

## **Sermon—Gathered Around the Table**

1/31/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

How many of you have a favorite pew at church, or at least did before the pandemic began? My guess is that most of you do and did, that it popped into your mind just a few seconds ago, and that it probably wasn't the front row. Well, there was a time when people quite literally paid for the privilege. Sitting in the front row meant that everyone had to watch as they walked by surrounded by their large, loving families and dressed in the finest attire. The front row was a sign of wealth and status which most people could only dream of having. Oh, how times have changed. Today, the pew that we long for, the pew that pops into our mind is the one in the back. The one which allows us to easily slip in and out of the service, to make a quick exit when worship is over, and to make certain that no one sees us when we begin to fall asleep. Yes, there's something within us that drives us to want the best seat in the house, whether it be at church or at home in our living rooms. Something within us, as we hear in today's Gospel lesson, that is not new and not always a good thing.

One Sabbath, after preaching at the local synagogue, a leader of the Pharisees invited Jesus to his house for a meal. At the middle of the Pharisee's house was a long, low oval table. Jewish law and tradition dictated that the host sit on the right side of the table, one spot from the end, with a trusted friend on their right and the guest of honor on their left. Everyone else sat—well, technically, lay on their left side with their feet extended backwards—in descending order of importance, with the least among them seated closest to the door. One by one, people entered the Pharisee's house and immediately turn their attention to the seating chart. They knew that where they sat reflected their wealth and status, as well as the quality of food and drink that they

would be served, so I imagine that they began boasting about how well they were doing and inching closer and closer to the host. Jesus, meanwhile, sat in the corner, watching and waiting, until the jostling and bragging become too much. But rather than call them hypocrites, he told them a parable.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet,” he begins, “do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host.” In weddings and other large affairs, where more than one table was needed, the tables were arranged in concentric circles; in other words, the host’s table was placed in the middle, and the remaining tables were arranged in larger and larger circles surrounding it. Similar to before, the most prominent persons sat closest to the middle, closest to the host and his table. Everyone feared the dreaded tap on their shoulder. When someone overestimated their place or a guest came “fashionably” late, the host would come over, tap the shoulder of the person who needed to move, and tell them to sit further down, if not to the end. In that moment, they were reminded of their place on the totem pole, both in terms of who was above them and who was below them. Jesus, frustrated with this game of musical chairs and constant comparison that he saw taking place before him, told them of a better way. “[W]hen you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.” And here is the key part: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

If not for this last sentence, we might misunderstand Jesus’ message. We might interpret him as telling us to take the last seat so that, upon being approached and told to move by the host, everyone will have to watch us as we walk past to the seat that we should have taken all

along. This would turn taking the last seat into another way to brag about our wealth and social standing, without the potential embarrassment of being told that we had aimed too high. But this is not what Jesus said. When we are humble, we sit in the lowest place because we are happy to just be sitting at the table, surrounded by friends and family. We want to hear about their lives and meet new people, people whom we know we are no better than, no matter our status or wealth. And if the host taps us on the shoulder? We will graciously accept out of respect for our host, not because we believe that we were always deserving of a better seat.

We do not hear how the Pharisee and his other guests responded. Given how important status and recognition were at the time, though, they almost certainly found Jesus' advice to be rather remarkable and scandalous. He was challenging them to no longer be beholden to the honor-shame culture in which they lived, a culture not so different from ours today. We still live in a world of constant comparison. We compete over who has the nicest car, the best job, the biggest house, and the finest education. And this doesn't even take into account the ways in which we judge each other over factors like our where we were born, our race, and our sexual orientation. We live in a world where we are constantly seeking to have more than our neighbor and to be the best. Which makes me wonder: how would we feel if Jesus were here among us today, telling us that we can only become his disciple if we stop competing and give up all our possessions, like he told the crowd just a few verses after today's Gospel lesson? I imagine that we too would find his advice rather remarkable and scandalous.

Now, by this point, my guess is that the Pharisee and his guests were shifting about nervously in their seats, mumbling under their breath, hoping that Jesus would stop his speech so that they could eat their food in peace. But Jesus, who was not done teaching, turned to the Pharisee and said: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your

brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors.” These were the exact people that the Pharisee had invited that day, and he almost certainly assumed that they repay him for his “kindness” at a later date. So who instead did Jesus tell him to invite, if not for these people? The least among them: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Dining with these people would not lead the Pharisee to be repaid with food, honor, or any of his other earthly desires, since these people had nothing to give. Instead, Jesus proclaimed, the Pharisee would receive his repayment “at the resurrection of the righteous.” For a leader of the Pharisees, in all likelihood, the promise of future rewards would not have been very persuasive. He had dedicated his entire life to following God’s law and instructing others in the Jewish faith. What more could he honestly gain by changing his dinner plans and seating arrangement? And thus, just like we are prone to do, he dismissed what Jesus was teaching him.

Today, we no longer adhere to the same societal structures and expectations. We do, though, continue to build and maintain social divisions through whom we choose to invite to our tables and into our lives, and whom we choose not to. For example, let’s imagine that the pandemic is over, a day we all look forward to, and we’ve been invited to a dinner at the house of Southern Baptist preacher and televangelist Pat Robertson. Based on what he’s said on his television show, there are various people who we would not expect to see there. We probably wouldn’t see many if any feminists or progressives, homosexuals or people with AIDS, or atheists or people from others faiths. We can envision who Pat Robertson would and wouldn’t put on his guest list because of the countless hours that he has spent in front of television cameras, providing us insight into who he is and what he believes. Now, it may be tempting to see Robertson as the outlier, as the Pharisee in the story. But the truth is that we all have people who are on our do-not-invite list, me included.

So, who would I rather not invite? If I'm honest, I'd rather not be sitting next to people who physically and sexually abuse women and children. I'd rather not be sitting next to the type of Christians who take joy in running scare houses on Halloween, who quite literally use the threat of eternal damnation to try and scare people into becoming Christian. I'd rather not be sitting next people who peddle conspiracy theories, like that the Holocaust didn't happen or that people who have lived through school shootings are "crisis actors." I'd rather not sit next to CEOs who feel no remorse about being paid millions of dollars a year, but cry poor at the thought of their businesses having to pay more than minimum wage. And by now you've probably guessed that I would be reluctant to invite Pat Robertson, and likely wouldn't be high on his guest list either.

Except, here lies the problem with do-not-invite lists, even hypothetical ones; a problem that Jesus saw all too clearly. When make them, we are separating ourselves from others based on our dislikes, fears, prejudices, and judgments. We are barring others from our tables and our lives, not because it is what God wants, but because it is what we want. Being the type of people who Jesus calls us to be, people who open our tables and lives to everyone, will not be easy, especially in the midst of a pandemic when we are forced to remain apart. Fortunately, we aren't expected to do it alone. In Scripture, we see what love and humility truly are in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We see how Jesus was willing to give up everything for our sake and never considered himself, the Son of God, to be better than anyone else. And we hear how God sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts and lives, so that we might become the type of people who God is calling us to be. People who seek to welcome everyone, no matter who they are, no matter where they are from, and no matter what they believe. Because the truth of the matter, at

the end of the day, is that everyone should be welcome at our table and in our lives, because everyone is welcome at God's table and is precious to God. Amen.