

## Revelation 7:9-17, CEB

<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> They cried out with a loud voice

“Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

<sup>11</sup> All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, <sup>12</sup> saying

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen.”

<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, “Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?”

<sup>14</sup> I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

Then he said to me, “These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb’s blood. <sup>15</sup> This is the reason they are before God’s throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. <sup>16</sup> They won’t hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, <sup>17</sup> because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”<sup>1</sup>



## Sermon

Last week at Walmart, I watched what looked like a grandmother navigate the back-to-school aisles with what I assumed were three grandchildren. Each child gravitated toward different supplies—one wanted sparkly notebooks, another chose plain black, the third picked folders covered in dinosaurs. She smiled and said, “You each know exactly what you need.” That simple moment captured something profound about how God sees us.

We all know the feeling of searching for where we fit—scanning the room at a new job, wondering if we belong at a community event, or sitting in church for the first time questioning if there’s space for us. Our hearts naturally seek the familiar, people who

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 7:9-17, CEB.

look and think like us. It feels safer that way. But what if God designed something far more beautiful than our comfortable clusters? What if the very differences that make us nervous are exactly what make us stronger together?

We're journeying through Revelation, and each week pulls back another layer of God's reality. We began with Jesus walking among our churches—present in our struggles, not distant in the clouds. Then God showed us heaven's throne room, revealing a perspective bigger than our limited view. Last Sunday, we met the Lamb who was slain, discovering that true power comes through sacrifice, not domination.

Today's vision weaves these threads together into a stunning tapestry. John sees the result of everything we've learned: a countless multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language united in worship. Not despite their differences, but because of them.

Consider two McPherson gardens. The first belongs to someone who plants only tomatoes—rows of identical plants, same variety, perfectly spaced. For a few glorious weeks in July, it produces beautiful, uniform fruit. The gardener takes pride in the consistency, the predictability. But when hornworms discover this monoculture paradise, they devastate everything in days. One disease, one pest, and the entire harvest fails because every plant shares identical vulnerabilities. The gardener spends the rest of summer fighting a losing battle with chemicals and interventions, trying to prop up a system that wasn't designed for resilience.

Down the street, another gardener takes a different approach. Their plot looks almost chaotic—beans climbing corn stalks while squash spreads below in what indigenous peoples called the Three Sisters. Marigolds scattered throughout might seem random, but they're strategically placed. Basil grows near tomatoes, improving their flavor while repelling pests. Some neighbors call it messy, unorganized. Yet this garden produces from May through October. When aphids attack the beans, ladybugs living in the marigolds quickly control them. Deep-rooted plants bring up nutrients for shallow ones. Native prairie flowers attract pollinators that boost everything's production. During drought, while monoculture gardens may wither, diverse ecosystems can adapt and survive.

This second garden mirrors God's design for human community. Our instinct toward sameness creates fragile systems requiring constant intervention. But God's diverse garden thrives through beautiful interdependence, each element strengthening the whole.

To grasp the radical nature of John's vision, we need to understand the world early Christians inhabited. Rome marketed itself as the ultimate melting pot, but it achieved unity through brutal conformity. Bow to Caesar or lose everything. Speak Latin or be silenced. Abandon your traditions or face consequences. The empire crushed difference to create order. They called it the Pax Romana—Roman Peace—but it was peace through domination, unity through erasure.

Into this oppressive sameness, God gives John a vision that changes everything. “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne.” The Greek here is powerful—ethnos (nations), phyle (tribes), laos (peoples), glossa (languages). John uses four different words to emphasize the stunning diversity. Not segregated by status as Rome demanded, but standing together as equals. Not forced into uniformity, but celebrating their distinct identities. They’re all wearing white robes—unified in purpose—yet John can still identify their different origins. Unity without uniformity.

Notice who comprises this multitude—verse 14 tells us they “have come out of the great ordeal.” The Greek word thlipsis means crushing pressure, like grapes in a winepress. These aren’t the comfortable and powerful. They’re refugees fleeing violence, families torn apart by economic systems, workers crushed by empire’s machinery. Everyone the empire pushed to the margins now stands at the center of God’s kingdom.

The specific promises reveal God’s attention to their particular sufferings: no more hunger for those experiencing economic injustice, no more thirst for displaced people wandering without home, no scorching heat for those laboring in fields without protection. God doesn’t offer generic comfort but addresses each specific wound. The Lamb who suffered under empire now shepherds those who suffered too, leading them to springs of living water.

This vision embodies our Methodist understanding perfectly. John Wesley insisted that personal holiness always flows into social holiness—you cannot love God without actively loving your neighbor. When Wesley saw England’s poor, he didn’t see statistics or problems. He saw bearers of God’s image, each one precious, each one carrying divine potential. He didn’t just pray for them; he created schools where poor children learned alongside wealthy ones, medical clinics that served regardless of payment ability, and job training programs that gave dignity through work.

Wesley’s theology of prevenient grace revolutionizes how we see others. This grace means God’s love already works in every person before they recognize it—before they pray their first prayer, before they step into any church. That Korean grandmother at the grocery store, that Syrian refugee learning English at the library, that teenager with purple hair questioning everything—God’s grace already moves in each one, preparing their hearts. This explains Revelation’s diverse multitude: God has been drawing every heart all along, across every barrier humans create.

Early Methodists lived this theology. Their class meetings ensured no member went hungry while another had excess—they literally shared their possessions. They visited prisoners not just to evangelize but to reform unjust systems that trapped people in cycles of poverty and crime. For them, the means of grace—worship, scripture, communion—weren’t private spiritual exercises but equipment for transforming society. Heaven’s diversity wasn’t distant future hope but present calling demanding immediate action.

This vision speaks directly to McPherson today. Our school board faces a profound decision about the historic Roundhouse, flooded in June and now awaiting its fate. As board members wrestle with whether to repair, replace, or reimagine this space, they're asking hard questions: Do we preserve what's familiar or create something new? At what point does holding onto the past prevent us from building an inclusive future? The debate reveals deeper questions about whose voices matter in community decisions.

This decision affects our community's children differently. Students from well-resourced families have access to club sports and private facilities when school gyms close. They'll drive to Wichita for basketball camps or Salina for swimming. Others lose their only opportunity for organized athletics, their only safe place for after-school activity. The same damaged building creates vastly different impacts based on family circumstances. One board member urged removing emotion from the decision—but whose emotions get removed? The alumnus treasuring memories of championship games? The parent wanting modern facilities for their child? The student who just needs any gym at all to stay active and connected?

This pattern repeats throughout McPherson. Local businesses hire through networks—people recommending people they know. Without malicious intent, this excludes qualified candidates lacking connections. That single parent with accounting skills but no professional network never sees the job posting. Churches may schedule meetings at 7 PM assuming predictable work hours, forgetting those juggling evening shifts at Walmart and Casey's. Community programs set fees assuming disposable income exists, not recognizing that \$50 for youth soccer might mean choosing between sports and groceries.

But transformation begins with honest conversations like our school board is attempting. What if we approached every community decision asking: Who does this impact? Who's missing from this conversation? Who can't be here because they're working tonight? What if businesses intentionally recruited in a variety of ways, not just through current employee networks? What if churches provided childcare during meetings and community programs automatically offered sliding-scale fees without requiring humiliating proof of poverty?

The good news is that God specializes in reversing what seems irreversible. The excluded become included. The last becomes first. The Lamb who was slain reigns forever. Throughout Scripture, this same God consistently lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry, welcomes strangers, and sets prisoners free. The powerful never see it coming because they're looking in the wrong direction—up toward more power instead of down toward those society overlooks.

In Jesus, God entered our broken systems not to bless them but to transform them from within. Christ didn't avoid the marginalized; he sought them out in places religious leaders wouldn't go. He touched lepers when everyone else stepped back. He ate with tax collectors when respectable people wouldn't share their table. He elevated women's

voices when society silenced them. His resurrection proves that even death—the ultimate system of oppression—cannot stop God’s determination to bring life.

The Spirit continues this work through us today, not by our own strength—we’d burn out in a week—but through divine power working in community. When churches become places where strangers discover family, where the CEO and the custodian share communion as equals, that’s the Spirit at work. When businesses prioritize people over profits, paying living wages even when shareholders complain, that’s kingdom economics breaking through. When neighbors cross racial and economic lines for everyone’s flourishing—not just charity but genuine friendship—that’s the Spirit creating glimpses of heaven on earth. We live between the “already” of God’s kingdom breaking through and the “not yet” of its completion. But make no mistake: God is on the move, and we’re invited to move too.

This week, take one concrete step toward heaven’s vision. Share coffee with someone whose life experience differs from yours—really listen without preparing your response. Volunteer at STEPNC or Save ’N Share, working alongside people you might never otherwise meet. Notice their stories, their struggles, their strengths. Read one article about systemic inequality in Kansas—not to feel guilty but to understand. Attend the next school board meeting on August 26th or a city council meeting to understand community challenges firsthand.

Most importantly, pray daily for someone from a different background—someone specific, with a name and story. Maybe it’s the immigrant family that owns the restaurant downtown, or the young couple struggling with housing costs, or the elderly neighbor whose family never visits. Ask God to reveal the walls in your own heart that need dismantling. Remember: heaven’s beautiful diversity doesn’t happen by accident. Every small step toward justice joins God’s great work.

As McPherson students return to classrooms this week, they enter spaces of beautiful diversity—different learning styles, backgrounds, dreams. Their differences aren’t obstacles but opportunities for everyone to grow stronger. The same is true for God’s church. Like that thriving garden where every plant contributes to abundant life, we need each other’s differences to flourish as God intends.

Will you pray with me?

God of all nations, help us see diversity as gift, not threat. Give us courage to cross dividing lines. Transform us into heaven’s beautiful garden. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In crafting today’s sermon, I employed AI assistants like Claude and Apple Intelligence, yet the ultimate responsibility for its content rests with me. These tools offered valuable perspectives, but the most influential sermon preparation hinges on biblical study, theological insight, personal reflection, and divine guidance. I see AI as a supportive aid to enrich the sermon process while ensuring my own voice in proclaiming the Word of God.