

## *A Seat at the Table*

August 28, 2016 Luke 14:1, 7-14

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While Christmas was THE holiday, when we were kids, after we each left home as adults, Thanksgiving became the Weir holiday of choice. Every year for more than 25 years, we all traveled to South Bend to celebrate with my folks. As the years went by, we added grandchildren to the mix, and soon there was not room for everyone at the dining room table. That led of course, to the proverbial 'kids table.' Now my parent's house had a tiny kitchen, so the kid's table was actually in the family room, and there was a pass through opening between the dining room and family room, so it was sort of like sitting at parallel tables. Everyone could see everyone else and conversation flowed easily. But eventually too many grand children, and even some great grandchildren were added to the family, and eventually we found we had outgrown the two-table setup that had worked so well for so long.

So that Thanksgiving, my mother set up card tables all over the first floor. It looked like a restaurant with tables in the living room, family room, and of course the dining room. But how to decide who sat where? The oldest grand children Were, of course, vying for their chance to finally make it to the BIG table. The youngest babes couldn't sit alone. What to do? My mother and I devised what we thought was the perfect solution. We were one big happy family, right? So who sat where shouldn't matter at all. So we numbered each table, and then put the numbers in a basket. Everyone would draw a number to determine what table they would sit at. It would be great fun to see where everyone ended up. We were quite proud of ourselves!

And then my father found out. And let's just say he was not too pleased....well we could actually say he had a little hissy fit. NO ONE was going to tell him where to sit on Thanksgiving in his own home! NO SIR! He would sit at the head of the table in the dining room, just where he always sat. He would not be a part of any such foolish plan as to mix everything up, seniority and rank had their privileges, thank you very much! My mother and I silently smiled at each other across the room and said, "of course, YOU sit where you want. We will just use the number system for everyone else. No problem!" So Dad sat in his usual place, and the rest of us, well we were all over the place. A great grandchild ended up in the coveted dining room, families were all mixed up, young and old, and we all had a great day. Everyone talked on and on about what fun it was to scatter us all around. And I am pretty sure that my dad regretted his boisterous objections when he saw what fun the rest of us had. I'm pretty sure he felt a little petty and perhaps a bit immature. Because we really ARE one big happy family and so it really didn't matter where we sat, as long as we were all together.

And I think this is part of Jesus' message in today's gospel story. Someone once said that in Luke's gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal!<sup>1</sup> What do you think of when you think of gathering with loved ones around a table? Who are those people you love to share meals with? Lets take a closer look at this particular table, this meal, at this particular teaching in this gospel story.

In the initial section, Jesus speaks to the guests. He opens his little speech by calling it a parable, but it doesn't seem to have the expected attributes of a parable. Well, at least not until the very end. He seems to be giving direct instructions that apply to very concrete situations. As a guest, don't assume a position of greatness until your host assigns it to you. In other words, don't sit at the right hand of the host, unless invited to do so. That seems to make common sense, even in today's world. Most of us, when invited to dine at another's home, will ask first "where do you want us to sit?" before sitting down at the table.

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<sup>1</sup> (Interpreters Vol. p. 283).

But this section addressed to the guests has a bit of curiosity to it as well. It seems like Jesus is giving people hints on how to look good to others. If you take the worst seat (like at the kids table in the family room) and the host has a fit and invites you to come sit in the dining room, then you look pretty good to everyone else sitting in both the family room AND the dining room! Everyone present gets to witness you being uplifted by the host! In essence, the host is saying to all 'look how important this person is, and they were sitting at the KIDS table! That will never do...they must be in the dining room!'"

Jesus' sage advice then continues towards the host. Don't invite the A-list when you have a party. No, if you invite your family, or friends, or celebrities, they will most likely invite you back in return. They will feel they owe you something, and you will end up rewarded with an invitation from them. Well, this seems to be the way social invitations still work, right? How often have you said 'I must have so-and-so over, it's been months since I was a guest at their house'? Is this where Jesus' words begin to take on the form of parable? But do you feel the disconnect that I do?

In speaking to the guests, Jesus seems to be giving advice on how to move up the social ladder, so to speak. He is telling us how to be exalted by our host in front of all the other guests. He is telling us how to get noticed in the most positive ways. But in speaking to the host, he seems to be taking a 180-degree turn. DON'T invite people who can indeed exalt you by returning the social favors. So which is it? Look for ways to look good in front of your peers, or don't? What's Jesus really talking about here?

I think the key is in verse 11: For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted. To the guests he says; humble yourself by sitting at the kids' table. To the host he says, humble yourself by inviting those who have no means to repay you. But why? Why is it important to humble ourselves? I think it is more fitting to turn that question around...why is it important NOT to exalt ourselves, or in better English, not to look for exaltation. What Jesus is really saying here is don't look for admiration, affirmation and exaltation from others. Don't look for a host to praise you and raise you up above other guests. Don't look for guests who will make you look good by their invitations.

Wow, this seems so pertinent to our world today. The grocery store checkout is filled with magazines that do nothing but talk about who's who in the world of celebrity. We buzz among ourselves about local up and comers, the so-called movers and shakers. We live in a world where comparison is the sport of the day. Do we have as much as the Joneses? Are our children playing the right sports? Is our car the latest off the assembly line, decked out with every bell and whistle? Have we been noticed by the boss lately? Are we being invited to the right social events? Are we part of the all-important IN crowd? We are constantly bombarded with images that society places on us as meaningful. Youth, beauty, wealth, achievement, popularity, winning...the list goes on and on.

But whose values are these? And who does the valuing? In essence, we all participate in this game of comparison and valuation based on the standards of the world. Whether we are the guest or the host, we seem to always be jockeying for the best seat at the table in the dining room. Why do we do this? What is this comparison business all about? It's about affirmation and exaltation. It's about assuring ourselves we are as good, or even better than those around us. And the reason I think we do this is because we do not know one essential truth at the core of our being. We do not know or believe that our value lies in none of that. Our value does not come from the car we drive, the sports our kids play, the salary we earn, or the people we keep company with. It doesn't even come from the good works we do!

NO, our value comes, is, simply by being created children of God. Our worth is not based on the acceptance of our peers, but on God's value and love of us. As Christians, we should see our value as a

gift, not as an achievement. Our value is not rooted in anything we do, or have, or accomplish. Our value is rooted in God's abiding love for each and every one of us. If we really believed this, if we took this to heart and knew it to be true, what freedom it would bring to us. Freedom from worry about being 'good enough'. Freedom from worry about what others think of us. Freedom from fear about our place in the world, in society. Freedom from letting others define us and our value. Freedom to stand up to the culture and say NO...enough! We won't listen to the materialism around us, turning our lives over to consumption and possessions. We won't buy the lie that sports of every kind, music lessons and tutoring are the most important ways for our kids to grow into healthy and happy adults. We won't listen to the fears that rise within us that we will never have enough to retire. Instead, we will live in the freedom God intend for us.

And what that means is that GOD is ultimately the only one who can bless or honor or praise or exalt us. God is the only one whose valuation of us matters. Why in the world would we look for that anyplace else? Why in the world would we want to be exalted by a host or by our guests when the only one that matters has already exalted us, has already prepared a seat for us at the table?

And once we know this in our core, what happens? Well for one, we are filled, filled completely and no longer need to look for assurance or valuation from anyone or anything. We are freed from the games of comparison and competition. But we also are able to see that every other person exists in this same exaltation. Every other person is also loved and valued and praised and adored by God. We no longer feel the need to value others....or devalue them, to make ourselves feel better. We no longer need to judge others, critiquing and criticizing. We no longer need the honor and accolades of others.

And when that happens, we are free to share God's amazing love with others in ways we never dreamed possible. We are free to see that Jesus' IN crowd is probably much different than OUR IN crowd. And then we are free to include the blind and the lame the poor and the crippled as easily as we include the rich and the family and friends. And we are free to see that there are plenty of seats at God's table....each with the same value. There is no kids' table in the family room, just one big table for all. With chairs enough for all. With exaltation for all....from God. Unlike my father, worried about where he would sit, when we know, REALLY know, that we are infinitely loved by God, by the creator of ALL things – then it really doesn't matter where we sit at all, does it? There is a seat for everyone at God's table, and every chair is a thrown. Amen!