

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**September 1, 2019 – 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost / 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Psalm 81:1,10-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14

### **YOU WANT ME TO SIT WHERE?**

At first glance this morning's reading from Luke's gospel may seem more like New Testament history about social customs, than a message that is for us.

But the more time I spent with this story about Jesus, the more I realized that it is also for us.

Because for most of us, when we are at dinners, gatherings, work parties, luncheons and school where we are sitting and why we are sitting there, and where others are sitting does have an effect on us.

In fact, it often starts in childhood—especially if you are riding with siblings. How many of us at one time or another have said: “she’s in my seat, he’s touching my seat, she’s looking out my window and scooting closer to my seat?”

Where we sit is important.

Then there is school, and if you ride the school bus, which seat you have, or which seat you want is important.

The seating chart that waits for us on the first day of school has a lot of power in our lives.

When you're old enough to choose where you sit in the classroom it makes a difference who you are sitting with and sometimes it matters if you sit in the front, or the back of the room.

I've learned that if you ask any student in middle school or high school who sits where in their lunch room or cafeteria they can often easily draw you a diagram. I've done this with kids in large metro areas and in small towns and most can quickly divide the room into the popular kids, the athletes, the brains, the outcasts, and all the current labels that kids put on themselves, plus there are often divisions by race as well.

And really, it's been that way for a long time hasn't it? I think I could still tell you where the different groups sat in my high school cafeteria.

And let's tell the truth, as adults the divisions may be more subtle, but we too pay attention to who sits where, and who sits with whom: in business meetings, the lunch room at work, the dining room at your apartment complex, at lunches and dinners and card games we're invited to.

Who sits where, and with whom, is important at parties, wedding receptions, and family reunions, not to mention church dinners, the fellowship time after church, and of course who sits where, and with whom, in the sanctuary itself.

Where we sit is important, and my guess is that we pay attention to it more than we realize. While we may say it's not that important, if you're at all like me, then you notice. Where we sit is important. The politics and divisions of those middle school and high school cafeterias still shows up pretty easily in adult life, don't they?

Which is exactly why Jesus said what he did nearly 2000 years ago. And his observations at the dinner given by one of Pharisees still speak to us today, because they call on us to check our motives when we're with other people.

That was one of Jesus' gifts as a teacher. He took every day experiences and showed how they related to living the life of faith.

Jesus told his listeners at that dinner: “if someone invites you to a wedding banquet, don’t push and fight and rush up to the head table and take one of the best seats, thinking that you are one of the most important persons there. What if your host had someone more important in mind for the very seat you’ve taken, and says something to you in front of everyone?”

Instead Jesus said, take the least important seat in the house. Then you won’t be embarrassed if you’ve overstepped the host’s plans for you, and the host may actually invite you to move forward to a better seat.

Then just when his listeners might have thought Jesus was giving them hints for how to look good, and get great seats at parties and wedding banquets, Jesus said: “if you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself; you will be honored.” (14:11 CEV)

Jesus said, “In the kingdom of God’s love, watching out for other people, even as you’re sitting down to a meal, or in the cafeteria, or the Dining Room, or in a business meeting, or in the church fellowship time is an important part of faith.

True faith is what we do in our day to day living, Monday through Saturday, as much as it is about how you come to worship God on Sunday mornings.

And there’s the message that catches all of us who rush for the best seats, or favorite seats, or seats beside our friends. And there’s the message for all of us, who if we are honest, do pay attention to who is sitting where and why.

Jesus asks us to pay attention to what is going on inside our heads and hearts at dinners, and card parties, and school cafeterias, church fellowship times, and those important banquets and parties.

Are we following that path of faith

and putting other’s seating-needs and life-needs in front of our own,

or, are we all elbows and pushiness so we can sit where we want to sit, with whom we want to sit,

and we can do whatever it is we want to do?

Because where we sit is important to us!

Then Jesus turns the table and says: “And, if you are the host getting ready for a party, a banquet, a luncheon, a dinner or a church supper, change your guest list.

Don’t invite the people who can easily pay you back and invite you to their house, or party, or table in the church Dining Room.

Change your guest list, Jesus says. Don’t invite your friends, or your sisters & brothers, or all your relatives, or your rich neighbors.

Those people can just pay you back, and that is not what the life of faith is about.

Jesus says, “instead invite all the people who will never be able to pay you back: Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.”

Invite the outcasts, and those who need help, and those who are so poor they’ll never pay you back, and invite the people who are not like you and your friends at all, invite the least likely people you can imagine to your table.

Then it will be God who will reward you, because you have cared for God’s people.

And that concludes what Jesus said.

The words are 2000 years old, but they are alive and well and for us this morning. For each generation of Christians through the centuries, there is no way around these words about  
 where we sit  
 and who we invite,  
 and who we break bread with in our homes, at our banquets, at school, and here at church.

There really is no way around these words because  
 Jesus' teaching isn't meant to be symbolic of something else, he meant what he said.  
 His words are not ancient teachings that have nothing to do with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.  
 Jesus wasn't giving us a nice ideal, or a way to feel good about ourselves.

Jesus' words are meant to change our lives starting right now this morning  
 At this morning's fellowship time, and at the brunches you're headed to, these words are for us. Who will you sit with, who will you invite to join you? Because where they sit is important.  
 Each time we sit down at a meal this week, and during our Labor Day gatherings, these words are for us. Because where they sit is important.  
 Each time we enter a room with other people this week, these words are for us.  
 Each time we make plans to invite others over to our homes, or to our parties, or our church, these words are for us. Because where they sit is important.

If we take these words to heart, then our lives will be different from now on.

And we do know how to do this:  
 we know how to be welcoming,  
 and to make room for others,  
 and how to invite those whom we never thought of inviting before,  
 and we even know how to get out of the way, so others can be more important,

We know how to do this,  
 because we follow Jesus, who got out of the way on the cross, so that we would always be important in the Kingdom of God.

We know how to do this,  
 because we've watched Jesus make room at his table for absolutely everyone, including us and those we love.

We know how to do this  
 because we follow Jesus, who always invites the most unexpected people to share his Communion meal with him, including each of us!

There are more tables waiting for us as we go out into this week.

Where will we sit?

And who will we invite to join us?

Jesus has shown us the way to live, may we have the courage to follow!  
 Because where they sit is important.