

COME TO THE TABLE

When I was in seminary over thirty years ago, I did a lot of supply preaching. Bangor Seminary was a good place for churches in central, northern and Down East Maine to find someone to fill the pulpit when their pastor was off on vacation. A deacon would call the seminary office and say, “We need a preacher for this Sunday. Can you send us a minister? Any minister will do.”

Being as the bar was set so low, I decided to put my name on the “Pulpit Supply” list. I had written a sermon, and I thought it was a pretty good one for an amateur. I took that sermon with me wherever I went to supply preach. “Have sermon, will travel,” I used to say.

I was fine giving the same sermon over and over again. But Penny used to go with me to the churches where I supply preached, and she had to carry the burden of listening to that same sermon of mine, over . . . and over . . . and over again. I want to take a moment at this time to publically apologize to my wife for putting her through that.

Anyway, I was called to supply preach at a small church in Down East Maine. It was in Machias, or somewhere around that area. We arrived at the church, which was pretty much empty at the time, and I chatted with a deacon about the worship service while Penny found a seat in one of the pews.

A few minutes before the service was to begin, these two, sweet-looking elderly ladies entered the sanctuary. I watched out of the corner of my eye as they walked down to the pew where Penny was sitting. They looked at one other, with surprised expressions on their faces, and talked softly to each other. Then they looked down at Penny sitting in the pew, looked at each other again, and talked softly to each other.

After the worship service, I asked Penny what went on with the two elderly ladies who came over to her. Penny said, “I could hear them say to one another, “She’s sitting in my pew. What am I supposed to do? She took my pew.”

That could never happen here, right?

Isn’t it true that we all want to choose our own pew, our own seat? And a lot of times we think it’s our right to do so. As we go about the decision making process (“Let’s see. Where am I going to sit?”), we notice that some seats are

better than others. For example, when I go to a movie, I like to get up closer to the screen so I can be immersed in the cinematic experience. Penny, on the other hand, likes to sit further back in the theater so she doesn't have to look up at the screen for two-plus hours and get a sore neck. So we compromise. We usually sit about half-way up in the auditorium. That way, she only gets half a sore neck, and I get half-immersed in the movie.

It's nice to be able to sit at a place of our choosing. It's great to have the freedom to decide, "This is where I want to sit. Right here." That's what the dinner guests we read about in Luke's Gospel were trying to do. They all had a particular seat in mind that they wanted to have. Up front. It was all about prestige. About status. About reputation. About respect.

You see, this particular dinner was put on by a prominent and distinguished Pharisee. He was known and respected all over town. So I'm sure anybody and everybody with any standing at all in the religious community was invited to be there. I'm talking powerful people. Influential people. They were all gathered in one place, at this big-wig Pharisee's house, for a banquet. But rather than focusing on the food they were about to receive and wondering with great anticipation what they might be having for dinner, they were all attempting to position themselves favorably so they would be noticed. They hoped the other people in attendance would look at them with envy and think, "I wish I could sit at that important place at the table."

Jesus was one of those invitees. He took a look around the dining room, and he saw all these influential and important people—mature, intelligent grown-ups, mind you—pushing and shoving and maybe even threatening each other so they could have a place of honor at the table. Isn't that foolish? I mean, come on, people. Don't act like children. You're not little kids, but you're behaving like you are. "I'm sitting there. Hey, that's my chair. I saw it first. Go find another seat because this one is mine."

I can't help but think that Jesus found their behavior kind of amusing. But at the same time, Jesus also probably thought that it was pretty sad, and even pathetic, to place so much importance on the location of the chair they wanted to sit down on. So Jesus told them: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.

"But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will

be honored in the presence of all the other guests.”

Here’s the most important thing I get out of those words.

When all is said and done, at the end of the day, we really have little or no control over where we end up sitting at God’s table. In that department, God is in charge. Because God is the one who is throwing the banquet. God is the one who owns the table and chairs. God is the one who provides the food for the feast. God is the gracious host of the affair. We might have a preference as to where we want to sit, but that’s all it is. A preference. A preference that God may or may not allow us to indulge.

I take this lesson Jesus was teaching as a metaphor about life and our human existence. You see, many times we think we have certain privileges. We believe the banquet of life is ours to take part in as we please. We think we have a say in how the banquet table is set, what food is served, and the seating chart. But really, we don’t. We can ask. We can suggest. We can hope and pray and insist and make our preferences known; but in the end, God is going to get what God wants; and God is going to give what God wants to give.

That’s what Jesus was trying to tell those guests who were scrambling around at the Pharisee’s house, trying like the dickens to get an honored place at the table. Through his lesson he was saying, “You’re wasting your time. You can pick and choose and scope out a particular place of honor at the table, but the final word is always God’s. It’s not your decision to make.

After you choose your seat, the divine host is going to come around and ultimately decide who belongs where, and you might just have to move. And if we’re told to find another, lower seat, like it or not, we will have no choice but to go and sit where God tells us to sit. So Jesus said we might as well be humble about it. Make the conscious choice to downgrade. Choose a seat at the lower end of the table. That way, if that’s where God intends for you to sit, you’re already there!

But should it happen (and who knows, it just might happen) that God desires you to take a higher, more honored seat at the banquet table, God will let you know. God will tap you on the shoulder and insist that you move up to a place that’s more fitting for you.

In the play *Auntie Mame*, there’s a famous quote that you probably know: “Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death.” Could that be because those starving “suckers” are so busy trying to climb over each other and get themselves a place of honor at the banquet table that they don’t even bother dining on the feast God has laid out in front of them?

This is the bottom line as I see it: it’s not as important where we sit at

God's banquet table, as it is that we're seated at the table in the first place. We got an invitation to attend. And that's reward enough, don't you think?

In just a short time, we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper. We have all been invited to the banquet table by Christ himself. No one here is excluded. The table has been set. The bread has been prepared. The cup is waiting to be passed around. And the most appropriate way for us to respond to Jesus when he bids us to sit down and eat with him is with simple, heartfelt gratitude and humility; and then wait for the Lord to show us to our seat.

So, in a few minutes, when Jesus bids us to come and eat with him and all things are ready, ponder the message that was on your invitation.

Come to the table of Jesus your Redeemer.

Come humbly, not because you have earned a place at his table, but because you are in need of God's mercy.

Come because you love God, and desire to love God more.

Come because Jesus loves you, and gave his life for you.

Come because you want to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Come because you wish to experience the mystery of God's grace.

Come, for Christ himself is calling you to meet him here.

Oh, and by the way, please don't worry about the seating arrangements. God has that covered. Just take, eat and drink. And be happy and satisfied, not with where your seat at the table is, but that you are loved enough to have been invited to sit at the table in the first place.

Thanks be to God. Amen.