

*November 20, 2011*

# ***“Extend the Table”***

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# Extend the Table

Deut 8:7-18; 2 Corin. 9:6-15; Matthew 25:31-46  
Christ the King/Thanksgiving A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett  
November 20, 2011; Claremont UMC

I just couldn't make up my mind this year. Is this Thanksgiving Sunday, or is this the Reign of Christ Sunday? I felt pulled in both directions.

King Solomon was wise enough to not divide the baby in half, but I do not have such wisdom, and I *did* divide the lectionary scripture readings in half.

The readings from Deuteronomy, 2 Corinthians and Psalm 65 are texts for a Thanksgiving service. The 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm (*our call to worship*) and the Matthew reading are for the Reign of Christ Sunday.

The Reign of Christ Sunday is always the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar and it lands on the Sunday before Thanksgiving whenever Advent begins the end of November as it does this year. Today is the last Sunday in year A and with Advent next week we begin year B which has the majority of Gospel readings from Mark.

You may have Thanksgiving memories, as I do, of family gathering in cramped quarters, with too many people in the kitchen with steamy windows, more food than we could possibly eat, elaborate praises extolled for the turkey, and table leaves that appeared from somewhere that magically extended the table to include everyone who came.

On that one day of Thanksgiving we ate as if there were no boundaries to observe. And yet the table conversation never failed to turn to people's worries about the economy, remembering when it was so very bad. We would remember how grandma and grandpa uprooted the family in Kansas during the dust bowl and moved to Idaho to farm there. They were dirt poor! But on this day, thank God, we could eat our fill, and more, and go comatose.

The passage from Deuteronomy is rather like that Thanksgiving scenario. The writer reminds the Israelites of when they were slaves in Egypt, and how they went through the terrible wasteland and wilderness with nothing, and how it was God who sustained them. This was written in a time when they had plenty.

We can reflect back on those hard times in our lives, those times when we didn't have anything, when resources were slim to none ... we can look back and say "those were character-building years!" Some of you are having your character built right now!

The Deuteronomist raises a caution for the Israelites - and for us. The Israelites went from slavery to abundance in Israel, on the backs of those they displaced. In the land of Israel they could grow lush crops and become wealthy.

One scholar notes, "There arises a subtle temptation that complacency and a sense of self-achievement may displace the recognition that there is nothing that was not ultimately a gift of God. Even the power to achieve *anything* is itself God's gift. Success and prosperity, too, therefore, are tests of character, in their own way more subtle and more dangerous than the wilderness." <sup>i</sup>

The Deuteronomist then is saying that whether we are *poor* and find our character challenged, or whether we are *wealthy*, we find our character challenged, perhaps even more. And the latter challenge may be tougher because the outer trappings that wealth brings can cause us to think we don't need God. And this is the point of the passage: "Remember the Lord your God," especially when you have plenty.

Losing sight of God in our lives leads to skewed priorities.

A man by the name of Tom Payne shared how it happened to him. He writes: "The year was 1964. The place was Chicago. A man I worked with had acquired a couple of all-leather, NFL regulation, 1963 Chicago Bears-inscribed footballs and was selling them at a real good price. My first son was on the way. I bought the football.

I had my son's "coming home from the hospital" gift, and it was something truly special.

"Several years later, young Tom was rummaging around in the garage as only a five- or six-year-old can when he came across the all-leather, NFL regulation, 1963 Chicago Bears-inscribed football. He asked if he could play with it.

With as much logic as I felt he could understand, I explained to him that he was still a bit too young to play carefully with such a special ball. We had the same conversation several more times in the next few months and soon the requests faded away.

"The next fall, after watching a football game on television, Tom asked, "Dad, remember that football you have in the garage? Can I use it to play with the guys now?"

Eyes rolling up in my head, I replied, "Tom, you don't understand. You don't just go out and casually throw around an all-leather, NFL regulation, 1963 Chicago bears-inscribed football. I told you before; it's special."

"Eventually Tom stopped asking altogether. But he did remember, and a few years later he told his younger brother, Dave, about the all-leather, NFL regulation, 1963 Chicago Bears-inscribed football that was special and kept somewhere in the garage. Dave came to me one day and asked if he could take that special football and throw it around for awhile.

It seemed like I'd been through this before, but I patiently explained, once again, that you don't just go out and throw around an all-leather, NFL regulation, 1963 Chicago Bears-inscribed football.

"But it wasn't special anymore. I stood alone in the garage. The boys had long since moved away from home, and suddenly I realized that the football had never been so special at all. Children playing with it when it was their time to play, is what would have made it special. I had blown those precious, present moments that can never be reclaimed, and I had saved a football. For what?

"I took the football across the street and gave it to a family with young kids. A couple of hours later I looked out the window. They were throwing, catching, kicking and letting skid across the cement my all-leather, NFL regulation, 1963 Chicago Bears-inscribed football. Now it was special!"<sup>ii</sup>

Our acquisitions can skew our view of life and of God. When our acquisitions and accomplishments become more valuable than relationship with those we love, including our relationship with God, then we have succumbed to temptation, and broken covenant with God.

Spiritualist Thomas Merton wrote, "If what most people take for granted were really true—if all you needed to be happy was to grab everything and see everything and investigate every experience and then talk about it, I should have been a very happy person, a spiritual millionaire, from the cradle even until now...What a strange thing! In filling myself, I had emptied myself. In grasping things, I had lost everything. In devouring pleasures and joys, I had found distress and anguish and fear."<sup>iii</sup>

God's ways are reflected in Paul's letter to the Corinthians... "give cheerfully, you will have enough, you may share abundantly, increase the harvest of your righteousness...you will be enriched for your generosity..."

Perhaps Reign of Christ and Thanksgiving Sundays have more in common after all. To conclude the Christian year by affirming our complete reliance on God returns us to the core of our faith. It pulls us away from worshipping objects and people, and *toward* worshipping God and seeking faithfulness to God, extending the table of God's grace.

Reign of Christ Sunday asks the question, “How will we be judged?” This reading from Matthew is the final passage before the section of Jesus’ death and resurrection begins.

Are you surprised that the answer to “how will we be judged?” is not by your faith? The sheep and goats are not separated based on their profession of faith. The sheep and goats are not separated based on what or who they say they believe in. The Chosen One in this story does not even ask, do you believe in me, Jesus Christ?

As one scholar noted, “Nothing is said of grace, justification, or the forgiveness of sins. What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people. Such deeds are not a matter of ‘extra credit,’ but constitute the decisive criterion of judgment...”<sup>iv</sup>

Scholar Bruce Epperly commented: “Matthew’s vision of the final judgment challenges those who see salvation as purely individual or doctrinal in character. Matthew’s vision is visionary, ethical, and political, and challenges Christians to think and act globally as well as locally. Right belief is important, but belief must be completed by faithful responsiveness. While many interpretations see Christian ethics as primarily individualistic, Matthew sees judgment as involving the “nations” as well as persons.”

He continues: “Matthew 25 sees judgment in terms of ethics, economics, and politics as well as individual generosity. God’s care embraces all things, but God has special concern for persons experiencing hunger, thirst, captivity, illness, poverty, and alienation. The implication is that we are not to make distinctions between fellow citizen and stranger, Christian and non-Christian, past and present lifestyle, health or illness, or national boundaries.

God cares for the “least of these” and calls us to do likewise.

“Today, this call must include congregational, economic, and political as well as individual care. Our response to suffering is not a matter of liberal or conservative but our willingness to experience the “other” as God’s beloved child, whose life is intimately connected with my own.”<sup>v</sup>

Did you feed the hungry?

Did you give the thirsty something to drink?

Did you clothe the naked?

Did you welcome the stranger?

Did you care for the sick?

Did you visit those in prison?

All the good religious folk in the story were surprised! Jesus, we never saw you there! What are you talking about! If we saw you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick, you know we’d be there for you, Jesus – you’re the man!!

Jesus calls on us to extend the table, the table of mercy, the table filled with food, the table of compassion and justice...extend it to all people so that kindness and caring will be the expression of God.

It’s simple. If you care for others, you care for the Christ. If you do not care for others, you do not care for the Christ.

We live in a far more complex world than Jesus did. It may not be as clear to us how it is that we feed the hungry, quench another’s thirst, clothe the homeless, care for the sick and the prisoners.

Thank God there are people who dedicate their lives to just these efforts. We live in big systems now. We’re not always sure how to offer help and hope in such impersonal settings.

The implications for our time include being involved in those systems. “I was sick and you took care of me.” What are we doing to ensure health care for all people, especially poor children?

“I was hungry and you gave me food...naked and you gave me clothes.” We as a church support organizations that do just that. We gather food for Beta Center and we serve hot meals in our community. We give out food here as well.

There are amazing women in this church who are steady in their companioning of women in prison, including when they transition to Crossroads across the street.

Caring for the least of these includes being informed about legislation that affects the poor. Our General Board of Church and Society provides a weekly email alert that does that.

In this week’s alert I learned that there will be prayer vigils all over the country today, including one in Washington D.C. at 3 p.m. today. Why the vigil?

Up for approval is Fiscal Year 2012 Appropriations for the Dept. of State, Foreign Operations & Related Programs. This funds many of the U.S. programs that assist families in some of the world’s poorest countries.

Jim Winkler, top executive of GBCS urges church members to call their members of Congress to “support the highest possible spending figure for poverty-related assistance internationally.”

Winkler is among the religious leaders who are part of the “faithful budget campaign” lobbying on behalf of the poor. “We all feel the budget is a moral document as it represents where we place our priorities,” Winkler said.

Ministry with the poor is one of four areas of focus for The United Methodist Church. But, the denomination alone cannot improve the lives of the poor. We need our government to do likewise.

“Those U.S. funds have a significant impact,” said the Rev. David Beckmann, top executive of Bread for the World. “What we have seen in the past 10 years is a big increase in support for what our government can do to help reduce poverty in Africa and around the world,” he said.

Although the recession may have made U.S. citizens feel more reluctant about providing such aid, “what people don’t know is all the money the government gives to reduce poverty around the world amounts to six-tenths of 1% of the federal budget ... not much money to us, but to poor people that is a huge amount,” Beckmann said. “In poor countries, you can hire a teacher for a year for \$600.”<sup>vi</sup>

Funding for federal programs such as USAID is “strategically important” to help lift people out of poverty and U.S. senators need to hear from members of faith communities about preserving that assistance. When that funding is further diminished, the representation of the United States as a sign of real hope and stability also is at risk.”

You can go to <http://www.umc-gbcs.org> to learn more. This is part of the work of the Supercommittee whose deadline is this week. This is a timely matter.

Lord, when did we see you hungry, or naked, or thirsty or sick? Lord, we didn’t know the social supports were ripped away. Lord, we don’t have time to think about all that hard stuff. Lord? Lord?

The Deuteronomist says, in your time of comfort and ease, remember the Lord your God.

Jesus says, to remember the Lord your God is to extend the table...put in all the leafs you’ve got...fill the table full and care for folks.

Feed people, don’t judge them.

Give them drink, not dirty looks.

Give them clothes to wear, not closed doors.

Give them hope for health, not shrugging shoulders.

Work for systems of care that are more just.

Help people grow into the Christ who is in them. In so doing, you will grow into the Christ who is in you.

As Paul said, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God."

Yes, friends, give thanks to God with a joyful noise. Praise God who crowns the year with bounty. And extend the table and offer the special gift of God's presence by caring for others...all for Christ. All for Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> Ronald E. Clements, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1995 Abingdon, Vol. II, p. 357

<sup>ii</sup> Tom Payne (c) 1997, from *Chicken Soup for the Sports Fan's Soul* by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Jim Tunney and Mark and Chrissy Donnelly.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Merton, "The Seven Storey Mountain", as cited by [www.brudershof.com](http://www.brudershof.com)

<sup>iv</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1995 Abingdon, Vol. VIII, p. 455

<sup>v</sup> [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.umc-gbcs.org>