

LUKE 14, BANQUET SEATING SEPTEMBER 1, 2019

So, where to sit at a formal, public meal? This is one of the questions before us this morning in our texts. And most of us, if we've lived a few years in this world and are not complete recluses, have faced this question repeatedly. These proper-etiquette seating situations, in my mind, tend to fall into primarily two types: the structured and the unstructured. In structured situations, you don't have to decide where to sit, as the decision has been made for you. At the wedding we attended in Florida this past March, we all sat beneath a huge tent on a beach on Anna Maria Island. Although a casual setting, it was quite elegantly done, and the seating was formally assigned. Alas, as an Aunt and Uncle to our nephew and his new bride, we didn't quite make the cut for the primary family table---too many grandparents, parents, siblings, and such for that to happen. Which meant we were seated at family tables of secondary importance with similarly removed relatives of the bride, our new niece-in-law, whom we didn't know very well. My heart sank slightly as I realized the implications of shouting above crowd noise at relative strangers to try and accomplish standard social niceties. But that's what happens when you're in that second tier of family importance! All of us have found ourselves seated at someone else's behest for various occasions, sometimes to our pleasure and sometimes not so much. Those are the structured situations.

On the other hand, there are those unstructured social eating situations where you seat yourself. And in these cases, you have to give a little thought to your strategy, or at least I do. Here are the considerations in my mind: Where is the table located in relation to the buffet table and what is the likely order of going through the line? Equally important, with whom will I be

sitting at any given table? Often you know people at several different tables to various degrees and you generally want to pick the table with the people you enjoy the most, right? Finally, and this is only true in certain situations, is the table located such that I can make an early and unobtrusive exit if the need arises? This latter depends entirely on the quality and length of the event. Still, it's a lot to process these considerations and commit to a seating position under what often needs to be a quick decision, sometimes with your hands full of beverages or plates. Not a huge deal; but it's just one of those small, but interesting little choices that come up every so often in our daily lives.

We might expect that such social niceties would be limited to more modern times and places, that they would be the luxury of more prosperous eras, but that is far from the case. Even the most ancient societies, including those in the Scriptures, had often quite detailed and carefully prescribed rules for seating at social events involving food. The little proverb from our first lesson out of the book of Proverbs could easily be 2500 years old or more, and it involves protocol at just such gatherings. Basically it advises us to not assume that we're the guest of honor and take the best seat or place, because it would be really embarrassing if our host has to ask us to move so that a more important person can sit in our place. Plus, we could then get stuck having to sit in some outlying spot with the rest of the unimportant guests. Far better to choose an ordinary, humble seat and have our host make a fuss over moving us up to the place of honor. We can easily see the practical wisdom of this. And so did Jesus, who is likely referring to this proverb in our gospel lesson from Luke 14. Jesus, attending a dinner given by a pharisee of some importance, observes the guests jockeying for position as they try to sit as close as possible to their host. It's rather interesting that he chooses to approach the issue not by a direct critique

of those involved, but rather by telling a story to illustrate his point. Maybe a reminder to us that we sometimes behave in unnecessarily heavy-handed ways in social interactions when a little bit of creativity or humor might be more effective?

Because look what he does! Jesus is attending a dinner party, so he intentionally uses a less loaded example by choosing a different setting for his parable, that of a wedding banquet. It's essentially the same situation that the Proverbs text describes or as the wedding my family attended in March in Florida or as countless social occasions of which *you* have been a part. Again, the same lesson learned---don't make arrogant assumptions about your own importance but assume a humble stance. Jesus, though, adds a thought that makes it clear he has bigger things in mind than merely banquet seating protocol. He states, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Not only do these wise words extrapolate a profound truth from this homely banquet seating story; they essentially summarize Jesus' life, especially as it is laid out for us in this Gospel of Luke.

Recall that Luke of all four Gospels presents us with the birth story of Christ, including the selection of a peasant girl of no account named Mary to be the mother of the Incarnate God made flesh. And this Mary sings a radical song called the Magnificat, which we sing to this day, that is all about how God is turning the world upside down; the powerful will be brought low, and the struggling will be lifted up. Throughout his ministry, Jesus, a lowly carpenter from a no-account town, confronts the powerful, astonishes both the mighty and the peasant, and declares that God sees things very differently than we do; what the world declares to be important, powerful, and prestigious matters little to God, who instead cares about justice, peace making,

and loving one's neighbor. Through the humiliation of his death on the cross, Christ will accomplish our salvation in resurrection. All of this adds depth and richness to his statement then: "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Christ was without a doubt among those who humbled themselves and were exalted.

The troubling thing when we read such words is to wonder how *we* fit into such a scheme.....are we the humble who will be lifted up? Or might we not be the privileged who may be brought low? These are uncomfortable words and thoughts for us, but that should not cause us to dismiss them, tempting though that is. I recently read someone else's mantra that has stuck with me: "Discomfort is a teacher". Discomfort is a teacher. I don't like to be uncomfortable, not physically or psychologically. But to recognize that discomfort has something to teach us, is for me at least, a profound insight, particularly in relation to Scriptural passages that make me uncomfortable. What does that discomfort *teach* me? Could it be teaching me, in fact, that I am too easily complacent about my privileges and good fortune, too quick to assume I deserve all the good things life has to offer and to dismiss those who have less as being somehow less deserving? Discomfort is a teacher.

Which is a good thing, because the next little story Jesus tells definitely rates high on the discomfort scale! If this first parable is mostly aimed at the guest who must choose their seating, this next is aimed at the host, who must choose their guest list and venue. Think how carefully we do so when we are the hosts, especially in a scenario when seating is limited and we are paying per plate for our guests, as is the case in many wedding venues, for example. In fact, just the other day a friend was bemoaning how upset her brother was, because his girlfriend didn't

make the cut for the guest list of a mutual nephew of theirs, since space was so limited and cost per plate so high. He was angry on behalf of his girlfriend, and I probably would be also, and we all know that it doesn't feel good to be the one who's not invited, the one who's left out. But it isn't easy to keep expanding that guest list, if we are the ones footing the bill and renting the space. Moreover, as we put together our guest list, we very often have yet another parameter in place; that of obligation and repaying social favors. We think--They invited us to their child's wedding; we need to invite them to our child's. Or in a different context--We provided the meal at that last get together; this time it's their turn to do so. This kind of social tit for tat is absolutely standard and not necessarily a bad thing; I don't really think Jesus is discouraging us from sharing meals with those we know and love and who will likely return the favor. But he *is* most certainly encouraging us to *expand out* from that practice to intentionally invite and include those whom either we may not know and love *or* those who cannot or will not return the favor. No tit for tat. Just as God provides through the providence of Creation for those who are grateful or deserving *and* those who are not, so we are to practice our generosity and hospitality likewise. And that's uncomfortable and it asks a lot of us. I saw a wonderful meme on Facebook that probably had immigration issues in mind, but it really speaks to so much larger an issue and I hope you can hear it that way: "If you are more fortunate than others, build a longer table, not a taller fence." Yes? "If you are more fortunate than others, build a longer table, not a taller fence." Not just in regards to immigration, but to our perspective in general as we operate in this world as people of faith.

But *are* we more fortunate than others? I'm going to go out on a limb and say "probably so". Now I'm not saying that we're all wealthy, talented, healthy, beautiful and fortunate in every

way. Of course we're not. But most of us recognize that, in the bigger picture of life, we are probably among the fortunate. Indeed, most of us, in some or many ways, fall into that category of the *privileged*. And if we have trouble wrapping our brains around that reality, let me reuse an example from some years ago that for me is the best way of understanding what privilege means. Here it is: "When a high school teacher wanted to teach a class about privilege, he came up with a simple, but powerful and insightful object lesson for his students.

At the beginning of the class, all the students received a piece of paper, and were asked to crumple it into a ball. Then, he moved the recycling bin to the front of the room. He told them...

"The game is simple — you all represent the country's population. And everyone in the country has a chance to become wealthy and move into the upper class. To move into the upper class, all you must do is throw your wadded-up paper into the bin while sitting in your seat." The students in the back of the room immediately piped up and said it wasn't fair — the students in the front of the room obviously had a much better chance than they did. All the students took their shots. Most of the students in the front of the room made it, and of course only a few students in the back of the room did. The teacher continued...

"The closer you were to the recycling bin, the better your odds. This is what privilege looks like. Did you notice how the only ones who complained about fairness were in the back of the room? By contrast, people in the front of the room were less likely to be aware of the privilege they were born into. All they can see is 10 feet between them and their goal."

Then the teacher wrapped things up with the most important thing to take away from this simple lesson... "Your job — as students who are receiving an education — is to be aware of your

privilege. And use this particular privilege called “education” to do your best to achieve great things, *all the while advocating for those in the rows behind you.*”

I love this illustration. Like our Old Testament lesson from Proverbs and like our Gospel lesson, it even involves the position of where you are seated---not around a table in this instance, but in a classroom. Arguably a good many of us are in those front rows. And while I’m not saying that we haven’t worked hard to sit where we are sitting, I do suggest that in the most basic sense of where, when, how and to whom we were born, the location of our seat is neither to our credit nor our detriment; it just is. But the same is true for most of those in the back rows, too. It just is. If instead of forgetting about or fearing those in the back rows, we advocate for them, maybe even build a longer table so they may share in our good fortune, or rearrange the classroom seating into a circle instead of rows, we are doing what Jesus asks of us. As one commentary put it, “Wealth and position are a blessing when shared and used for the betterment of humanity....God calls us to turn our privilege into blessings.” And that’s the takeaway—*God calls us to turn our privilege into blessings*. Ouch. It’s a little uncomfortable. But discomfort is a teacher. And every time we include at the table those who cannot repay us...whether in direct encounters, or through giving to the Center for Changing Lives to house homeless teens who will never house us, or through sending money and animals through God’s Global Barnyard to people in developing countries who can never return the favor to us, we are answering that call. It’s actually easier to do it with our money for people farther removed from us, isn’t it? It’s less comfortable to do it for those closer at hand who may not even bother to say thanks! But both are crucial, and both answer this calling: *to turn our privilege into blessings*. To build a bigger table. How big is this table at which we will share in Holy Communion this day? The other half

extends around the world and into heaven. It's a huge table, and all are welcome. We can never out give God. We can never match God's generosity and welcome. But we can turn our privilege into blessings and build a bigger table. God is turning the world upside down. The humble are exalted; the proud are humbled. But in the final analysis, we are all dependent on the extraordinary generosity of God; we are all equally and humbly, *together*, in need of the grace and mercy of God. As this wise Gospel hymn says, "Let us break bread *together* on our knees. Let us drink wine *together* on our knees. When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, Oh Lord, have mercy on me." Amen.