

Have a Seat

They seated us right next to the kitchen doors at the worst table in the restaurant. Throughout the meal there was a steady stream of traffic around us, the waiters occasionally jostling our chairs as they rushed to serve the clientele seated at the better tables. It took a long time for anyone to take our order. In fact, it was so long that we were about to leave. Our waiter's manner when he finally took our order was brusque bordering on rude. We did finally get our meal and the food was delicious and expensive.

We didn't know what was really going on until we left, when our guest explained that it was anti-Semitism, pure and simple. We were in London and had taken our friend to lunch at a nice Italian restaurant recommended by the concierge at our hotel. He probably never would have suggested it had he known our friend is Jewish.

We never had thought of Evelyn as being Jewish, perhaps because of her beautiful British accent; an accent of which we had always been fond since we first met her years earlier in Austin, Texas. Or maybe because in all our previous visits with her, Evelyn's Jewishness had never before surfaced as a topic, much

less an issue. Furthermore, although I know it flourishes here in the United States, we had never experienced such subtle anti-Semitism. And our first clue that we were unwanted customers? Why, where the host seated us.

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I wonder where Jesus is seated in today's text? It doesn't say. I presume he is seated near the head of the table since the Pharisees feel they need to keep an eye on him. Of course, this isn't in a public eating establishment. It is in the private home of one of the VIP's from the synagogue. Due to the host's high status, we may assume that it is a very nice home. It is also the Sabbath, when the evening meal is always special.

Before the meal even begins Jesus notices the way the other guests are choosing their seats at the table. There appears to be some sort of competition for the best seats. Then as now, the seats of honor are those closest to the host. The lesser ones importance, the further away from the host one is relegated.

At the time, it also had a lot to do with comfort. Meals were eaten in a reclining position, usually on low couches similar to chaise lounges, or on large pillows. Since it was such a relaxed

atmosphere, meals lasted for hours. If one was seated on a less comfortable pillow, the meal may have seemed excruciatingly long. Naturally, the most comfortable couches were the ones closest to the host, those reserved for the most honored guests.

Jesus has a captive audience and he decides to comment on their unseemly jockeying for the best seats. Notice that he does it indirectly by telling a parable. It is useful for us to remember that a parable isn't just a story for entertainment. It is a teaching tool. Consequently, everyone around the table automatically switches into a learning mode when they realize that Jesus is telling a parable.

The parable is about a *wedding banquet*, one of Jesus' favorite metaphors for the kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus isn't playing at being Miss Manners, rather he is talking about kingdom behavior; that is, how God expects disciples to behave.

The key to kingdom behavior according to the text today is the virtue of ***humility***. Humility, that rare virtue we see in individuals who are genuinely self-effacing; those who are not impressed with their own intelligence, prowess, talent, and/or appearance; those

who eschew self-pride; those for whom self-absorption is anathema. Indeed, according to Shakespeare, “Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself.”

In his parable, Jesus points out that it is far more gratifying to be moved by the host to a more prestigious seat, than to a more modest seat. In putting it this way, Jesus is emphasizing that when all is said and done, the seating arrangements are at the discretion of the host, not the guests. This is not a new idea to the dinner guests. It reiterates an idea found throughout the Hebrew scriptures, including Proverbs 25:6-7, which says, “Real honor will come not from one’s self-seeking choices, but from what is bestowed on one by another.”

Metaphorically speaking, the Host in the kingdom of God is unimpressed with our own feelings of self-worth. In fact, in the kingdom, God brings about a giant polar reversal of all our temporal measurements. As the text puts it, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Which could be bad news for an entire culture in which those who exhibit an easy, effortless presumption of

entitlement are actually admired, sometimes honored.

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After taking to task the guests for their self-seeking behavior, Jesus takes a deep breath and turns on the host for the same thing in a slightly different form. In the case of the guests, it is a matter of grabbing the best seat at the table. In the case of the host, it is inviting guests with an eye toward what they can do for him. In short, both guests and host are motivated by the question “What’s in it for me?”

I once heard about a large family dinner where the conversation turned to what kind of people each one *didn’t* like, which as you might imagine, led to sweeping generalizations. One of the uncles said he didn’t like skinny people. A cousin said she didn’t like highly opinionated people. And so it progressed until it finally came around to the great-grandmother who said, “Well, I don’t like people who don’t like me.”

That probably comes close to how a lot of us feel. I mean why shine everything in the house to sparkling; why get out the good dishes that have to be washed by hand; why cook for days for someone we don’t like? That doesn’t make much sense to me.

But Jesus expects even more of us than that. He isn't instructing us to invite to dinner folk we don't **like**. After all, we have to **know** someone before we can **not** like them.

Rather, Jesus is telling us to ask **strangers** to our dinner table. *Hospitality* means literally "love of a stranger." And here Jesus is not referring to strangers with similar backgrounds to ours, who enjoy the same social, educational, and financial circumstances as we do. No, Jesus wants us to ask **unclean** strangers to our table.

In Jesus' day Jewish law held that the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind were ritually unclean. That meant that law-abiding, respectable people were forbidden from associating with them; which meant that inviting them into one's home, **especially** on the Sabbath, was a definite no-no. Talk about a polar reversal. Jesus is pushing a society not based on reciprocity. Socialize with those who have **nothing** to offer you, he says.

It is important to note that from ancient times, hosting a meal put the guests in debt to the host, simply because we cannot live without food. Therefore, to provide food for another, especially to

sit down and break bread with her, gives one power over the other by token of sustaining the other's life, literally. But time and again Jesus tells us that **God** is the host in the kingdom. And how on earth are you and I supposed to repay God for sustaining us, indeed, extending our lives beyond the grave? God provides our souls with the food of heaven by way of his Son, Jesus Christ. How are we supposed to repay that? We cannot. But we can give thanks.

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The Greek historian, biographer, and moral philosopher Plutarch once wrote that "it is in the small, apparently trivial act that character is most accurately reflected." If you and I hold the conviction that **God** rules the world, then the trivial act of how we treat one another may well be adequate thanks for God's hospitality. And may we be content to leave the seating arrangements to our Host. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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August 29, 2010