



## WHERE TO SIT

September 1, 2019, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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The first words of another text from scripture, which go hand-in-hand with this morning's lesson, come from the letter of James. They are, "*My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor.*"

Both Jesus and James know how to put us in our place, how to tell it to us straight.

They are saying that if we are true believers of Christ, we need to change, we need to transform our hearts, our minds and our actions, every one of them. The lens through which we look at this world needs to be reversed, countercultural, and different than the way the world tells us to act. In a world where the rich, prestigious and powerful can so often be put on pedestals, we are to invalidate that within the church, as well as in the world around us. We are all to be equals and to be treated as equals, to look at one another through the eyes of God. That's what James is saying. That's what Jesus is saying. There are to be no distinctions among us and that if there are distinctions we are to humble ourselves and take the lowliest position, and to honor all others before ourselves.



These seats of honor and privilege – within the church and world that Jesus was talking about – did not only occur during Jesus’ and James’ time. The church, the universal church, has failed at this time and time again. In the 19th and 20th centuries, one of the ways that churches raised money was to rent pews.

An author wrote the following in regards to the process of pew renting: “Here you had a blending of [Christianity](#) and the principle of private property--hardly an unusual alliance in the history of the [faith](#), but in this case a particularly vivid one. Like opera patrons, prominent families put up hard cash for the right to occupy a spot. Not all space was so reserved, making free access possible for the rabble, but the choice seats, in terms of visibility and confirmation of [social](#) and economic status, were clustered around the front [and] trespassers could be escorted out.”

Time after time, we as a church have done the exact opposite of what Christ has taught us to do, how to act and how to behave. So what is it we are doing, or not doing, in today’s church that aligns with this story? Where are we showing favoritism?

An example of favoritism within the church came to me from one of our parishioners at one of our summer BBQs a couple of summers ago. It’s a bit of a stretch to today’s text but it can get us all thinking about things that may have happened in the past or are happening now and need to be addressed. This story would have had Jesus and James up in arms.

The woman at the BBQ told me that years ago her daughter had attended a Confirmation Class here much like the one I teach each year. And that as the end of the year was on the horizon, and Confirmation Sunday was about to occur, some of the students were given parts in the service. However, to the dismay of this young Confirmand, her part, which happened to be a prayer, was given to another child at the last minute.



Okay, sometimes things get switched around or someone makes a mistake and changes occur at the last minute. However, the young girl and her mother were under the impression that it was given to another student because of the other family's financial status and because of the amount of money the other family had recently given to the church.

After telling me the story, the mother told me that her daughter could understand why such a thing happened, because that sort of thing happens in our world. But the daughter also knew that that's not how the church was, or is, to be orchestrated, governed or led. Therefore this young lady, who perhaps understood church better than most, has not stepped foot in a church since. Such a shame.

In Ezekiel it says we are called not to use our power or might to push others with "flank and shoulder, or butt at all those with less power than ourselves with our horns" but rather be the people who help those with less power. We are called to bind up the broken hearted, we are called to feed the hungry, and give water to those who are thirsty.

Imagine if you will for a moment, a watering hole in Africa filled with animals all jockeying for the best position to get water. Water is survival for every animal in Africa, and in our society, places of privilege and honor become that. But Christ said that he is the living water, and he said that in order to drink from his living water we need to step back and let others go first, we need to be patient, and humble ourselves, and to be thankful for all that we have and share it with others.

The following is a modern version of the text Tom read. This is us at the club, at our banquets; this is us at work, at church, at school; this is us, and this is tough. Listen closely to Michael Coffey's reflection on the **Parable of the Dinner Party**:

She entered the party like a caped queen  
her heels lifting herself up to thinner air  
almost to where she wanted to be



she saw the table spread with boutique finery  
charcuterie and artisanal cheeses and duck liver paté  
red and white and bubbling wine for every course

she approached the gathering and saw on the far end  
the out-of-fashioned, the rough handed and wrong spoken  
the servants and migrants who picked the butter lettuce

on the near end she saw well-labeled suits  
handbags with leather and metal clasps  
that look of confidence in the eyes of the highly educated

she saw one chair near her with those of her kind  
she sat and mingled and sipped wine and laughed controllably  
and knew which fork to use for the appetizer

the host came and thanked her for taking  
the seat at this end and assured her warm voiced  
that someday, she too, could join him at the other end

When have we been this person? It happens in school cafeterias all over the world, in conference rooms and meetings, at banquets... This is our culture, our world, and we need to find ways to live differently within it. Find ways to put others first, elevate those who have less status than we do, make room for them at the table.

In today's text, Jesus was first telling us to not think too highly of ourselves, to put others above ourselves, and before ourselves, to "be modest. That it would be better for us to start from a lower position and be invited higher, than to place ourselves ahead of others and be asked to move lower..."

And then he gave directions to those who might throw a banquet. He tells them "don't invite those [in a position of power, those] in a position to do something for you, but rather invite those who cannot give you anything in return."



Well, how do we do that? Often, it is through mission work that we start to see our proverbial neighbors differently; to see them as we see ourselves and to not judge them. We are called not just to wish people, rich or poor, young or old, good and well but also to be, and do, the good for them, to feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked and visit the prisoner. We have been called to be the hands and feet of God. God gives us commandments and we are then called to go out and do them. We are His church and we are to act that way, to not just sit idly by, but to speak up in the face of injustices, to serve the poor, to eliminate boundaries, and to build one another up.

When we do mission work, we see “the other” eye-to-eye. We hear their stories. We learn of their struggles. We see them as humans, as equals, and we learn to sit at their feet and listen to their stories. We learn how someone may have had the same job we have but lost their spouse and needed to spend more time at home with their children.

And then because they needed to take care of their children and get them to the doctor too many times they lost their job, and when the unemployment checks ran out they lost their house and their car. They are just like you and me; it only took one instance, one occurrence, and the world, as they knew it, as we know it, changed forever.

Do we help bring mercy upon them and elevate them to seats above ours at the table or do we walk right by them? Do we sit next to them, ignore them and say nothing? Or do we try to get to know them?

Brothers and sisters, we, as Christians, are called to a life of service. It’s easy to get wrapped up in the world’s ways but we are meant to be different. To view the world differently. To live in the world differently. Christ came to turn everything upside down and we too are called to live that way. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. So go against the tide and do not make distinctions or show



favoritism, do not become judges of the poor, and whenever and wherever you can help those who are in need you must. Frankly, it's that simple.

When you were young, did your parents ever make you invite a classmate to your birthday party – someone you would rather keep at a distance? That can be a real challenge. But Jesus asks us to do just that: to reach out to the person you disagree with, dislike, don't understand, or don't have much in common with. Jesus invites us to seek out the less popular, the invisible, the socially awkward.

Why? Because we are blessed by these people. Our invitation is not the blessing; their challenging presence is. We learn so much more from the margins than we ever could in our comfort zones. It's a hard place to be, but the blessing is real, and we are transformed.

Preacher Melissa Bane Sevier wrote, "If you are one of those people who thinks you deserve the best place at the banquet, think again. You need to be humbled. 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. At God's table, every place is the same. There is always enough to go around. There is always room for you. Be strong and be humble. They are not mutually exclusive."

So, how is our church, or are our homes and families, welcome to those who may be timid or scared or felt left out of the fold, or are sitting on the sidelines? Who in our lives, and in the world around us, is in need of being welcomed in from the cold, lonely, and oftentimes dangerous world? And what are we doing to go out of our way to welcome them? How can we take the lowly seat and give them the place of honor? When are we going to start listening to Jesus? When are we going to sit at the other end of the table?

*In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.*