

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
12th Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 57:14-15, 18-19

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

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.”

Whose Place Is It?

As I was preparing for this sermon, I thought about the word “place.” It’s pretty loaded in our everyday language. We can think of phrases like these:

- Everyone has a **place**.
- I feel out of **place**.
- Tell me the **place** where you live?
- Keeping track of the time and **place**.
- **Place** me near my friend.
- Don’t make me lose my **place** (Which, of course, no parent ever said to any child, ever!).

This reminded me of a story about the nervous usher at the “tall steeple” church in town. The head usher gave him some instructions:

“Now, when you see someone, hand them a bulletin and say their name. Some of them will thank you and move on their own to their favorite place. Others will want to see what you do first, then they’ll go sit where they want to. Pay attention because some people will sit just anywhere and take someone else’s seat. If you don’t see one of us, just say:

‘Pardon me, Madam, but this pew is occupied.
‘If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to another seat.’”

And, he walked away. Well, everything went pretty well. Folks had been sitting in the same pews and along the same aisle ever since the sanctuary was built many years before. Soon, a visitor came in and took a seat. But, he knew that the well-to-do family sat there every Sunday. He had a problem! So, he politely turned to the lady, cleared his throat, and firmly and politely told the church guest:

“Mardon me, Padam, but this pie is occu-pewed.
“If you’ll mollow fee, I’ll sew you to another sheet.”

Out of sheer wonder, the lady stood and followed the usher to another location.

Well, that is one sense of “**place**.” But, in our scripture lesson, Jesus takes a look at the seating order at a banquet that he is attending, and turns it into a **teaching moment**. He tells the host that he should **watch** what he was doing, or he is going to insult someone. Not only that, taking someone out of their seat would be awkward and pretty impolite. Then he begins to expand this into one of the core portions of the **Gospel message**. It is familiar to us, but **difficult** to live into: Those who want recognition and who **promote** themselves are in for a big **surprise**. Because, the **least important** person is the most important in the **ultimate banquet**, the Feast of Heaven, where the order of seating and all the arrangements, essentially **judgement** itself, are made by **Almighty God**.

Of course, this sense of **place** at play here involves **each of us**. We take particular pride in our **achievements**. And, we seek and respond to those who acknowledge us for what we have done. This is part of the human condition. But, it brings up an important part of our scripture lesson today. Jesus is asking those at the banquet, and you and me:

Who **are** you? And, why do consider yourself so very important to take the most **important seat** at the table?

As we would say back home, “Who do you think you are?”

Like the visitor at the “tall steeple” church: Why are you sitting in this dignitary’s seat? Regardless of our deserving, or not deserving, our current position in life, who gave us the authority to take **advantage** of it. Having done so, we are taking it at **the expense** of others! Specifically, do we push our **personal agenda** in order to influence others, even if they don’t want it? And, what exactly do we think is keeping you and me at the “head of the line”?

In truth, **Jesus** tells us that we are **not better** than anyone else. And, Jesus says that, regardless, we **hardly deserve** the special treatment we do get. That’s the whole point of this message from Jesus.

“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.”

Luke 14:8b-9 NRSV

In a setting where he could get by with a **lecture** to his host and his friends on proper table etiquette, Jesus used those words as a teaser, introducing a far **deeper topic** and message:

Who is exalted, or first, among us?

Of course, this was not the only time Jesus brought this up. But, anything he said that evening should have been **familiar** to his audience. Most of the Pharisees and scribes, and very likely Jesus, knew all of the *Book of Proverbs* by heart. And, that would include this:

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great;
for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

Proverbs 25:6-7 NRSV

Jesus tells us plainly, that when we try to increase our own value or "pump up" ourselves, we actually are **diminishing** ourselves in the **sight of God**. Instead of increasing our stature, we are found **wanting** by God who is omniscient, that is, all-knowing.

You see, God is not interested in my graduate degree, your resumé, or the elected position of our friend at the dinner club or on city council. In fact, it works just the opposite. And, do not fool yourself. **Nothing** escapes the notice of God. Because of that, God knows that we our imperfections place us in a precarious position over issues like these. And, if we allow them to overtake us, we begin to compromise our ability to serve as **faithful witnesses** to Christ.

Here in the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus says that we are **obligated** to take care of **others**. He is telling us that God is very aware of the poor and the **homeless person** who walks the sidewalk just outside our door to ask for a free meal at the local fast food restaurant. God understands the plight of the **single mother** who struggles to get nutritious food for her school-aged children on the weekends. God even knows the number of the hairs on our head. But, your hair follicles and mine are no more important than those of a newborn child of a single mother who works an hourly wage at the local hospital. After all, Jesus said:

"So, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Matthew 19:16 NRSV

That is not a threat, and really it is not an admonition. It is a **directive**, basically, a **command**. Not surprisingly, these words mesh with today's scriptures: This is not a debate, and certainly God is not interested in a pecking order. Instead, Jesus is saying: Place your ego, perhaps even your own needs, last and look to the **welfare** of the **other**.

As I was writing, I kept thinking of a documentary I saw recently: "The Miracle of East Lake." Some of you may be familiar with this, so I will try to summarize it for us. Through the vision of real estate developer, **Tom Cousins**, the East Lake golf course and country club estate in Atlanta were turned into a model for rebuilding blighted urban areas. Sitting about 5 miles east of downtown, it was the first planned suburban community in the state and the childhood home of world famous golfer Bobby Jones. Many people were disappointed to learn of the demise of the heart of golf where Jones learned the game of golf and made his home.

Over time, the area fell on hard times and the course and clubhouse were abandoned. Public housing projects took up the neighboring blocks and the neighborhood was an urban **disaster area**, complete with shootings, stabbings, drugs, and gang wars. The schools were the poorest in quality in the state. Few students finished high school, even fewer attended college. Of course, unemployment was rampant.

Then the golf course and empty clubhouse came up for sale. It was bought and saved from ruin and decay by **Tom Cousins** in the early 1990's. Incredibly, he had a vision for the community to turn everything around. He convinced the city of Atlanta, the county, some nonprofits, and some of his friends and business associates to join him in this effort. Among those he recruited was none other than **Warren Buffet**. Most could not believe the scope of his plan:

- They built an **entire community** from the ground up.
- They **restored** the clubhouse, grounds, and golf course of the East Lake CC, which became the **heart** of the development.
- Then, they **tore down** the housing projects that surrounded the property.
- The center of drug and crime wars was replaced with mixed-income, affordable housing that rivaled the condominium developments in the city in there quality and appointments.
- And, they created a **charter school system** in the heart of it all for grades K-5 through 12.
- They supported **tutoring** and after-school programs.
- They promoted **golf** as an affordable and **accessible** activity for **all** of the residents, a forerunner of the **First Tee** program that brings golf and its discipline to school age children in need-based communities and schools.
- And, Tom Cousins held out for a truly **big promotion** of his project: the end-of-year championship tournament for the PGA Tour, which has been there for the past dozen years.
- Nearly twenty-five years later, the community, the tournament, the school are all **going strong**.
- The **high school graduation** rate for grammar school children in East Lake is over 90%
- Over 90% of East Lake HS graduates attend and **graduate** from colleges and universities each year. Most of these receive **academic** scholarships. Around 50% attend the **graduate school** of their choice.
- And, most remarkably, these achievements came from the **same children** and families who lived there **before the reconstruction**.

In short, Tom Cousins put himself in the **last seat** at the banquet table. And, some prominent folks in Georgia and our nation joined him there. In the process, he created a transformed environment for disadvantaged young people and their families so that they could live decently and responsibly and receive needed education, mentoring, and support that did not exist previously.

Today, **East Lake** has inspired similar developments in Phoenix, Raleigh, Washington, DC, St. Louis and many other places. They are all highly **successful**. The result in those communities are: an improvement in quality of life, producing confident, educated, fully employed young men and women who are committed to social change, just like Tom Cousins. And, they are **fully contributing** members of our society today, freed from poverty, addiction, and economic oppression. We should all look at the grass roots effectiveness on the lives of these young people.

All of this came about because Tom Cousins came in with a **fresh idea**. He disrupted the existing system and **turned life around** for thousands of people. In that same vein, too, often we

forget that **Jesus Christ** came to **disrupt** things as they were in Rome-dominated Palestine. It cost him his life, but that was part of the resurrection story and our **redemption**.

What we so often fail to take in is that **Christ** is still there before us, **pushing our buttons**, edging us out of our comfort zone. Some of us become motivated for ministry in our communities, just by observing the poverty and misery that surround us. I believe that was the motivation for Tom Cousins. But, **Christ** himself stands before us and asks us to **join** in his example. This transformative experience of Christ was the motivation for the early church. And, like the ministry of the apostle Paul early Christians **acted on faith** instead of reason. They acted in communion with **God's Spirit**, instead of pursuing unworkable, time-worn approaches to poverty and social injustice. They acted on faith instead of well-considered political alignments. What might happen for our community and for **this congregation** if you and I decided to do the very **same thing**?

Today's scripture lesson shows Jesus asking: **Whose Place Is It?** To say it another way:

Who Do You Think You Are?

Christ reminds us that we should approach **humility** as a quality of life: one which is open to all. Christ can tell us this, because God knows that our **worth** is not measured by recognition from our peers. Instead, it comes from the certainty that **God has accepted us**, just as we are (Culpepper, *NIB*, vol. 9, 284). Jesus tells us:

Take the **last seat**, and you will be judged favorably by God.

Remove yourself from the high places, and you will receive your just reward from almighty God.

And, having recognized that we arrive at that position because of Christ's sacrifice, **God's mercy**, and God's **grace**, you and I must look at the world and our position in it in a new, helpful, and hopeful **light**:

A light that **cannot be hid** and that can **never** be extinguished.

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