

## **Proper 17 C, 2025**

**Proverbs 25:6-7a**

**Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**

**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

Guests selected seats. Their selection spoke volumes. Who wanted to sit with whom was obvious. Jesus watched this selection process. Humility is rare. Leaders watching people closely is nothing new. Leaders trying to secure their own future is nothing new either. It is happening now. It happened to Jesus the day he went to the home of a Pharisee for a Sabbath meal.

Seating charts help dispel the awkwardness associated with selecting a seat. One of the reasons that RSVPs are so important is that the host can arrange seating configurations that will promote conversation, relationship, and contribute to the solemnity or the exuberance of an event.

Over the years I have been the officiant at numerous weddings. On the occasions when the couple honestly doesn't know me, I dread the reception, especially the seating chart. It is inevitable that brides and grooms who do not know much about me decide that I would be best placed at the table with the most religiously devout family member or friend. Everyone seems to have an uncle or aunt, sister or brother, cousin, coworker or neighbor who falls into this category. The couple honestly place me there because they think that "Uncle Earl," for lack of a better name, who goes to church only when he is asked to preach, has been baptized several times at different intervals in his life, who wrote his own version of the gospels, fasts on Thursdays, and is self-appointed chaplain for the local SPCA thinks that we will have a lot in common! I admit that my side of the conversation is guarded. I don't reveal that I think Christian people should go to worship every week, of that I believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, or that the four canonical gospels provide more than a life time worth of study, or that fasting is optional, or that being a self-appointed chaplain for any organization may not be life giving. So, choosing not to offend, I eat slowly, praise our Lord that there is liquid libation available, and shake my head, all while taking in what "Uncle Earl" shares about preaching, sacraments, scriptural interpretation, fasting, and the challenges of chaplaincy at the SPCA.

Those who have invited Jesus don't have any idea where to place him in their seating configuration. He is an outsider, but one which they want to keep an eye on. They know that he is not fitting into their political or religious categories. He has been advocating resocialization among community members. His teaching calls into question allegiances and moral standards. His persistent healing people on the Sabbath is troubling for the lawyers and the Pharisees.

This is the third time that Jesus is dining at the home of a Pharisee. Each time, we experience Jesus being set up so that the leaders can find fault, trap him, or try to silence him and his growing crowd of followers. His followers have been transformed. Their allegiances and moral underpinnings call into question nearly every action taken by the legal and religious leadership.

And now, just before the assigned text begins today, another healing story. This time a man with dropsy. This is the fourth story of healing on the Sabbath day. The religious leaders are watching. But the Pharisees are not the only ones watching. Jesus is watching how they enter and assume positions at the table. Most want the seats of honor. Most want to be near the host. Most select places with friends. And like me, none of them want to sit with "Uncle Earl!" Jesus' observation is that most are concerned for themselves. And what about God's banquet of life?

That is the thread in the gospel of Luke that is consistently stringing his followers and his critics along.

Jesus is here and is extending the graciousness of God's invitation to God's banquet of life. God's rules are exceedingly different from ours. We humans invite people to a banquet based on who can reciprocate. That is not God's way. Kingdom protocol is so different. The exalted are humbled. The humble are exalted. The first are last. The last are first. The symbolism is such that those who need help, who need hope, are the ones who are invited to the Lord's banquet. Tax collectors and sinners are welcome too. Jesus comes reversing the order of things. He invites the poor, the maimed, people with disabilities, and the blind to the banquet. Jesus calls sinners. That is why we are here. Jesus calls us to come to the banquet. He calls us to take a higher seat. He lifts us from the low places and sets us high above and does this out of gracious love.

Now it is easy for us as religious people to forget, that our status, our position as beloved of God, is a gift from God. That is what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reveals. He sends a sermon-like letter to the people reminding them of the most routine aspects of congregational life and how they are to be living. He touches on the importance of hospitality and welcome and that such aspects of their life be extended to everyone, even to the people for whom they have trouble loving. While mutual love is to be expressed within the faith community it is not limited to inside the walls of their church community. They are to make room for the stranger, the sojourner, the foreigner who comes among them.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> century church order *Didascalia* provides us an example: *If a destitute man or women, either a local person or a traveler, arrives unexpectedly, especially one of older years, and there is no place, you, bishop, make such a place with all your heart, even if you yourself should sit on the ground, that you may not show favoritism among human beings, but that your ministry may be pleasing before God.*

Jesus, of course, shows no favoritism. For the sake of all humanity, he suffers death on the cross so that through his death and resurrection, we too may die to sin and rise to newness of life. Through this sacrificial act, once for all, Christ Jesus makes a way forward for all people; rich and poor, citizen and alien, male and female, likable and unlikable, Jesus extends an invitation to all. Seats of honor. Jesus elevates us all and is willing to dine with us. He is host.

We select seats. The seats we choose speak volumes. Who wants to sit with whom is obvious. The seat selection process is age old. Humility is rare. We look to secure our own future thinking that with whom we rub elbows matters most. Jesus provides the future that really matters. He comes extending the graciousness of God's kingdom. We focus on seating charts to help dispel our awkwardness. Jesus, the host, arranges seating configurations that promote conversation, relationship, and contribute to the exuberant abundant life of his kingdom. "*You are welcome here,*" he says. "*I have come to call you to my banquet.*"

Amen.