

**A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler**  
**The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, September 1, 2019**

Sirach 10:12-18

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Part of my time away this summer included being with my husband Michael's large family and we were all together to celebrate his parent's 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. There was a lovely large dinner party and I couldn't help noticing how much care and attention was put into where people were seated at the dinner. It seems very important to us, doesn't it, where we sit, and whom we sit next to. Even little children jockey for the places they want at mealtime.

In today's Gospel Jesus is again sharing a Sabbath meal in the home of a Pharisee and he uses the opportunity to teach important lessons about choosing our seats, and what genuine humility is all about, and how we are called to live together. From the outset of the story we know it's important because Jesus is teaching at a meal, around a table. And important things happen around tables, like our Eucharist that we remember and carry on to this very day. So we know there's more going on here than just commentary on social etiquette about seating assignments – who sits where, next to whom.

Notice also that when Jesus sees how the guests chose their seats at this meal, he's moved to tell a parable. Recall the importance of parables, and their function to point listeners to the Kingdom of God. Jesus uses parables to teach "Kingdom Behavior" - the way God longs for us to live and treat one another here and now and, the way God's eternal Kingdom is ordered. Jesus's parables are timeless, important lessons about how we are to live, so again, be assured this lesson about humility is more profound than just how to get a good seat at the table.

In the parable Jesus explains a seemingly simple approach on how to be a humble guest: do not sit at the place of honor, he advises, because someone more distinguished might also have been invited. Then the host, who has invited you both, may ask you to give this other person your seat. Then you in disgrace would have to take the lower place. Rather, when you're invited, go sit at the lowest place first, so when the host comes he may say to you, friend move up higher. Then you will be honored with those who sit at the table, for... all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.... those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Friends, on the surface this parable might seem to be about adopting a self-deprecating, polite tactic that many of us have used or at least recognize. The brilliant preacher and teacher Fred Craddock, offers a wise note of caution explaining that Jesus's lesson here should not be simplified: "The human ego is quite clever," he warns, "and upon hearing that taking a low seat may not only avoid embarrassment but lead to elevation to the head table, may convert the instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-exaltation. Jesus does not offer a divinely approved way for a person to get cleverly what he or she wants. Taking the low seat because one is humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up, is another. The entire message becomes a cartoon if there is a mad, competitive rush for the lowest place, with ears cocked towards the host, waiting for the call to ascend." \*

Clearly there is more here to be considered and our clues must, of course, come from Jesus. So now let's remember again that Jesus is telling a parable, which means it's *not about us*

- it's about God. The banquet Jesus is referring to is The Kingdom – not a dinner party. God is the host here and the table at which we sit is God's table. What does the landscape of the banquet look like now – where do we sit?

Jesus said: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Well, what if the exaltation that Jesus speaks about is actually liberation from the whole ordeal of trying to determine where we sit? What if humbling ourselves is the very action that can lead to freedom from worrying about our place at the table? What if humbling ourselves means being released from the anxiety of caring about who we're sitting next to?

What if, in the Kingdom, at God's table, we finally realize that everyone is equal? There are no high seats or low seats. This is God's banquet after all and that means everyone has the best seat, everyone is served at the same time and there is plenty to eat. There is no end game in the kingdom because all is put right and righteousness is the order.

In today's gospel Jesus is teaching that the path to the Kingdom begins with genuine humility, genuine humility. Sitting in the low seat first is important because if we spend enough time there, we may begin not to care so much about progressing. We may begin to let go of our efforts to get more, and be more - more than others. This kind of genuine humility leads to exaltation but not the kind of "better seat" exaltation. The reward of living humbly is being exalted and lifted up, freed, from human trappings of ego and status concerns and the anxiety of constantly eyeing that higher seat. Free and better able to sit lovingly beside one another at the table not caring where we sit.

Jesus taught this lesson about the last being first and the first being last over and over and over again. In the end he stopped teaching and just showed us what he meant by humbling himself upon the cross. By this we are promised once and for all that it doesn't matter where we sit – we are welcomed to the banquet in this life and the next – God's table in God's perfect kingdom, where it doesn't matter who sits where. Amen.

\*LUKE, Interpretation a Bible Commentary for Preaching by Fred B. Craddock