meal, the conversation started to turn toward Christmas, specifically, where we'll gather this year. Who's going to host this time? How many people can we probably expect? How will we fit the tables and chairs into the space? No sooner had we moved from the Thanksgiving table to the birthday table, than now we were making plans for the Christmas table. 'Tis the season for tables.

One commentator has pointed out that John the Baptist's ministry and message "sets the table for the arrival of Jesus."¹ In other words, John is God's way of getting his people ready for his coming. Tiberius may be in the palace. Pilate may be in the governor's mansion. Herod and his brothers may be in their castles. And Annas and Caiaphas may be in their fancy parsonage. But their claims to authority, while important, aren't ultimate. The world's true Lord, who calls all rulers to account, is on his way, to set things right in his creation. So return to God, and prepare for his arrival.

In some parts of the Christian community, preachers begin their sermons with a worship formula like, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Or, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps. 19:14). But John takes a different approach. He opens his sermon with a question: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?" (v. 7, NLT). How does he expect to connect with his hearers and get results by accusing them of being like snakes scurrying from a spreading fire? What's more, he starts attacking their reliance on their spiritual ancestry. Just because they're descendants of Abraham doesn't guarantee them a place in the kingdom that's coming. So John doesn't begin his message by trying to build bridges between himself and his hearers. Instead, he emphasizes the huge gulf between God's will and their ways.

But John doesn't leave them helpless and hopeless. He says that the gap between God's faithfulness and their unfaithfulness gets closed by the coming of the Lord and their response to his arrival. What ultimately matters isn't their ethnic and religious heritage, but whether their lives bear fruit that reflects true repentance. Genuine faith will be evident through acts of righteousness.

This helps us understand why John's listeners respond to his message from a very practical standpoint. After recovering from the sermon's opening blow, they start to ask questions about their lifestyle and behavior. Notice that these aren't questions that revolve primarily around theological theory. Those who raise their hands don't ask, "What should I think?" or, "What should I reflect on?" or, "What should I affirm?" No, they ask, "What should I do?" What reforms do I need to make in my attitudes and actions? What kinds of changes

need to happen in my way of living so that I'm more aligned with the reign of God that's now on the scene?

Specific questions deserve specific answers. So first, John looks at the whole congregation and says, "If you have more than you need, in terms of money, food, and clothing, you need to stop hoarding and share with others." Then, to the people who work for the revenue department, he says, "Stop skimming off the top. It's theft." Then, to those who are part of the occupying forces, he says, "Enough with the intimidation and extortion. Stop misusing your power and authority."

Notice that all these concrete exhortations have to do, in one way or another, with how to live out love of our neighbor. Those who see and hear the arrival of the Lord have their eyes and ears opened to the needs and circumstances of the suffering, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. They turn toward God and toward others, putting proclamation into practice.

So how shall we respond to the arrival of the Messiah, both in his birth and in light of his promised return, when he comes in the fullness of his glory to judge and to save? What, then, should we do? What should I do? What should you do? To answer these kinds of questions, I want to focus primarily on John's broad exhortation to his listeners. He told the crowd as a whole, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same" (v. 11).

Part of the word that we hear through John's preaching is that the act of sharing is one of the fundamental expressions of repentance. In this portion of his sermon, John isn't calling you and me to go out and start a revolution. God, through Jesus Christ, has already launched a kingdom revolution. The old order of things has been overturned and a new reality called the reign of God is already present and underway. And you and I are summoned to turn from sin, turn to God, and participate in the implementation of his righteousness. That includes being responsive to the needs of others through generous giving that helps provide for their basic needs.

In March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic was spreading, Jonny Blue, a physical therapist in San Diego, took to the streets with a simple message adorned on a cardboard sign: "Share your toilet paper." Blue held the sign as he stood on a busy street. He said, "It just inspired me to remind people, listen, if you have a lot of something that probably means there are people who probably don't have very much of it, because you took it all. So, sharing it is probably a good thing to keep in mind." Drivers responded enthusiastically, stopping to hand over a few rolls, or others in need would pull up to receive a few. Blue commented, "I think people want a sense of community. When things are really challenging, people are looking to band together and be unified. It feels like I kind of struck on a common theme where people were thinking, 'Why are people hoarding toilet paper?'"² It makes me think, can you imagine John the Baptist standing outside the entrance to Costco, or BJ's, or Sam's Club, preaching to shoppers as they come and go?

Especially in times of crisis, when the pressure and temptation to hoard can be great, we as God's people have an opportunity to help build community by sharing, so that the basic needs of others are met. Basil the Great, a fourth-century theologian and bishop in what is now Turkey, once wrote, "The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked. The shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot. The money you keep locked away is the money of the poor."

Money, food, clothing, shelter, health care, transportation, and other necessities often come to the fore this time of the year. But these basics of life often get overshadowed by the clamor for things beyond necessities. During the holidays, the question isn't, "What do you need for Christmas? The question is, "What do you want for Christmas?" But remember that when John the Baptist showed up in the wilderness, preaching the good news of the approaching Savior, most people were focused on just being able to secure the necessities, not stockpiling a surplus. Thus John's exhortation for the haves to share with the have-nots.

Linda Petrucelli has described John the Baptist as the patron saint of sharing. She tells about a lesson she learned when she was a missionary in Taiwan. It has to do with the ritual exchange of gifts. Petrucelli says:

In Taiwan, as in many parts of East Asia, wrap your gifts in red and never in white. Don't give fans or clocks—it's bad luck. And always, always give and receive a gift with two hands.

"What's the big deal about two hands?" I once asked a Taiwanese friend. I knew it was more "polite," but was there something else to the custom I was missing? "When we give and receive with two hands," my friend responded, "it is more like sharing; we hold the gift in common, not hiding or withholding a thing."³

In this season when we make lists of what we want other people to give us, John the Baptist shows up and calls us to focus less on what we hope to possess and more on what we actually possess in common with others, particularly in the life of the church. Within the fellowship of God's people, communal sharing has always taken priority over personal possessions. Repentance therefore includes reorienting our sense of ownership. It's not primarily about what belongs to you or what belongs to me, but about what belongs to us. In the church, we bring these things together—time, money, talents, experience, relationships, and many other God-given resources—giving and receiving them with two hands, as a sign of sharing.

And the way of life that we learn within this community of sharing shapes the ways that we relate to others beyond the church, especially those in need. So we search our lives and ask, Where and in what ways do I have more than I need, and how can I pass that along to someone else who lacks daily necessities? What am I treating like it's my personal possession, when in reality it belongs to others who are in need? What am I storing up or clinging to that's actually getting in the way of love of God and neighbor?

Belden Lane tells this Jewish legend:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill, each night dividing the grain they had ground together during the day. One brother lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family.

Now, the single brother thought to himself one day, "It isn't fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed." So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to see that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he's old?" So every night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night they met each other halfway between their two houses. They suddenly realized what had been happening and embraced each other in love. The legend is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, "This is a holy place, a place of love, and here it is that my temple shall be built." So it was. The First Temple is said to have been constructed on that very site.⁴

That story highlights the sacredness of mutual sharing, giving to one another so that no one has to do without. During this season leading into the celebration of our Savior's birth, you and I are called to bear "fruits worthy of repentance" (v. 8). That includes seeing more clearly how our lives are interconnected with the lives of others. It means giving from what you have, so that others may have. And it means learning how to receive from others the gifts that provide for your basic needs. In all these ways we make sharing a way of life. We help set the table for Jesus and prepare ourselves for his coming.

¹ Karl Jacobson, Commentary on Luke 3:7-18. Working Preacher website. December 16, 2012. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18> (December 1, 2021).

² Rob Nikolewski and Hayne Palmour IV, "An Unlikely Hero." San Diego Union-Tribune (March 14, 2020).

³ Linda Petrucelli, "The Patron Saint of Sharing." *The Living Pulpit* (October-December 1997) 7.

⁴ Belden Lane, "Rabbinical Stories." *Christian Century* Vol. 98, No. 41 (December 16, 1981) n.p.