

Date Preached	28-Aug-2022	Date Initiated	09-Aug-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 17, Yr C

" '[G]o and sit ... at the *lowest* place.' "



SEATING CHART. What do those words conjure up for you? Maybe memories of high school when one teacher insisted on absolute alphabetical order, row after row after row? For me, the thought of a seating chart brings smile, as I recall how, in college, our glee club conductor seemed to crank out a new seating chart almost every week, in search of that ever-elusive perfect choral blend! But also a furrowed brow, when I remember law school, where professors used the dreaded seating chart to call on us victims—er, students; and then jot down on the chart inscrutable little squiggles, based on the quality of our answers.

Or maybe you've had the pleasure ... or pain ... of having to create a seating chart for a wedding reception or some other big event: a veritable landmine of social etiquette and inter-family peace-keeping. Close family members should be seated near the head table ... but, then again, we don't want to strand all our closest friends way back by the kitchen door, do we? Aunt Agnes and Cousin Harold haven't spoken a civil word to each other in forty-five years, but the only other chairs left are at the teens' table, and heaven help us if we put *either* of them *there!* And then, too, there's the problem of space itself: The room seats only seventy-five; or we can afford to host no more than thirty. Who gets invited, and who doesn't?

These issues may keep us up at night when we're in the throes of planning, but in the long-term, they're fairly trivial. Thus, I find it a little surprising that, given all the things He *could* talk about, Jesus holds forth today on the seating arrangements at the swanky affair He's attending. Of what importance is it to the Son of God where guests sit at the table? Why does it matter to *Him* whom the chief Pharisee did, and did not, invite to this dinner?

But with Jesus, nothing isn't a teachable moment. Just as He uses the lilies of the field (*see* Mt 6:24-35) to illustrate the His Good News ... so, too, are questions of how the guests seat themselves ... and who doesn't even get in the door ... opportunities for Jesus to emphasize that what is paramount—to Him; to God—is not custom or entitlement or status or even friendship; but the need to be *humble*, with respect to ourselves ... and *welcoming*, with respect to those we don't know.

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When Jesus observes the scrum of religious middle-managers scramble into the chief Pharisee's dining room and scape and scrap their way to the best seats at the table, as if those places were theirs to claim, He calls them on it: Those aren't seats to take for *yourselves*. No, take the *lowest* seat available, and let the *host* recognize your worthiness and invite you higher.

Jesus reminds us that none of us merits ... none of us has earned ... a place at God's table. We sit here only by grace. If we humbly take whatever seat is open, we honor Him as our host ... and will draw still closer to Him. If, instead, we plopped down proudly, staking out the privileged seat we (think we) deserve or are entitled to ... we forget that *He's* the only reason we're at the table

at all. Jesus' *first* rule of 'Christian seating etiquette,' then, is to be self-effacing and humble: grateful merely that we've been invited, rather than assuming we're the guests-of-honor.

And the second rule of Christian seating etiquette Jesus shares is to go out of our way to welcome others. As He tells his host this night, we tend to socialize with and esteem people we already know. Our habit is to sit next to those whom we've already broken bread with ... already share something in common with ... are already chummy with. But that's not My way, Jesus says. Seek out those whom you *don't* know ... have *nothing* in common with ... may not *enjoy* sitting next to. For it is when you're willing to sacrifice your own comfort that you'll be blessed by God.

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Now, in some ways, where we sit in [*gesture*] this place seems trivial. It doesn't matter where we perch, so long as we engage and participate. And also, which pew we **steer to** week after week may have become a benign habit: a small, recurring detail we put on autopilot ... like whether we put the trash bins out the night-before or the morning-of.

But I'm willing to wager that this morning's little experiment—and it's *only* an experiment; next week you can sit wherever you'd like!—has made some of us a little uncomfortable: perhaps feeling little displaced ... maybe even a little cranky? After all, we *have our* places in this space. We've staked out *our* seats: perhaps not with an eye toward status or merit ... but, still, according to custom: a sense of our belonging here; maybe, if we're candid, just a smidgen of entitlement?? For many of us, crusty accretions of time and practice have created 'our' seat ... the 'best' seat ... and we don't relish being deprived of it. If so, let Jesus, our host, use our discomfort ... to remind us that none of these seats is ours ... that they all belong to Him; that He feeds us His love, mercy and kindness, no matter *where* we sit ... not because we're deserving of honor, but because He's invited us to grace.

Moreover, by taking a different seat ... by relinquishing our customary place ... we hear other voices praying [10:30 and singing] around us. We may pass the peace to someone we've never spoken with ... or greet someone whom, in the past, we've only just **nodded to** across the aisle. Now, I'm not suggesting that you'll make four new best friends this morning, but perhaps you'll have a conversation that surprises you ... hear a joke or a story you'll remember the rest of the week ... promise to pray for an illness or need you hadn't been aware of. And in *this* lies God's blessing: the blessing of hospitality ... the blessing of two selves turning toward one another, in the warmth and charity of Christ's love.

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Maybe we'll remember this random Sunday as the day when Jesus came into *our* banquet ... at *His* table ... and re-did our seating chart; asked us to take a different ... perhaps humbler ... more welcoming seat. On our way home, we may reflect on how this made us *feel*. But I'd *also* encourage us to ponder how taking a new seat may have opened us more fully to Christ ... Who always sits right in the very midst of us.



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