

## "Knowing Your Place" Luke 14:7-14 Trinity 17 2023

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Who's first? Where do we fit in? We jostle for the best seats. The seats on the plane with the best legroom are always preferred! The view is definitely better at the 50-yard line at a football match or right behind home plate at a baseball game. You're much more into the flow of a concert in the front row than at the back of the balcony.

Where do we fit in? What's our place? One of the big tasks for a wedding couple is to determine the table seating chart for the reception. There are certain people who need to avoid each other. You also don't want to exclude someone from their circle of friends. Figuring who sits where and with whom can lead to gnashing of teeth and even tears. It's very serious stuff!

I remember when I was young and my family would go to my grandparent's house for a Christmas meal. All of us children would be relegated to "the children's table." Now to be honest, the children's table was a lot of fun! But I also remember how proud I felt when I graduated to sitting with the grown-ups!

We hear about an episode from Jesus' life. Jesus had been invited to the home of a leading Pharisee for the Sabbath dinner. It was a big occasion to be on the leader's invite list! When the mealtime came,

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Jesus watched as the various guests all jockeyed for position at the dinner table.

It would have been a large, U-shaped dining area. People reclined on pillows around very short platforms. The host reclined at the center of the U's bottom edge. The nearer your position was to the host, the more important your status was. The least important people dined at the two far ends of the U.

As Jesus watched the guests scuttle about, elbowing for the best position, he tells a thinly veiled parable. When you're invited to a dinner party, he says, don't jockey for the best seats. Just think how embarrassing it would be if someone more important than you showed up. And the host approached you and said, "Hey, I need you to move down to the far end. I have a very important person who needs to sit here."

"How much better it would be," Jesus says, if the reverse happened. The host sees you sitting at the far end, and he says, 'Oh! You don't have to sit way down here! You come with me! I've got a spot at my table reserved just for you!'"

Jesus doesn't tell this parable just to fill them in on proper etiquette. He isn't playing Miss Manners. Jesus is getting at something much deeper, something that has spiritual implications.

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Where is your place? Are you secure, do you feel that you belong, that you matter? Do you feel that you are a valued person, for who you are, just as you are?

There are few things as distressing as the feeling that you don't belong, that you're unwanted and unimportant. It cuts you to the core. It leaves you with the feeling that you're somehow less substantial than others, that you're less of a person. You're somehow internally flawed.

How much are our words and actions tied to jockeying for esteem? How do we try to prove to the world and to ourselves that we have value? There are many voices trying to tell us what our place is. Who do you listen to? Which voice reveals your identity, who you are and where your place is in the world and the universe?

Those voices are especially forceful on our youth. I remember how very difficult and confusing my time in middle school was. My interests were changing, my voice was changing, my body was changing, and I had no idea where I ranked in the social network of my school.

I think this is true for most people passing through that very vulnerable period in their human development. What do you wear, where do you sit in the cafeteria, do you dare to express yourself?

Where do you belong? What is your place? The root of what Jesus is getting at in this parable is about a whole lot more than just good

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manners. It's about our core essence and our spiritual journey through this world.

Do you know your place, your REAL place? Jesus is stating that we do not need to jockey for position. We can let go of the unceasing pursuit of angling for position. We can let it go because our seat is already secure! You are already God's beloved. There is nothing you must do or not do to safeguard your position.

You are God's beloved. Your place and your value were firmly established long ago, long before you were born. You were BORN belonging. You are God's beloved creation, you reflect the image of the creator. And together we reflect the many splended facets of God's wondrous character.

Your permanent place of belonging was secured long ago at Jesus' cross. He took the worst seat so that you might have the best. He took the cross, the worst seat, and his dead body was laid in a borrowed grave. All this was done so that you might have the everlasting seat of worth and belonging.

And the knowledge of that most valued status came to you at your baptism. Baptism has been called the sacrament of belonging. In those waters, God said, "You are mine...forever!"

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No one can change that, no words, no alternate perception of reality, no earthly forces, no polarized politics, nothing in all of creation can change this truth, this declaration of your precious value to God! This is who you are, this is your value, your place, and don't let anyone tell you any differently!

When we dwell, when we abide in this sacred perception of our inherent worth, then our place is secure. We know our value! We can let go of all the jockeying, of pulling others down so that we can gain an upper advantage. And most importantly, at last we can have peace even – and especially – in our broken places.

It's in our poverty that we come to know our true worth and importance to God. Where we are broken, when we have nothing to offer, it's there and then that the divine words of grace come to us. It declares that our intrinsic worth stems from the love of our creator. It sprouted from the very heart of brokenness, from the cross of Jesus. We received EVERYTHING, all that there is of value, when we had no way of repaying good for good. We were the poor, the crippled, we were the lame, the blind. This was when we were invited to the banquet of abundance.

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And that has changed everything for us. We can give as freely as we have received. We can give without thought of return. We give from the seat of joy. We know our place, and that place is good. Amen.