

Seating Arrangements Are In Process [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 14:1, 7—14

Someone's always watching. That may sound really creepy, but the fact is someone's always watching. Last week I went to a Spokane Indians baseball game, and in the line to put condiments on my hot dog, there stood a man with a light brown t-shirt, and on the shirt I read the words, "FOR YOU TO INSULT ME, I'D HAVE TO CARE ABOUT YOUR OPINION." And, noticing these words and feeling badly for the man (because I'm going to assume that he's been frequently insulted and needed this shirt as a kind of shield), I raised my voice and addressed him: "I know you don't care about my opinion, but I'd like to complement you on your shirt. It's really pretty clever." And rather than saying, 'Thank you,' the guy in the shirt simply rolled his eyes, while his spouse or girlfriend, laughed and gave him a hug.

You see, someone always watching. In Luke, chapter 14, verse one, for example, we read that the Pharisees are "***watching [Jesus] closely...***" But later, around verse seven, there's a reversal, in which Jesus NOTICES "***how the guests [are choosing] the places of honor...***" And so, as these super-spiritual, sophisticated elites are *watching* him, he's *noticing* them—but not so much *them*, as their habitual practice of gathering in certain ways, and according to certain rankings. Jesus *notices* their behavior. And given how (for seven verses) he presumes to instruct the guests and the host, I have to ask: WHY? What's so important about seating arrangements? Why not just ignore who's sitting where and enjoy the perks of where *you're* sitting? Why not ignore it? Why doesn't Jesus simply shrug his divine shoulders, make a few customary remarks and digest his food like everybody else?

These, I think, are perfectly valid questions, and although I don't have any great wisdom myself on how they relate to us here at Northwood Presbyterian, what I have is verses eight and nine:

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.”

Back when I served a congregation in Ohio, there was this posh banquet happening at the local university; and I suppose because I served as pastor to many of the professors and administrators who worked there, an invitation came to me. It happened on a Sunday afternoon, and as the President of this institution of higher learning stood at the door of this elaborate ballroom, a greeting line formed and with many others, I inched along to the point where I noticed something. That is—rather than looking each invited guest in the eyes as he shook their hands, the President would glance way down the line... presumably to see who was coming next. Was it someone more prominent? A big donor to the new building project? A distinguished author? A sought-after recruit for the sports team? Anyway, I noticed. And when I had made it through the line and took my seat—and when I ate my fill of fillet mignon and strawberry shortcake—I had the sense that this esteemed group of academics was not my crowd, not my scene... and I thought I'd be okay with that... until I wasn't okay.

Now I mention this dynamic from my own socializing experience because my guess is that we've all been there. We've been to places and among people where we sensed a desire to belong but secretly felt as if we didn't belong. And maybe, out of fear of being rejected, we tried to shield ourselves. We tried to pretend as if we didn't really care.

But here's the Good News—here's the Gospel: IN CHRIST WE BELONG TO THE EMBRACE OF EVERLASTING AND EVER-LOVING ARMS. And, while I'm here to proclaim that wholeheartedly, I'm also embarrassed to say that belonging to the company of Christ also means that I may never enjoy the prestige of the upper crust; I may never have the close, tight-knit family with the lake place; I may never savor membership in that select group of experts, artists, skilled tradesmen or social-media influencers. And the reason I mention this strange caveat is what Jesus says in Luke 14:12:

“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return and you would be repaid.”

Wow! Now I don't know about you, but I'm seriously confused. Shouldn't I want to get something out this? Shouldn't I attend the party at Northwood Presbyterian because I belong there, among my friends and my relatives? And if there happens to be one or two folks with extra resources at their disposal, for the good the church, don't I want to invite them to the party? Don't I want to schmooze with them, network with them?

One of my favorite Broadway musicals is *The Fiddler on the Roof*, and you may recall how it begins with the endorsement of 'Tradition', and how it's Tradition that keeps all the various people of the small, Jewish village of Anatevka in their proper places, fulfilling their proper roles. Unfortunately, there's a restless milkman, named Teyve, who dreams of being rich, and who negotiates with God, "If I were a rich man..."

Ya ba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dum
All day long, I'd biddy biddy bum
If I were a wealthy man...

Anyway, what interests me about this lyric is how, near the end of the song, the cello slows and Teyve croons what he perceives to be the ultimate possibility:

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall
And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day
And that would be the sweetest thing of all.

Again, this is beautiful music and it connotes a beautiful message. But there's a fly in the ointment in that any close reading of 'the holy books'—like the Book of Jeremiah that we read again today—prompts us toward RADICAL HOSPITALITY. No one who reads the holy books gets to put their feet up on the table and fold their arms in smug satisfaction. Sooner or later, there's going to be a re-arrangement of seats. Moreover, any close reading of Jeremiah 2:12—13, for example, ought provoke us into places where things become awkward and contentious:

***“Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord...
... for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”***

Of course, these are confrontational images. And if you were to ask Yahweh to explain exactly how and when *you and I* have 'forsaken' him—or how and when we've become like 'cracked cisterns that can hold no water'—here comes Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth is not a congenial house-guest; and today, in Luke 14, he's essentially telling his Pharisee host that his type of belonging is leaking water—that by merely treating ***“the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind”*** as if they were 'charity cases' and not honored guests—he was missing the Gift of the Gospel altogether.

Martin Bell is the author of a short story, called *Barrington Bunny*, and in the story, which our family reads every Christmas Eve, there's this lonely rabbit who is hopping out in the snow and as the snow's piling up and getting worse, he sees some squirrels up in a tree, hosting a party for other prominent squirrels and, above the howling wind, he shouts up to them, "May I come to your party?" A squirrel replies, "Can you climb trees?" and when the bunny says, 'No, I can't,' it's obvious that Barrington doesn't belong. Next he comes to a pond of partially frozen water, and a beaver breaks through the surface, and again Barrington asks if he can come to the party, and when the beaver wonders if swimming were a part of the rabbit's skill-set; the answer's No, and so Barrington's still left out. And there's this honest recognition of deep despair. "Bunnies," he says, "aren't good for anything..."

But, you see, they are. This one, in particular, is. And just as Barrington plops down in the deepening snow, chewing ferociously on his own foot, there appears, in the clearing of the forest, a large, mysterious grey wolf; and the wolf, rather than eating the bunny, tells him that he's wrong, and that bunnies are very good because they've been given a gift, a free gift—and one day, says the Wolf, Barrington's going to learn what that gift is... And so, the next thing you know, the bunny cocks his bunny ears because he hears the squeaking of a field mouse, who's about ready to freeze to death. And as Barrington, the Bunny, lays on top of him, the mouse survives. And Bell writes, "Two thoughts went through Barrington's head that long night [before he leaves behind his dead carcass]: the first was, it's good to be a bunny because bunnies are furry and warm; and the second was, 'All the animals of the forest are my family.'"

So here's the crux of it: in a world where people feel utterly rejected and where they can find no place to belong—God has given you and I special, specific gifts; and these gifts of personal experience—are not intended to generate applause, but rather they're intended to cultivate the belonging of the other—whoever that other person may be. Hospitality. Hospitality.

Hospitality. The Hebrews 13 reading makes it sound so nice, especially, if we stop at the end of verse two:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Isn't that nice? Isn't that sweet? And yet, remember to read a little further, at least into verse three:

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured...”

Recently, on the last Sunday of July (some of you know) I finished my work as Interim Pastor at Salem Lutheran Church, by the court house and two blocks from Kendall Yards. The leaders of the congregation had planned a banquet in my honor; and I was happy to fill my plate and take my seat. In the corner of the gymnasium, however, someone noticed a black woman with a shopping cart; and there she was, just looking back at all the people and no one felt comfortable approaching her. Mind you: I'm not complaining, but what made me sad and feel a little awkward that day wasn't that I was leaving them and coming to you, but that, originally, I was the only one to break away from the group of people, who were there to honor me. Originally, while they were about to present me with a Gift Certificate and card, I was the only one to go over and sit with this person, whose name is Dolores.

Eventually, of course, others followed and joined in. (How could they not?). And eventually, we provided Dolores with food and drink and few vouchers for groceries. But what I want to emphasize is how vexing it is—how awkward and how bewildering it is to be sitting there, and needing to get up out of my privileged seat and go toward “*the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.*” But, according to Jesus, these are the seating arrangements.

I began this message telling you ‘SOMEONE’S ALWAYS WATCHING’—SOMEONE’S ALWAYS NOTICING.’

Have you noticed? Who have you noticed?