

## **“A Place for Everyone and Everyone in Their Place”**

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Jer. 2:4-10, Heb 13, Luke 14:1, 7-14.

Jesus was invited to a dinner party, and he saw that the guests were scrambling for the places of honor. The best seat in the house was the place nearest the most important guest. He would have good stories to tell or wisdom to share and everybody wanted to be around him. The bad seats would be far away from the center of the conversation and if you sat there you would have to strain to hear, and you might not catch the jokes, and you would not feel fully a part of the action.

What other places of honor do you know?

Think about high school. In my high school there was a wall in one of the main hallways where the athletes and other attractive, popular guys hung out. About two dozen of them leaned up against the wall, looking cool and checking out the girls who walked by. Some of the popular girls who dated the popular boys got to stand around the wall, but the girls didn't get to lean. The boys had their place. The girls had their place. And the rest of us walked by. There was no sign posted on this wall which said “popular people only welcome here.” But it was very clear to me and to many others that we had no place on or around that wall.

Think about your workplace or your social groups. What are the places of honor there? Who is the “star?” Who is asked to serve on the committees that decide something important? Who is considered the most spiritual or the most talented? Who has the ear of the president or the CEO? In most social groups, there are unwritten but very clear rules about who has the highest status and who is the most important. And apparently we don't outgrow this. A friend told me this week that Freedom Village has its own social hierarchy, based largely on the job the husband had before retirement!

Jesus saw the guests choosing the places of honor, and he had some advice for them. Here Jesus sounds a little like Miss Manners or Emily Post telling people which fork to use. Don't sit in the place of honor, Jesus said, because you might be asked to leave it for somebody more important, and you would be shamed. Instead, sit at the

lowest place, at the far end of the table, and the host may move you up to a better seat. Sort of like getting an upgrade that allows you to sit in first class rather than the back row of the plane next to the bathroom!

Jesus had more advice, this time for the host of the party. When you give a party, don't invite your friends or rich neighbors who will invite you back to their place next month. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

The first piece of advice about seating arrangements made some sense. These first century people cared a great deal about status and honor and approval. They wanted to avoid shame at all costs. But inviting the poor and the lame and the blind to dinner? That was strange.

It is helpful to compare the words of Jesus here to some other Jewish instructions for living from about the same time. There was a small Jewish community of people who lived in the desert apart from the rest of the world. They are known as the Qumran community. They emphasized purity and they had some very strict rules about their worship life. For example, they walked in a procession on the way to worship, and thought that God had assigned everyone had a certain place in line "according to the perfection of their spirit." Each person needed to stay in that place, and not try to move up or down. Place mattered.

The Qumran community also had some very clear rules about who could go to worship. They did not want to let any impure people into the holy places. So they specified ... if you had a skin disease, if you were paralyzed, if you could not walk or hear or see or speak, you were excluded from worship. They did not welcome senior citizens either. One of the rules said: "Any aged person that totters and is unable to stand firm in the midst of the Congregation: let those persons not enter!" Finally, they had a rule that no person with any human impurity whatever should enter the Assembly of God." Doesn't that exclude most of the human race???

One of the reasons for such strict rules was that people in the first century believed that any kind of physical defect or illness resulted from sin. A blind or crippled person must have done something very wrong to receive that kind of punishment from God, and their bad behavior might have a negative affect on others in the community. These people had a place in society ... but it was someplace else. They did not belong.

We are a long way from the Qumran community. We have ramps for the mobility impaired, large print bulletins for the sign impaired, and a loop system for the hearing impaired. We don't reject people based on disability.

But even in America there have been numerous examples of people being told to stay in their place. In the South, in the 1950s, the Jim Crow laws ensured that African Americans had a clear place in the back of the bus, the segregated schools, and the jobs as maid and janitor. Those who challenged the rules of place could be severely punished.

For centuries, women's place was in the home. Jewish people for many years did not have a place in certain country clubs or colleges. Most recently, it has become clear that some people think that Muslims have no place at Ground Zero.

The Qumran community was not the only social group that established a rigid hierarchy that would not let people move out of their assigned space. There is something about human nature that wants to put people in their slots. Some get the places of honor, and most don't. We want to know where we fit and who is above us and who is below us, and that can give some security. It can also make us very anxious.

All of this background makes it a little more clear what Jesus is talking about in this text. He was not giving good. He was challenging everything his listeners assumed about good behavior. Jesus said that in the kingdom of God, there won't be any places of honor. There won't be any rigid hierarchy. Status and recognition and popularity did not matter to God.

Jesus was not talking about etiquette in these examples. He was talking about God. God is the one who throws the dinner party and invites the poor and the lame and the blind. And isn't that all of us? We all do our share of tottering. We all have some kind of impurity or brokenness. And yet, God has graciously invited us to a banquet where the outcasts have become equals. There is a place for everyone. Not because we are pure, or worthy. But because God is gracious and welcoming and inclusive.

Status doesn't matter in the kingdom of God.

But it still matters to us. We do not yet live in the kingdom of God. We live in a world where our status in the workplace depends on achievement. We live in a world where everyone is equal but some are more equal than others. We live in a world where race and class and gender and sexual orientation can still keep people in a certain place.

We live in a world which values athletes and movie stars and beautiful people, but does not much value care givers and maintenance workers. And because we live in that world we are constantly told that our worth and value depends on our appearance, or achievement, or wealth or popularity. Some of us still walk by that jock wall every day thinking that we don't have a place.

Status doesn't matter to God, but it does to us, and we live in that difficult in-between place. But I wonder ... what if we found ways to make status matter less in our lives. What if we reminded ourselves everyday that we have a place at God's dinner party even if we don't have a place leaning on the jock wall? What if we start to challenge the unwritten rules about status that exclude or marginalize people? What if we spent more time with people who are not exactly like us? What if we spent time with that student who always sits alone in the lunchroom? What if we offer the same kind of grace and generosity to all God's people that God offers to us? What if we throw a big party and invite all the people who aren't on anybody else's guest list.

What does this mean for the church? God has not just invited the people of Hope Church, or Holland, Michigan, or the members of the RCA to dinner. It would be a dull dinner part if that was the case. What if God has invited the whole world to dinner ... Christians and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists. What would that mean?

More specifically, that does this inclusion mean for the church? This year Hope Church has had a couple of picnics in the park where the neighbors are invited for dinner or ice cream. They aren't expected to "repay" us by becoming members. That seems like a step in the right direction in addition to sending canned goods to feed people somewhere else. What else can we do to be welcoming and inclusive?

Brothers and sisters, we have been brought into God's circle, and we have a place where we belong. And now we can share in the work of God's kingdom. We can make a place for all in God's circle of love.

Amen.