

Finding a Seat

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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September 1, 2019

Psalm 112

¹Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments. ²Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. ³Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever. ⁴They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. ⁵It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice. ⁶For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever.

⁷They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD. ⁸Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. ⁹They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor. ¹⁰The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Weddings are generally considered to be joyful events, but spend just a little time with engaged couples and you find out just how stressful the whole thing quickly becomes.

Out of a vast array of choices that must be made, one of the more difficult decisions is always who is going to sit where. Once one has finished the agony of creating a guest list, and confirming the RSVPs, establishing a seating chart for the reception can be its own kind of misery.

Think about it. We can't sit Aunt Carol by Uncle Mark because Mark sold Grandma's set of antique silver when he inherited it, and Carol still hasn't forgiven him for it.

We can't sit Claire next to Tim because they dated in college, and it would be awkward. We can't have Uncle David near the open bar, or the bourbon will run out before the cake is even cut.

If we sit Karen too far from the bridal table she will be deeply insulted, like she was when it happened at Mary's wedding in '93, about which she never fails to remind us. And Sam, if he's anywhere near his ex-wife, there won't be a poor soul around who will be able to escape reliving their divorce.

Do you see what I mean? If we have a plated dinner, then we have to do that for every single person on the guest list.

We place them in their seats based on the context of their own lives and their corresponding tablemates. What was initially a celebratory event quickly becomes a burdensome calculation of risk management.

But the truth is, it's always a risk to throw a party and invite others to attend. We think about who gets along with who, and what mutual connections there might be if so-and-so are invited, and how the dynamics will work to our benefit to be seen as good hosts.

The tension and anxiety can be just as high for the guests themselves. I remember the first time Abby and I were invited to a dinner party hosted by parishioners in our former church.

While they lived just down the street from us, our lives were worlds apart in some respects. Ed was a Harvard graduate and a well-respected family physician. His wife, Elle, was a beloved Wellesley educated radiologist. They lived in a gorgeous, century old, Williamsburg inspired home.

I remember stressing as we walked up their perfectly manicured brick sidewalk. What if I say something foolish at dinner? What if I don't use the right fork for the salad? Or what if they see that the wine we brought was a cheap bottle that also happened to be on sale?

That first invitation made us anxious. We didn't know our place at the table. We didn't know where, how, or if we would fit in. A dinner party can be a make or break for entrance into a social circle.

Jesus is invited to such a party, and as he's watching the guests make their way to their seats in a calculated fashion, he decides to speak up. I want you to hear how *The Message* Bible translates part of what I read earlier:

“Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, Jesus said, ‘When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host.

Then he'll come and call out in front of everybody, ‘You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.’ Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.

‘When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, ‘Friend, come up to the front.’ That will give the dinner guests something to talk about!

What I'm saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

Which is a way of saying the virtue we call humility births wisdom, and even joy. Of course, humility doesn't always come natural to us. And I suspect that's in part because our culture prizes achievement and success; wealth and power and privilege.

It's hard to be humble about those things. And why would one want to? It stands to reason that perhaps many didn't get to where they are by being humble.

And false humility seems to be just as problematic as no humility. Just after winning a major election, a national politician was interviewed by Leslie Stahl of *CBS 60 Minutes*. When she noted that many of his opponents questioned his lack of humility, he responded, “I think I am a humble person. I think I'm much more humble than you could ever understand.”

Now I'm not going to tell you who said that, because he's currently the President of the United States. But a lack of humility is not a partisan issue. Elected leaders across the aisle wrestle with their own sense of grandiosity. The narcissism that plagues our politics is as old as the world itself.

Humility is hard. And that's because at our core, many of us want our gifts to be recognized, valued, honored. So taking the place of the low born at the table, means we would have to swallow a lot of our pride in order to sit down there.

Jeff Hyman, a professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern notes in an article in *Forbes*, “I suspect that humility gets a bad rap because it is sometimes linked with subservience or weakness or introversion.

Psychological research actually indicates the opposite. Humility is most closely associated with a cluster of highly positive qualities including sincerity, modesty, fairness, truthfulness, unpretentiousness and authenticity.”¹

¹ Jeff Hyman, www.forbes.com/sites/jeffhyman/2018/10/31/humility/

In my opinion, to be humble is to acknowledge how fortunate you are to be at the table at all. It is a response to grace; real grace, undeserved and unmerited.

The Psalmist declares “For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory.”

One proverb states, “The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.”

And St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians reads, “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.”

Again and again, the biblical witness testifies to the virtues of humility.

So of course table etiquette is more than just good manners in the ancient world; it's about honor and shame, social position and political standing.

So what Jesus shares is at a very literal level, good advice: If you don’t want to look foolish, don’t race to the best seat. Somebody else might have been chosen to sit there.

But Jesus is not simply giving good advice; he’s also defying conventional wisdom. He's challenging the status quo. He's inciting something of a social revolution.

I suspect that we humans are just insecure enough—and that life is just tumultuous enough—that there are few things we crave more in this chaotic world than a little order. We want to know where we stand, how we're doing, how we measure up, often by comparing ourselves to others.

Which means it's rare that we're not keenly aware of, and just a little invested in, where our seats are found in our various groups.

And so we hear Jesus tell his dinner host, that the pecking orders aren't worth anything. More than that, Jesus invites him—and us—to defy the pecking order, to actually turn it on its head.

Invite some people who wouldn't normally be welcome to a nice dinner, Jesus says, and see what happens.

Jesus doesn't just call our social orders into question; but he also says these things are *not of God*. Jesus proclaims here and throughout the gospel that in the kingdom of God there are no pecking orders. None. Zero. Zilch. Everyone is on equal footing before God's grace. No one gets a head start.

The *Westminster Confession* (1647) says it like this, “This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is all together passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.”²

While at first blush that sounds like it ought to be good news—that God’s grace is free and beyond human agency—it throws us into radical dependence.

This confession reminds us that we don’t access God with our accomplishments, or wealth, our positive attributes, or good looks, or strengths, or IQ, or our movement up or down any ladder of privilege.

Which means that we have no claim on God; Rather, we have been claimed by God and invited to love others as we've been loved. The response to grace is always gratitude. Are we living lives of real gratitude?

Presbyterian minister and author Melissa Sevier writes, “If you are one of those people who thinks you deserve the best place at the banquet, think again. You need to be humbled.

² The Westminster Confession of Faith, *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, Geneva Press, 1996) p. 186.

And if you are one of those people who thinks (or you've been told) you only deserve the lowest place at the banquet, think again. You need to be strengthened—you need to accept your own privileged status as a child of God.”

Melissa continues, “At God’s table, every place is the same. There is always enough to go around. There is always room for you.”³

That’s the Kingdom Jesus is bringing, a Kingdom that has no place for our insecurities, or craving for order. Which is why it's frightening and why those invested in the social order—which, of course, includes all of us—will put Jesus to death.

It’s scary to believe that our accomplishments don’t get us any closer to God’s invitational love.

Yet that’s what the Risen Christ tells us. And then he keeps inviting us; engaging us with a new vision and way of being, where there is no first or last, no honor or shame. When we are bound to God and each other, not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

Following Jesus looks like that. We didn’t do anything to deserve an invite to the party. We might not be dressed for it. We might not think we’re good enough, or perhaps we haughtily think we are too good for it. We might not have the right words, or use the right fork.

But the invitation has our name on it, which means Somebody wants us there. And right below our name, it says it plainly: “The party won’t be the same with you.”

So pull up a chair, every seat is the best seat at the table.
Amen.

³ Melissa Bane Sevier, <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2016/08/22/the-challenge-of-a-humble-gospel/>