

A Place at the Table (Summer Saints: John Lewis)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 5, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift ... He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

(Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16, NRSVue)

Yesterday, our country marked two hundred and fifty years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Across the nation, and here in Athens, there were flags and fireworks, concerts and speeches, family gatherings and public ceremonies. And I suspect many of us received the occasion with genuine gratitude and pride, but maybe also with some unease – conscious of the contradictions woven through our history and of how fragile some of its hard-won freedoms can seem in our own time.

There is so much in the American story to cherish: the daring conviction that government derives its authority from “we the people,” that freedom is a *human right* rather than the privilege of a favored few, and that the work of forming a more perfect union belongs to every generation. It took profound courage and political imagination to declare, against monarchy and aristocracy, that legitimate government rests solely upon the consent of the governed and that all people are created equal, endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights.

And yet there is much also that calls us to a more painful remembrance, for we know all too well a freedom proclaimed even as it has been *withheld* – truths held to be “self-evident” and yet *denied* to millions of human lives.

Love of country does *not* require us to *choose* between this gratitude and this grief. A mature love can hold them together. It can give thanks for what is good while also telling the truth about what has wounded and *continues* to wound. It can celebrate all that our forebears got so very right, and all that is open, and kind, and generous in the American people, while also

accepting responsibility for building a better future, a future big enough for *all* of God's children.

That hope – a future big enough for all of God's children – brings us this morning to the late Georgia congressman John Lewis, our Summer Saint for this Independence Day weekend: a man who loved his country deeply enough to tell it the truth, and who gave his life to the unfinished work of building a democracy in which every person could claim a place at the table.

John Robert Lewis was born in 1940 near Troy, Alabama, the third of ten children in a family of sharecroppers. He grew up in the carefully enforced world of Jim Crow, where the color of one's skin determined which school one could attend, which door one could enter, where one could sit, and whether the law would recognize one's dignity and worth.

As a child, Lewis felt drawn toward the ministry. It's said that he preached to the chickens on the family farm, arranging them as a congregation and delivering sermons with all the earnestness he could summon. He baptized them, married them, and even conducted funerals when necessary. The chickens, he later admitted, were a difficult congregation, but at least they never fell asleep in a service or walked out on him!

Behind that charming memory was a growing awareness that the faith proclaimed in church could not remain sealed away from the world outside. As a teenager, Lewis heard Martin Luther King Jr. preaching on the radio during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King spoke of nonviolence, courage, and the beloved community, and Lewis began to dare to imagine that segregation was neither permanent nor invincible. A different future could be claimed through disciplined love and collective action.

He enrolled at American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, where he studied for ministry and joined a group of students preparing to challenge segregation at the city's lunch counters. They didn't walk into those places casually. They *trained*. They *practiced* remaining calm while others shouted insults. They learned how to protect one another when struck, and how to refuse retaliation without surrendering their dignity.

Then they sat down. Their request was profoundly ordinary: a place at the counter, a meal, the same service available to white customers. Yet the entire racial order gathered around denying that simple claim. They were cursed, beaten, covered with food, dragged away, and arrested. The students returned anyway, because they understood that the lunch counter had become a visible sign of a much deeper question: *Who belongs in the common life of this country?* John Lewis put his body where his faith had led him.

Our passage from Ephesians begins with an appeal to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called," with humility and gentleness, patience and love. These can sound like quiet virtues, suitable for agreeable people in peaceful circumstances, but John Lewis shows us their deeper strength.

Gentleness is *disciplined power*. Patience is the courage to remain faithful when change is slow. Bearing with one another in love includes the work of confronting whatever prevents genuine community from taking shape. Lewis did *not* bear patiently with segregation by *accepting* it. He *resisted* it because segregation concretely denied the still-deeper truth that Paul proclaims: *one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is above all and through all and in all*.

And yet the unity of which Ephesians speaks is *not* sameness. Paul's language moves from the *wholeness* of the one to the giftedness of *each*: "*Each* of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." Each person bears a treasure. Each member contributes to the life of the body. The community grows as each part is honored and allowed to offer what God has entrusted to it. This is why exclusion wounds more than just the person being excluded. The *whole body* is diminished. Gifts are silenced. Wisdom is lost. The common life becomes smaller than God intends.

John Lewis spent his life exposing the true poverty of a society built upon that kind of diminishment. As a Freedom Rider, he entered buses that white supremacists attacked and burned. As chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he became one of the youngest leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. At twenty-three, he stood at the March on Washington and challenged the nation to move beyond gradual promises.

Two years later, on March 7, 1965, Lewis and Hosea Williams led hundreds of marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. They were walking toward Montgomery to demand voting rights. At the crest of the bridge, they encountered a line of state troopers. The marchers were ordered to disperse. Before they could respond, the troopers advanced with clubs and tear gas.

Lewis's skull was fractured. He later remembered believing that he might die on that bridge. The images of Bloody Sunday spread across the country, revealing with terrible clarity what some were willing to do to preserve a system that kept Black citizens from the ballot box. Within months, the Voting Rights Act became law.

For many of us, that history lands with a particular poignancy now, when rights once thought secure feel increasingly vulnerable and freedoms hard won seem subject again to erosion. Lewis knew that democratic progress is never self-sustaining; each generation must receive it as a trust, defend it with courage, and continue widening its reach.

Paul writes that the body of Christ grows toward maturity by "speaking the truth in love." We often hear that phrase as advice for navigating a difficult conversation politely, and that can be true enough. But in Ephesians, it really describes the way an *entire community* becomes more fully alive, for truth in love has *weight*. It enters public life, it names the wounds, and seeks a healing deeper than appearances.

John Lewis spoke truth from a heart disciplined by the vision of beloved community. His commitment to nonviolence preserved the humanity of his opponents even while exposing the

cruelty of the system they defended. He wanted a freedom large enough to release the oppressed from injustice *and* the oppressor from the spiritual prison of domination. But that kind of freedom comes at a cost, and this is what he meant by “good trouble.” That phrase has become familiar and perhaps maybe a little *too* comfortable, for in Lewis’s life, good trouble carried *bruises*, jail cells, and blood. It was *good* because it served *life*. And it was *trouble* because it interrupted the so-called “peace” of injustice so that a more truthful peace might become possible.

And it is *precisely* this that made John Lewis a genuine patriot. He believed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution enough to insist that their promises *must* include everyone. His protest arose from his own deep sense of belonging and love. America was his country too, and he refused to accept a version of it that required millions of people to remain at the margins.

After years of movement work and voter registration, Lewis was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1986. The young man once arrested for seeking a seat at a lunch counter eventually took a seat in Congress, representing Georgia for more than three decades. He carried the memory of those early struggles with him, along with the conviction that democracy depends upon ordinary people deciding to act.

His life offers us a way to inhabit this anniversary weekend with both honesty and love and hope. We need not embrace myths about our national past to love this land and its people, and we can celebrate its ideals best by asking whom those ideals still fail to reach. We can rightly rejoice in our freedoms while being clear-eyed about how imperiled they are for so many. And they *are* imperiled.

Now in saying all of this, it’s important to remember that the United States is *not* the kingdom of God, and so much harm has been done – and continues to be done – by blurring those lines. No nation can bear that holy weight. But our faith, our trust in the God of *all* the nations, *can* form us into a people who *do* live well in *this* land, and who love this country well by loving our neighbors, telling the truth, and protecting the vulnerable. It can teach us to seek a public life in which dignity is the *birthright* of every human being, and *everyone* has a place at the table.

And so, it is right that on this day, of all days, we come to another table – the Table of the Lord – where a still-deeper belonging is revealed and received. *Christ* is the host here. None of us owns it. No matter our race, class, status, or birthplace, none of us arrives with a superior claim. We come with different histories, different wounds, different gifts, and we receive the same bread from the same gracious hand.

This communion then becomes nourishment for the life Paul describes: a people joined together, growing toward maturity, learning to speak truth in love. We receive the bread so that we may become bread for a hungry world. We share the cup and are drawn into a covenant wider than our preferences, our parties, or our fears.

John Lewis spent his life challenging systems in which people had been excluded from the table of America: the lunch counter in Nashville, the ballot box in Alabama, the halls of Congress. Each became a place where he insisted that democracy must widen its welcome. And *this* Table before us now reveals the deepest source of the hope that sustained him.

And so, when we sing at the close of worship today, “For everyone born, a place at the table,” may those words become more than just a beautiful aspiration. May they become a *promise* we carry from this place: to widen the circle, to protect the belonging of all our neighbors, and to enter whatever good trouble love requires.

My friends, the table is set. Christ is here. And there IS room – for you and for me, and for all, both near and far – to the glory of God! Amen.