

Where will you sit?

Merciful God, your Son came to reconcile us to you and to one another, and stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that all might come within the reach of his saving embrace: may we trust in your mercy and know your love, rejoicing in the righteousness that is our gift through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Based on the Additional Collects, The Church of England

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (PROPER 17C)

Proverbs 25:6-7, Psalm 112, Luke 14:1, 7-14

August 28, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "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. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher!'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Most of us care about where we sit and with whom.

Each month our Vestry begins its meetings with a Bible study of the gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday, so this past Tuesday, this reading was our focus. It wasn't lost on members of the Vestry that this reading came to

us on the same weekend of our Summer Classic, when literally hours upon hours of work was spent on the single matter of the seating chart - who will sit where and with whom - and we didn't even assign every seat - just grouped people at tables. We were still making adjustments even as

the event was beginning. And, of course, some people weren't happy with the results....

And some people were overjoyed about their group at their table.

But seating at the Summer Classic wasn't an exception to the rule. We care about where our seat is on an airplane, in the movies, at a restaurant, when we come to church on Sunday, in a classroom, at the office, at school. Are we with our friends, or, at the least, are people around us friendly? Can we identify, make a connection or, occasionally, can we be left alone, if that is what we want? A new school, a wedding, a dinner party... these all raise familiar questions... who will be there? Will we get along?

So the gospel reading has Jesus giving us advice - and it seems to square with the aphorism in the reading from Proverbs (which has to be one of the shortest readings in the lectionary) (the kind of reading you hope for on Sunday mornings after a party on Saturday nights).

So is Jesus just giving us some social direction, an etiquette lesson?

The reading says that when Jesus went to eat at the home of a pharisee, "they were watching him closely."

If we *are* watching Jesus closely in the gospels, what do we see? Especially as it comes to sitting

down with people....

On one hand, we may say that Jesus also cared about where he sat and with whom... but he cared to sit with practically anyone, anywhere, anytime.

And I don't think he was on some liberal diversity kick.

I think it was his genuine heart's desire to be with the people of earth, women, men, any group, any religion, clean or unclean, powerful or outcast, for him or opposed to him, friend or foreigner.

It was just who he was.

And is.

Which is to say, he didn't find his identity in policing the seating chart — especially in assuring a certain, consistent placement for himself and those most congenial by certain standards.

And it is also to say that Christ within us constantly has the potential of leading us beyond our own conventional seating charts, beyond our normal, knee-jerk choices — whether we're talking about the seating chart or who gets invited to the party.

And don't we know that who gets invited to the party is an increasingly dicey question in our consumer culture (in which we generally want what we want when we want it) - in which, at least for certain segments of the culture, the word "curated" has taken on new meaning. We "curate" our list of friends, our associates, who we see

at school or in social contexts. The criteria for our “list” may be somewhat complex - or not - but we find ourselves being more and more “discerning” - or just choosy, picky....

Here we run across one of the gifts - and challenges - of belonging to a church. We find ourselves rubbing shoulders, being with, building relationships with people who may be older, younger, gay straight, of one racial or ethnic group or another, one economic group or another, with varying education levels or other experiences.... And this “non-curated” community draws us into new possibilities in ways we may not initially appreciate - but, in short, gives us an experience of reality - reality of the other and of ourselves... - reality of the extent of the life of God in the world.

And what Jesus is leading us into in this gospel reading is a question about whether or not or how we are curating our church.... He is encouraging us to take a close look at the guest list and invite not only those with whom we might have the most affinity but also those who might push us... noting, in particular, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind — not to say we have to go out and find one person in each of those categories — but, in his day, those were people who were all unclean or otherwise excluded, not allowed into the

normal practice of conventional religion for various reasons.

He is encouraging association beyond categories....

And, it seems to me, he is encouraging us to recognize within ourselves and among our friends and families, all the ways *we* are impoverished, disabled and to take note of what we don't see - or won't see.

I know I contribute quite a bit of blindness and often a decided limp to our common life.... How do we make space or otherwise respond to who we all really are as individuals and as a community of compassion and service in the world?

What Jesus is offering isn't necessarily, very often is not all hearts and flowers.

We can recall that his good “advice” his etiquette lesson got him a table for three on Calvary.... his very own cross next to two yahoos strangers who didn't know how to hold their tongues.

And to reach beyond our safety will often feel like dying — and *will* be like dying — but what we're dying to, sometimes painfully, is a false sense of who we are - of whose we are - and of what the future truly holds - for us and for the world - for all of humanity.

Let's do watch Jesus closely.

He says we will be blessed as find this different way of being in the world with all of God's people -

all that God reveals in everyone.

Where will we sit — and with whom?

Don't be surprised if our answers change over time....



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