

## SERMON 28<sup>th</sup> August 2022 GUEST AT THE BANQUET

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When I was planning my trip to China I was given the option of paying an economy fare or upgrading to premium economy or business. Well I couldn't afford business, but I might be able to bid for an upgrade on Air NZ's one up. You had to put in a bid and cross your fingers that your bid is a winning bid. I put an initial bid of \$400 and it came up as a weak bid, so I thought OMG what are they asking for so I put in a bid of \$600 which was the same as if I had directly paid for a premium seat. I was not wanting to spend a 12-hour flight in uncomfortable economy class, was I being a snob? I figure that at my age, I need the comforts in life and I have deserved them! Thank God my bid won and I was up-graded to premium economy for the outgoing flight. Coming back home, I did the same thing. I figured that I would bid the same and win. But lo and behold the flight was full and there was no room in premium economy so I had to prepare myself for an uncomfortable flight home. My cousin Ane who I was travelling with was surprised when we went through the gate they stopped her and said, you have been upgraded to Premium economy here is your new ticket! I felt happy for her and told her to go and enjoy and we will meet up after we land. I was expecting to be upgraded and yet I wasn't, Ane wasn't expecting to up-graded and yet she was. Does this remind you a bit of our gospel reading this morning? Those who want the best seats might be made humble by being moved to the lower seats and those who are lowly and humble might be moved to the highest seats at the table. In the end I sat with a mother and child on the way home, and it wasn't so bad after all.

The highest honor at most banquets is to sit at the head table at the right hand of the host, a seat many of us want and some would do anything to attain. We arrive at events early in order to get the best seat available. We go out of our way to outshine others. We go over the top just to be noticed. And we feel no regret about it because we believe we deserve it. Entitlement. This is what Jesus observed while he and other guests were gathering at a Sabbath meal upon a Pharisees invitation. Interestingly enough, at the outset of this Biblical chapter, Jesus was the one being “watched closely” (v. 1); however, it would be Jesus who is the keenest observer (v. 7).

In the first century, an invitation to a banquet was more than an offer to eat. It had significant social and economic meanings tied to it. To be invited meant that you were somebody “special.” I would like to think that, at times, the guest was someone with a beautiful spirit, a kind heart, and a good sense of humor. However, Jesus’ words in the parable lead me to believe that the “special” guest may simply have had the right beliefs, the appropriate amount of status, or something that the host needed or wanted in return. Times have not changed.

When Jesus noticed how “the guests chose the places of honor” (v.7), he immediately went into teaching mode. His parable included moral instruction not only for the guests who were competing for the best seats at the table, but also for the host who had invited them. Jesus gives the guests two reasons why they should not automatically sit at places of high position: (1) in case someone of higher status arrives (v. 8); and (2) to avoid embarrassment (v. 9). How mortifying it would be if you had to move your seat because someone else’s status trumped yours!

Jesus' instruction to the host may seem to be a simple lesson about guest-list etiquette, but it involves much more; it is about the exploitation of power. Jesus says that a guest list should not include friends, family, or rich neighbors — those who are in a position to give her something in return (v. 12). By having this expectation, the host abuses her power by placing her guests in debt (oftentimes unbeknownst to them). Alternatively, the host should invite the less fortunate — “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (v. 13) — those who cannot return in like kind. Jesus says the host “will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (v. 14). This is kingdom language. They will get their reward from God in heaven.

When you go to a wedding, don't try to sit in the seat of honor. That is, don't go down and sit at the head table. There might be a more important guest coming, and you might suffer the indignity of being asked to give up your seat for this other guest. As a result, you end up sitting at the back of the room, behind the pole, in the last place. Wouldn't it be better to sit at the back, and then be invited by the host to move forward to a seat of honor? The last shall be first, and the first last. Don't think of yourself too highly.

A minister friend of mine got remarried and he rang me late the week of the wedding and apologized for not sending me an invitation but issued me with a verbal invitation which I gladly accepted. I went to the wedding ceremony and outside of the church was the table settings for the reception. I looked and I looked but I could not find my name on any table. I figured obviously he had forgotten to tell the person doing the table settings. My colleagues that I was sitting with told me to come anyway and I will get a table. I didn't want to assume that just because I was a minister I would get a seat. So I humbly

passed on my wedding gift to the couple and went home. I didn't want to arrive at the reception and be left standing because there was no seat for me. I wanted to save myself from embarrassment.

Jesus uses the common experience of shared meals to bring his teaching home today. In his first offering he speaks of the centrality of 'humility' to those who would follow him. In his second, he turns all conventions upside down and rewrites the guest list --- promising that in the end, we will be blessed in other than the usual ways.

Now, I don't know about you, but 99% of the time I eat with people I know --- those I have a lot in common with --- co-workers, colleagues, family, friends. These are people who, for the most part, who can and will pick up the tab the next time, if they did not, in fact, do so this time. Part of the surprise in Jesus' words now lies in this: that even more than sitting across the table from someone at the local diner, Jesus says we ought to be inviting "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" to something much grander when he speaks of a banquet. Perhaps we still sit with them. Perhaps we don't. Either way? These are to be treated as honored guests. And Jesus promises that in the end, we will be "repaid."

Oh yes, today Jesus makes his point using an experience which people across time and space and culture continue to know well. And I, for one, find myself sitting up and taking notice. Along with you who also listen in on Jesus now, I am wondering what this looks like and what this means for you and me. Is it like a shared lunch with the person who frequently drops by the church office asking for help? Is that small, small step the direction Jesus would have us

move today or is he speaking of something much, much more?

Whatever else is so, when we sit down to a meal together, neither one of us is the same. At least I know I'm not. And beyond simply being the "right thing," in keeping with Jesus' direction now and shy of the 'resurrection of the righteous,' when such as these will be paid in full? Maybe that kind of 'changing' from the inside out is exactly what Jesus intends for us all when we take even the smallest step towards doing and being what he calls us to today. Maybe he intends that in a shared meal we might just see in one another our common humanity. Maybe he yearns for us to offer a prayer of thanksgiving together. Maybe Jesus yearns for a shared meal to be the first step to a more equitable world.

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. Amen.