

Sermon – Luke 14:1, 7-14
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“Your Place at the Picnic”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Well, you look exactly like I thought you might this morning. Good job! No, I didn't know what you'd be wearing. But one thing I can depend upon from my perch in this pulpit is where you'll all be seated. I've never been quite sure how this happens, but it does. People in church know where they like to sit. I'm pretty sure I could draw a seating chart for each of our two Sunday services and get it all about 95% right. And just so you know, this makes it easy to know who's missing on any given Sunday – not that I'm keeping score. My family was like this, too, when I was growing up. We could be dependably found in the third pew from the front on the pulpit side of the nave, seated right behind Mr. and Mrs. Roloff – it wasn't until I was in my twenties that I sat on the other side of the sanctuary. There is, of course, comfort in knowing where to go when you get here, and a lack of comfort can be mildly amusing. One of my favorite Sundays of the year in my previous call was Palm Sunday. The entire congregation would gather outside the church building, and we would process into the sanctuary waving palms and singing, “All Glory, Laud and Honor.” And as we walked confusedly into the church, it would dawn on people that they wouldn't be able to get to their unofficially assigned seats. Yes, I enjoyed watching the faces of God's people on Palm Sunday, suddenly unable to get to their places of comfort, dislocated from the familiar.

2. We like knowing where we belong; in fact, we yearn throughout our lives to find a place to belong. But it is also true that we like knowing where other people belong. It gives us a sense of our place in the world, which can be good, but it also serves to create a false sense of worth based on worldly values, and that's not good. We are continually ranking ourselves, comparing ourselves to one another, striving for higher places and seeking the best seats in the house. So it is now, and so it was in Jesus' day. Luke tells of a Sabbath meal to which Jesus was invited. As the guests begin to arrive, Jesus takes note of how they strove for places of greater honor, presumably those closer to the host, the center of power and activity at the meal. Jesus reproaches them with a parable, a brief tale of a wedding banquet, and offers them some advice: Don't sit down in the place of honor, but sit rather in the lowest place. Why? Jesus tells us that it is better to be invited from a lower to a higher place than to be shamed by being kicked out of your seat for someone more important than you. To be sure, this is decent social advice; much better to be invited up than moved back down, finding honor rather than shame. But there's more going on here than that, more than advice on how to win friends and influence people, more than social gamesmanship. This is about the gospel, and this is about the Kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate.
3. Like most of Jesus' parables, this tale of a wedding banquet and the behavior of guests is about Jesus before it is about us. Perhaps you hear echoes of Paul's letter to the Philippians, reminding us of Christ Jesus, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." And what happened next? "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name." Jesus, for us, abandoned the best seat at the party and claimed the lowest, exchanging the glories of heaven for the shame of the cross. And then, *then* God exalted Jesus. The gospel is death *and then*

resurrection, the cross *and then* the empty tomb. Always and only in that order. Jesus, in this parable, is inviting us to cruciform living, calling us to die to our own misplaced value system and instead simply receive life and a place of honor as a gift from God.

4. As followers of Jesus, as those ushered from death to life through the waters of baptism, we are called to live cruciform lives – not for the sake of etiquette, but for the sake of the gospel. Who will we welcome, include, and invite for Jesus' sake? Who will we escort to the head of the table? Will these questions be answered based on whether or not people's skin color or stock portfolios match our own? Too often, I fear, that's how we approach things. In a commentary on this week's text, G. Penny Nixon reminded me of the story, "Revelation," in which Flannery O'Connor tells of Ruby Turpin and her husband, Claude. While Claude visits his doctor, Ruby finds herself in the waiting room, filled with people she deems to be beneath her. She gives thanks to God that she is white, privileged, and not like these other people. Ruby is, after all, an upright, churchgoing woman. Eventually, Ruby is exposed as a judgmental hypocrite. But the point is not Ruby's shameful realization but the revelation that follows. She sees a vision of people moving toward heaven in parade-like fashion. At the front are all those whom Mrs. Turpin had once considered beneath herself, while she and Claude bring up the rear of the procession. O'Connor reminds us of Jesus' twofold teaching. First, that all are welcome, all redeemed; that in baptism the distinctions of this world have been erased and we are all equally invited to the party that is God's kingdom, so who cares where you are in the line? But second, within that equality, God in Christ has declared preferential treatment for those who have not occupied seats of honor in this world, for the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind – for all who have been left out, left behind, or simply forgotten in this world.

5. The party that is the Kingdom of God is for us, but it is not only for us. In cruciform living, we are called to lives of welcome and invitation, to reaching out in Jesus' name to those we might, in our sin, be tempted to exclude. This can be uncomfortable for us; in fact, I'm sure it is. But it is Jesus' way. As the Internet meme puts it, "The problem with Jesus is that he always brings his friends." We fear, perhaps, that our place at the table will be lost if we include too many people, especially those who seem less worthy. And yet such people are the ones Kingdom of God is for! In the wide embrace of the cross we can finally accept that we are included in spite of ourselves, that nothing can take the kingdom from us, and that we can then go and tell, invite and welcome.

6. What does this mean? Well, for one thing it means that you should never tell someone to get out of "your" pew; it's not your pew! It means that as we gather on Sunday mornings, as our eyes and hearts are fixed on Christ, that they should be fixed through Christ upon newcomers in our midst, offering warmth and welcome. It means that our shared life as Grace Church is not something we curate for our own benefit, but a gift to ever extend to more people, especially to those upon whom the world looks down. It means that when we gather for celebratory church picnics, the joy is not where we sit, but that we're together – all of us. But more than all this, it means that we are to be concerned not with where we're seated, but to be always centered on the host of the party, Jesus himself, who will soon once more welcome each of you, sinners who deserve no invitation, to become once more saints and honored guests at the feast of the Lamb. As we receive again the body and blood of Jesus, our worldly distinctions are erased. At this party, does it really matter what place you occupy? No, the joy is in the invitation. You are invited. Grab a seat anywhere, and maybe a bratwurst or two, and help someone else find their way to Jesus' party, too.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.