

Lift Up

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, March 17, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [John 12:20-33](#)

Copyright © 2024 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

“Tea Cakes with Jesus,” by Kate Gaston.¹

You’re knocking at my front door.

I wasn’t expecting you, so of course I’m still in my pajamas.

Cracking open the door, I say, “Hi, I think you’re looking for my sister.
She lives down the street at number 31, with her wool and flax and busy hands.”

You remain standing there on my front stoop, unfazed by my awkward greeting.
You want to come in.

I give myself full marks for my tidy doorstep;
it’s well-swept and cheerful; welcoming, even.

But as I swing the door wider to let you in,
I am acutely aware of the mess of things I’ve gathered around me—
dusty participation trophies, moldering stacks of self-help remedies.

You don’t hesitate;
you even remove your boots in case they might dirty my hopelessly smudged floor.

You take the folding chair I offer you;
it’s rusted and uncomfortable;
pilfered from a cold church basement.

I take for myself the seat of honor:
a blue velour La-Z-Boy, covered in cat hair and coffee stains.

My throne.

As I pour you a lukewarm cup of tea,
you talk to me.

My answers are curt, churlish;
much like the way I make small talk after church on Sunday
when all I want to do is put on sweat pants and eat some lunch.

Even so, you’re leaning in like you really might care.

Before I know it,
I find myself telling you the things I think about behind my closed eyelids in the dead
of night;

¹ Kate Gaston, “Tea Cakes with Jesus,” *Rabbit Room Poetry*, <https://rabbitroompoetry.substack.com/p/tea-cakes-with-jesuskate-gaston> (posted 6 March 2024; accessed 16 March 2024).

the stuff I'm afraid to whisper aloud lest my life be consumed by heartache, despair,
and chaos.

Dear Lord, here I am telling you what I don't tell anyone;
my deepest carnality passing from my honey-dripping lips into your keeping.

Rather than stiffening in injured propriety like any normal person would, you soften.

Your face assumes that shape which can only be interpreted as compassion.

And are your eyes filled with tears?

For me?

And there I was, so damn certain you were some blank-eyed automaton
handing out bread and fish and platitudes of come-unto-me.

But we just took a face-first swan dive into my heart's deepest crevasse,
and you're still sitting there in that rickety folding chair.

I don't know much, but I do know that platitudes don't swan dive.

I also know now that I want you to have my recliner, Jesus.

I want to stand up and get out of the way;

I want you to sit enthroned in this rat-nested, broken odds-and-ends, Mad Hatter
heart of mine.

You do, oblivious to the cat hair sticking to your pants.

Like any decently-raised southern woman, I want to feed you;
as I bustle to the pantry, I'm aware of all my furniture.

It's still mine, yes, most of it still dirty and duct-taped,
but it has been changed,
charged with some holy current.

Some gold-veined Kintsugi spell of reconciled redemption
has been injected through the whole thing.

I smile.

I hand you a tea cake—my grandmother's recipe—and we eat together,
unconcerned about the sweet crumbs sprinkling onto our laps.

My friend² who introduced me to this poem calls it “the most beautiful description
of prayer I think I have ever heard.” It is, for me, too, a beautiful description of prayer and a
wonderful metaphor of the efficacy of prayer, of the transformative, healing power of
prayer, of how in prayer Jesus lifts us up.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus talks about how he will be lifted up, and that when it
happens, he will draw all people to himself. And then John tells us, “He said this to indicate
the kind of death he was to die.”³ That line in John's gospel makes me first think John is

² The Rev. Dr. John R. Mabry.

³ John 12:32-33, *NRSV*.

focusing on the crucifixion, the “kind of death” Jesus was to die. Sadly, if I go there, I think I miss what John is really saying.

In chapter 11 (our reading is from chapter 12), Jesus brings his friend Lazarus back to life. Then, at the beginning of chapter 12, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, drawing a big crowd. (We’ll look at how Mark tells that story next week.) The religious authorities find this troubling and John ends his telling of this story with some Pharisees complaining about the crowd Jesus attracts, saying, “Look, the world has gone after him.”⁴

It’s just days before Passover, so Jews from around the Mediterranean world are gathering in Jerusalem. The crowd includes some Greeks, who want to meet Jesus. Those Pharisees seem to be right. The whole world has gone after him.

This is troubling for the Jewish leaders. And it’s not jealousy. They figure that if the numbers of people following Jesus continue to grow, the commotions he seems to stir up may well attract attention – and even provoke a preemptive attack – from the Roman occupiers, who always seemed to be worried about the potential for rebellion. “Thus, for the authorities, the more Jesus’ celebrity grows (and what’s more spectacular than raising someone from the dead?), the more the temple and the whole people are put at risk.

“Apparently sensing this tipping point when he hears that two foreign pilgrims want to meet him, Jesus declares for the first time [in John’s gospel] that ‘the hour has come’ (12:23). At several points earlier in the story, beginning with the wedding at Cana (2:4), Jesus has said that his hour has not yet arrived – but now it’s at hand. Now he will come fully into view, for all to see. Now he will be ‘glorified’”⁵

But what does that mean – “glorified”? The Greek, a biblical scholar told me, means to value something for what it truly is, so to glorify Jesus is the value Jesus for who Jesus truly is. Okay ... and to be honest, that isn’t especially helpful for me. I like that agricultural metaphor Jesus uses to help me understand: “a grain that falls to the earth and dies, and then grows as a seed grows, bearing much nourishing fruit. In other words, being ‘glorified’ will look like a human life freed from self-centered isolation, a generous life lived for others in community, in which both self and others flourish.”⁶ So, the kind of death that Jesus is going to die is a death that can’t be separated from his resurrection. His death will lead to rising, the bearing much fruit, the drawing people to him, to the flourishing of life. That is what being lifted up is all about for Jesus: the flourishing of life.

I’d like to tell you a story (so I’m going to) that illustrates how we can be part of this glorification when we lift up each other. The year is 2007 or 2008, maybe seven years after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The story is Naomi Shihab Nye’s,⁷ and I’ll apologize in advance for mispronouncing some of the words.

⁴ John 12:19c, *NRSV*.

⁵ “The Hour Has Come,” *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-lent-5> (posted 11 March 2024; accessed 13 March 2024).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Naomi Shihab Nye, “Gate A-4,” *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/poem/gate-4> (© 2008 by Naomi Shihab Nye; accessed 16 March 2024).

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately."

Well—one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. "Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. "Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let's call him."

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—from her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

It's a wonderful thing – to lift up another. And, in my experience, so often when we lift up another, that lifting energy causes us to be lifted up as well. And God is glorified.

Retired pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes⁸ reminds us:

You are not just one seed.

You don't have to go and die for Jesus.

You are a whole bag of seeds.

Strew yourself in this world.

With every act of kindness or generosity,

every time you forgive,

another seed slips through your fingers.

Every time you care about someone,

even a stranger, especially when it's risky,

you scatter a handful of seeds.

Let them go.

Toss your love wildly into this world.

Scatter seeds in good soil and poor.

Many will be eaten by birds

or trampled under foot.

But only the ones you throw away will grow.

You have a whole bag of love. Sow it all.

Amen.

⁸ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Sow it all," *Unfolding Light*, <https://unfoldinglight.net/2024/03/11/sow-it-all/> (posted 11 March 2024; accessed 16 March 2024).