

Wedding feasts today typically take the guesswork out when it's time for the guests to sit down to eat. Nowadays it's becoming common practice for the guests to be pre-assigned to a table and a seat at the table by the use of place cards. I suppose this prevents the embarrassment of having to give your seat to someone else. But then, it also reveals just how dear a friend you actually are to the bride and groom depending on how close, or how far away, from the head table they place you.

We speak here of a wedding feast because this is what Jesus speaks of in His parable. Yet in our text, He with all the other guests, have not gathered for a wedding feast, but for the customary meal on the Sabbath Day; much like the meals that we eat with our families after church on Sundays. And at this Sabbath meal in our text, there are no place cards assigning seats to the guests. And so, when it's time for them to sit down at the table, we can kind of envision the scene. Sort of a mad dash, like musical chairs without the music, to grab the best seats, the ones closest to the head of the table.

Jesus notices this and He chastises them. *“Do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited...and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person.’”* How shameful to have to go and sit in the lowest place in the presence of all the guests.

Now let's be honest here. It did not have to be Jesus to point this out to them. Anyone who was well-versed on proper etiquette could have done the same. And if Jesus' parable is simply good advice on how to behave at the house of a host, it would not have been all that necessary for Him to even speak up. Nor for you to be attentive this morning to this sermon based upon His words. You could have stayed home and read a few chapters by Miss Manners or pulled out some old Dear Abby advice columns.

But no, Jesus' parable in our text is not good advice. It is food for the soul. His words are words that give life, yes eternal life, to those who receive them in hearts of faith. It's not likely that His hearers on that day received His words in this way. But that was then, and this is now. And you are not here for advice on how to live. Are you not Jesus' sheep whose ears and hearts are open to His living words?

And thus, it is important for us to note that Jesus' parable focuses on a wedding feast. And in Scripture the wedding feast refers to the Kingdom of God. *“This is the feast of victory for our God”* we sing as we prepare to dine here at Jesus' Table, and also in heaven at the feast which has no end.

Jesus' parable is not about how you seat yourself at a dinner table, but how you seat yourself in the presence of God in His Kingdom. And based upon Jesus' words in our text, we know one thing for certain. And that is this: where you and I seat ourselves is never where we end up. *“Everyone,”* He says, *“who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* If we put ourselves in the place of honor with God, He will place us in the lowest seat.

But if we take the lowest seat, He will say to us, "*Friend, move up higher,*" and we will be exalted to the place of honor.

But we don't like to take the lowest seat. We are much like those who gathered around the table in our text. They did not take the lowest seats. They had too much pride for that. They felt deserving of the seats of honor.

And don't we? We may say the words, "*I, a poor, miserable sinner...deserve Your temporal and eternal punishment...I deserve the lowest seat,*" but do we truly mean these words within the secret places of our hearts? Don't we rather think in our hearts that we deserve better? After all, we try, pretty well, to avoid sin, unlike others. And we have done some pretty good things, again unlike others. We have pride too. We're built that way. Our sinful nature, in fact, refuses to take the lowest seat.

But your God is merciful. And so, here is what He did. He took the lowest seat. The seat of shame and disgrace. The seat of suffering, suffering for the sins of the world. Jesus did not exalt Himself, though He had every right to. Instead, He took the seat in hell. The very seat that you and I deserve for our sins.

And because Jesus took that seat for you, in your baptism He says to you, "*Friend, move up higher.*" How high? All the way up to the head table where He seats you as His beloved bride. Yes, His beautiful bride, forgiven of all your sins, including your sins of pride. Washed clean in the water of baptism. Do you see your name there at the head table on the place card? It is there. For Jesus spoke your name from the cross. "*Father, forgive (your name),*" He said.

That is your name on the place card where the bride is seated, but you and I dare not sit there because we think we deserve that seat. The place of honor cannot be taken but only given. Given by Jesus to those who take the lowest seat. Taking the lowest seat is called repentance. And repentance is a gift of God. The Holy Spirit, through Jesus' words, through this sermon today, points you and me to the lowest seat so that, by God's grace we say, "I deserve that seat," and there we place ourselves. And this takes faith, another gift of God, to sit in the lowest seat believing that Jesus will say to you, "*Friend, move up higher.*" He said these words again to you this morning in the declaration that your sins are forgiven "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus gives you what you do not deserve because He took what you deserve for your sins. And so, your seat, your place with Jesus is today, tomorrow, and always the seat of honor. The seat He won for you by His sufferings, death, and resurrection. Your name, forever, is written in Jesus' blood, on the place card next to Him as His beloved bride. Amen.