

Luke 14:1-14

I'm not sure which chapter you would find it in, but I'm thinking there is a reference to today's Gospel reading in Miss Manner's book on etiquette. At a wedding, or at other banquets, sit down not in the best seat which may be reserved for someone else, but in a seat which is considered to be lower on the totem pole. It's showing good manners, and is simply the proper thing to do.

But when Jesus said these words, He certainly was not striving to get the dinner guests to use proper etiquette for the purpose of learning better manners. Having good manners will not get anyone into heaven. It is not the deciding factor in the least. If it was, very few men would make it in, and children wouldn't have a chance at all. No, Jesus has something else entirely in mind with His words in our text. It does have everything to do with entering, or not entering heaven. But manners and etiquette have nothing to do with it. It's about where we seat ourselves before God.

When the Pharisee in Luke 18 entered the temple to pray, he did not sit down; he stood. But with his words and his attitude before God, he was seating himself in heaven. When the Publican came in, he also did not sit down. But with his words and his attitude, he was seating himself in the lowest seat of all. He seated himself in hell.

If your heart and attitude match the words you speak, then as you entered God's House today, you entered as the Publican by seating yourself in hell. By your confession of your sin, you were telling God that you deserve a place, a seat, not in heaven, but in hell. We spoke the words correctly, but was our heart and attitude also correct? Did we mean what we said? Or within our heart and our thoughts do we really think and believe that we deserve, like the Pharisee, a seat in heaven?

Here is the crux of the issue--we never end up where we sit down. Everyone who seats himself in heaven, will find himself in hell. And those who seat themselves in hell, will be given a seat in heaven.

The Pharisee, who believed he deserved a seat in heaven because he was better than others, did not go home forgiven according to Jesus, but he was on the road to hell. The Publican, who seated himself in hell, went home forgiven with a place in heaven belonging to him.

In our text, Jesus drives this point home. You do not end up where you seat yourself. Someone who sits in the place of honor will be shamed when told to give his seat to someone else, and he will be relegated to the lowest seat. Yet, the one who sits in the lowest place will be honored when the host comes and says, "*Friend, move up higher.*" And so where you and I seat ourselves is of the highest importance. Anyone, no matter how pious, kind, and loving he or she may be, who thinks in his heart that he deserves a seat in heaven, will on the Day of Judgment find himself in hell.

And the honest truth is that this dangerous pride dwells in the heart of every Christian. It's there in all of us, and unless we daily beat down and drown that sinful pride in the waters of baptism through a life of repentance, it will control us and bring us to ruin. Every day it raises its ugly head. It causes us to be judgmental and condemning of others. It would have us raise ourselves up because we're decent and always try to do the right thing. We support our family, the church, and the poor with our hard-earned money. We don't make a habit of being lazy, of stealing, of cursing, and doing other vile sins. The ugly head of sinful pride within us can always find someone who is beneath us; someone who does not work, study, or give as much as us; someone who should be seated in a lower place than us.

Which seat do you deserve? Within your heart, where do you seat yourself before God? By nature we do what the dinner guests were doing in our text. We go for the places of honor. It is the work of God within His Christians to come to the awareness, the truth, that I deserve only the lowest seat, and then place myself there by confessing my sin.

Look at what Jesus did. He was, as the Almighty God, in the highest seat. He was in the place of honor. But His Father told Him, "*Give your seat to this person,*" - to this poor, worthless sinner. And Jesus did. Willingly, He did. He got up from His seat of honor and in shame He went to the lowest seat. He humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant, and He was seated on a hard, splintery cross. Jesus went to the lowest place of all. He endured the torments of hell so that you, a poor sinner, would be given His seat of honor--a place in heaven.

Jesus describes Himself in our text. God counted you more distinguished than His own beloved Son. Jesus walked the shameful path to the cross, and to you God says, "*Friend, move up higher.*" It's not what we deserve. This is the mercy of God--to give Jesus what we sinners deserve, and to give us what He earned...the place of honor in heaven.

Those people who do not come to church because they are afraid to hear what God has to say to them, do not know what they are missing. God is here telling you over and over, "*Friend, move up higher.*" He is here giving you not what your sins deserve; He is here giving you a seat in heaven. You enter as the Publican confessing your sin, declaring that you are a poor sinner who deserves the lowest seat. But God is here forgiving you. When your pastor turns toward you and announces the words of absolution, God is moving you up higher. When you come to the Lord's Table as poor, hungry sinners, God says to you, "Friend, take and eat the body and blood of your Lord," and He moves you up higher.

God is the host of this banquet feast spread out on the altar, and He does not invite those who can repay Him. He invites the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. He invites sinners. He invites you...not to be repaid by you, but to give you what Jesus earned for you--a seat in heaven.

It's all by the mercy of God. No one can move up higher on their own. It's a gift that Jesus earned for you. Everyone of us deserves a place in hell for all eternity, but God is here today and He invites you to move up higher. He invites you, He forgives you, He raises you up in Christ Jesus, and He moves you to a seat with Him in heaven. Amen.