

Scripture: Luke 14:1,7-14

Sermon Title: "Pick a Seat. Not a Side."

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As my partner and I have been making final plans for our wedding which is now exactly two weeks away, I have been thinking a lot about something that should be so simple, but isn't. And that is sitting down. Yes, sitting down should not be as complicated as we often make it but it is. I mean, think about it – what is often the first question that goes through our minds when we enter a wedding ceremony? Which side should we sit on? We have this historical and traditional notion that we must sit on the side of the person we are most connected with, right? However, nowadays, the majority of couples who are getting married are moving away from this and encouraging open seating. Just sit down. Still, it's not that easy – it's never that easy, because you know that someone is going to arrive and still ask, which side should I sit on? So now there are all sorts of creative signs that people make up with cute poetic words which basically say, pick a seat, not a side. Greeters are prepped to encourage folks to sit wherever, just find a seat. And no matter the preparation or the signage, the questions they will still come. Where should I sit? I don't know about you, but I personally feel that sitting down should not be as complicated as we often make it.

In our reading this morning from the gospel of Luke, Jesus even dives in to this seemingly eternal dilemma of where does one sit and it was complicated even then. In our reading, Jesus is responding to a particular situation where the guests are choosing honored seats as Jesus shares a meal with a Pharisee and a group of his friends. Keep that in mind as we think on this further, Jesus is talking to a particular audience here as he addresses a religious leader and his social circle. And in Christ's teaching here, he encourages humility as he tries to help these folks decide where they should sit – if you know there is a seat of honor, don't sit in it unless you are told. Pick a seat elsewhere in a less honored spot. Then let your host invite you higher rather than have someone telling you to move lower. See how complicated sitting down was even then? It's crazy. And overall, what Jesus is encouraging is humility – pick a seat which doesn't exalt you.

However, Jesus then goes a bit further and he calls out the people here for how they invite others to come and sit at their table – not just where they sit but how they invite people to come and sit. For he sees a crowd which has been gathered by a leader of the Pharisees and a crowd which likely contains those who think like their host does, who walk in the same social circles, who live like he does. Jesus calls out this way of being and says this is not the way to host a meal or share your time. Don't only invite folks or surround yourselves with folks from your side of society, but the other side as well and show hospitality to those who are different. Show hospitality to those who may not be able to offer it in return, as he lists the poor and the differently-abled, the people who were seen as being on the lowest tier of society. Invite them in too for this is how we are called to live and love!

And what I truly cherish about this lesson from Jesus regarding whom we are inviting is that this teaching will then make the Pharisees have to evaluate again how they choose their seats – evaluate where they sit. For if you invite folks from every walk of life, from different social classes and circles, who gets the seat of honor? Maybe a seat of honor is not needed after all? How will you encourage this diverse crowd to mingle and sit together, not separating themselves out, but sitting with folks who are different and sharing a meal? At this point, I'm surprised that Jesus didn't suggest place cards. Still to me, the answer should be even more simple, just pick a seat no matter who you end up sitting next to, no matter where the seat is located, just pick a seat and sit down. And if someone sits next to you with whom you disagree or who is different than you are, remember humility and hospitality, share your time together, find a way to get along, and look for the blessing.

Friends, I'll say it again sitting down should not be this complicated and yet we continue to make it so. Let me share with you a story that is likely closer to home for most of us in one way or another. I believe it was in the early fall of 2017, I made a decision to attend one of our town select board meetings where there was going to be further conversation on the downtown project which we all know is now underway.

And I knew going in to the meeting just how divisive this project had become for our town. I had already heard of friendships shattered because of it and of strained relationships caused by differing opinions. It had caused a divide, one that we can still see and yet one that I am seeing some signs of healing, and as a pastor of our community, it was and still is important for me to be aware of issues like this which we face. So that is why I went to the meeting – to be informed and to offer care for our community. As I entered the full meeting room, I immediately saw many of the wonderful folks I knew from around town. And since I had arrived early, I enjoyed having time to say hello to people and check in with those whom I hadn't seen lately – it was nice to get to chat with folks. Then when the meeting began, I grabbed an empty seat near the back. I just picked a seat and sat down. Sitting should be just this simple. Yet, it wasn't. Afterwards, I had more opportunities to check in with people and chat longer and that's when a community member told me that I had sat on the "wrong side." In that moment, how deep the divide had become was made so clear – that comment opened my eyes to see that the meeting had basically segregated by opinion and because of where I sat, it was assumed what I believed. Yet all I saw was an open seat, next to a genuinely good person. I simply picked a seat and not a side.

Beloved People of God, can't we just sit down? Can't we just sit down without a seat of honor influencing our ability to be connected with one another? Can't we just sit down with those who are different than we are and may have different opinions and simply acknowledge the humanity in us all– we don't have to agree but we need to stop the separating and we need to learn how to be human together. To learn from one another. To humble ourselves from time-to-time and be in community together. As Jesus called the Pharisee and his dinner guests to be open in their invitation, we too are called to be open. To not only spend time with those who are like us but also those whom are different. Because when we do this, there is a blessing – Jesus reminds us of this. There is a blessing to sit down with those who are different. We just have to be open to sitting

down with whomever and discovering what that blessing might be. Let's not make it any more complicated than that. So be it and may it be so. Amen.