

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

Where Do You Sit?

Where do you sit? Last week the gospel and sermon had a stand up theme, this week it's about sitting: Where do you sit? Before I became a pastor I started attending a church—not this one, of course—and I thought it would be nice to get to know other people, participate in some deeper way. I thought, I'll try singing in the choir. I recommend this to everyone: become deeper involved, get to know others here as more than that person who usually sits over there... I'll make a particular commercial for the choir because rehearsals restart this week. For details see the bulletin or our Music Director, Bing, he is sitting over there. Commercial over. So at this other church, I came to the advertised choir rehearsal, and I sat down in one of the chairs, and a woman came up to me and said that I was sitting in her chair and would I please move. Of course that would never happen at this church, right? I was a little embarrassed—and a little offended. Sadly, we do that in church at times: even as we want people to be a part of things we say and do things that offend.

Where you sit, what you are told about where you can sit, can be cause for embarrassment and worse. Along with choirs, school is also soon restarting—remember the great seating question that is the school cafeteria? Where do you sit? And we can think of other cafeterias, too, we can remember not so long ago in our nation's history, when people were told where they could and couldn't sit. We can think of lunch counters, and Jim Crow laws, and people being told they need to sit somewhere else. What a great offense that was—that racial prejudice still is—still deep in us, in our nation's history and psyche and words and actions.

Where can you sit? Where do you sit? In today's gospel Jesus tells a parable about where people sit. It's a short parable, and I think, not that interesting a parable, not at first, not compared to some other parables in Luke: parables about lost sons and a father who is ever welcoming, or parables about beleaguered travelers on dangerous roads who encounter gracious welcome from surprising sources. But unlike those Lukan parables, artfully recounted and told in the third person, "There was a man who had two sons..." "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..." Unlike those parables, today's parable is much shorter; it's not all that story-like, and, interestingly enough, it's told in the second person, it is addressed directly to you, "When you go to a party, don't sit in the place of honor."

All this is to say that this parable may sound less like a parable, than a proverb. In fact it sounds exactly like the proverb that was the first reading—talk about short—and may seem nothing more than basic etiquette with a bid to avoid embarrassment: don't claim a place of importance in case you are told to move to a less desirable location. But if that's all that this parable is about, if it's simply a matter of not sitting somewhere you might be told to move, if that's what this parable is about, Rosa Parks was wrong. Sadly, there were probably churches that said that. There were probably some church that said that Rosa Parks shouldn't have done what she did, when she took a stand by taking a seat at the front of the bus.

Jesus would never say that. Jesus is not saying that when he tells this parable. The "you" in this parable is not directed at those who are oppressed. Jesus does not further abuse the downtrodden by demanding they make themselves lower. From the very beginning the gospel, Luke's gospel in particular, God in Jesus has been all about lifting the up the lowly. You can

hear it in the soaring cadences of Mary's song, as Jesus' mother sings in the Magnificat: the Almighty has done great things for her, a woman whom no one would give a second look, God looks at with favor. God lifts up the lowly, scatters the proud in their conceit, and brings down the powerful, the ones who grab at the seats of honor. Those are the people, those are the "you" to whom Jesus is talking in this parable today: to the privileged, who may not even see how privileged they are. Maybe that is you. It is often me.

A couple of weeks ago I went to a Cubs game with a large group of family members who were here for a reunion. The ballgame ended and we exited Wrigley, walking with a swarm of other people north on Clarke. As we slogged on in the heat and the hustle my husband and I argued about which bus stop to get on and where it was. In the end, we walked east on Irving Park Road to the bus stop before the park, because we wanted to get on an emptier bus. I grabbed a seat, and the bus lumbered along, stopping to pick up more people, crawling its way through the crush of traffic. My impatience increased with every stop, I had places to be, the reunion was starting soon, I thought self-importantly, silently resenting any new person who got on the bus, anyone other than me who might also need a ride.

I think that story is a parable: a parable of privilege, sadly, of grabbing the best for oneself, or perhaps one's relatives. That's not the gospel; that's not the gospel song. The gospel is always looking for the person who is just peering in to the opened doors. The gospel song says, "Get on board little children, there's room for many a more."

While that bus made its way amidst beeps and sighs and platforms being lowered, people got up from their seats, not because someone told them to move, but because they saw people who had with a physical difficulty, or who were older, or were tired, or were traveling with small children. People got up gave them their seats. We could do that, not just as a matter of bus etiquette, but because that is what it means to live in the way of Jesus.

That is what Jesus does. Jesus is God, but he takes the lowest seat, he becomes a human being and experiences the worst that humanity can do to him. Jesus gets up from heaven, and takes a seat here with us, in the crush of daily life and deaths large and small. Jesus was on that bus. Jesus could be sitting here with us. Jesus does sit here with us, whenever we welcome someone in his name, and most especially when that someone is a stranger or someone in need. That someone is Jesus, coming here to sit with us, that is the guise he tells us he will wear when he does.

Jesus humbles himself, and, as it says at the end of today's parable, those who humble themselves will be exalted. There is also a song about that in the Bible. Biblical scholars think it may be one of the oldest parts of the New Testament, this passage, that it was originally a song. It is found in Philippians and is often referred to as the Christ hymn, we hear it every year on Passion Sunday, Philippians chapter 2: "⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name."

We bear that name, Christ's name when instead of grabbing for the best seat, we welcome others to it. We bear that name when we sit with those who mourn, or who bear heavy burdens. We bear that name when we sit with those who are downtrodden or oppressed. We bear that name; we who are his children, when we see that all are his children. Let us join with them, and with him, and sing that song.