

Sermon on Proverbs 25:6-7, Luke 14:1, 7-14
12th Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

In all of my travels around the world, to Asia, to Europe, and throughout the domestic United States, I have never purchased a first class ticket. Because I'm cheap. I have sat in cramped coach quarters for countless hours on flights over the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, and watched my feet swell from the lack of circulation from my legs, and I still have not broken down. I have often walked past first class passengers settling in with their complimentary pillows, champagne, and fine china, and continued on to my allotted seat, in the back row of the plane. Luxury is a waste of money, a privilege for the wealthy. You know what I'm talking about!

But one time I was rewarded with a first class seat, after Kim and my "flight from hell" to Hong Kong in 2002, at no added cost! For a 45-minute flight! Here's how it happened. We had arrived on time for our flight from Minneapolis to Los Angeles, unaware that our daughter Lori, who was five, had run into a wall at home and required stitches (nobody told us, of course, until we returned from China!). We discovered at the airport that our flight was cancelled, forcing us to take a later flight to L.A. This caused us to miss our flight to Hong Kong. We stayed overnight in L.A., then took a morning flight to Hong Kong, where we had to rebook our flight to Hainan Island. By the time we re-booked, the airport had closed, and we had nowhere to go – so we slept on our bags in the terminal. We didn't get much sleep. But imagine our surprise when we discovered that our new tickets for "business class" to Hainan was actually FIRST CLASS! Infinite leg room in our reclining seats, linen napkins and real silverware to go with our muffins and fruit, with mimosas served for breakfast by our attentive server! I thought I was in heaven (and I hadn't paid extra for the luxury!); The only drawback was that it only lasted 45 minutes! By the time we were up in the air, we were starting to land. My momentary comfort in this prime seat was short-lived! But it sure beats sitting down by mistake in first class, and being kicked out to the back row of the airplane in coach! I've never forgotten the momentary pleasure!

So today we heard in our first lesson from Proverbs the eternal wisdom of not sitting in the wrong place at a royal banquet! Here a royal *faux pas* is described like the wisdom of the ages: "*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.*" Good, practical advice for all those who seek to avoid embarrassment! Even when your daily life doesn't include attending a royal banquet, but for anyone who has ever sat in the wrong desk at school, the wrong seat at a concert or ballgame, or the wrong pew in

church, we get the point! Oh – you mean we can sit anywhere we want to in church? Theoretically, but it doesn't always work out that way! I've heard stories....

Now, about that pesky gospel. The setting is another one of those dinner parties Jesus was attending, invited by a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath. Jesus the outspoken rabbi was always a good “draw” at such dinners, and he never turned down an invitation, it seems! The other Pharisees were watching him closely, to see how much Jesus ate and drank and hear what he said, so that they could accuse him, perhaps, or maybe they wanted to judge for themselves what all the fuss was about! Jesus was willing to eat with those with whom he disagreed – he saw it as an opportunity for real dialogue, debate and conversation. Not like today, when we boycott meals with those who disagree politically or theologically with us, and never have a chance for conversation! We can have our political disagreements with relatives at holiday meals, and that's enough suffering for a whole year – we think!

At any rate, while Jesus was being watched at the Pharisee's dinner party, Jesus was observing his host and the invited guests. He noticed how the guests would choose places of honor, near the head of the table, a front row seat! So Jesus told the parable about a wedding banquet, where guests jockeyed for position. The lesson? Beware that you don't choose to sit too high in an honored place, lest the host tell you to move to a lesser seat when someone more important than you arrives at dinner. So find a lesser seat, on the chance that your host will notice you and invite you to move up to a more honored place. *“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* Good advice for social etiquette AND for life! As my mother used to say, “Don't put yourself forward! If you do the right thing, others will notice – let them put you forward!

Jesus found an additional lesson in this, to upset the whole system of “tit for tat” and social rewards that most of us recognize. He advised his host, *“When you give a luncheon or 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.”*

So what does this mean for us in the Church today? Jesus was not just politely challenging the Pharisees here! Jesus challenges the way the whole world of human relationships, networking and rewards works! Jesus was not just talking about “Banquets” here! It's a lifestyle for Christians, including not only those with whom we are most comfortable (our families, our friends, those most “like us”),

but those who might make us uncomfortable – referred to here as “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

Dare we go even further and say...not only Christians, but Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, animists, and even the agnostic or the atheist! Republicans should eat with Democrats, and Democrats invite Republicans, no matter which candidates they support, because when they don't, we end up with the mess we are in now, when nobody talks to anybody who disagrees with them anymore! I hope that's an exaggeration!

So, now about the Church (with a capital “C”). Over the generations we find that churches usually don't follow the “Golden Rule” (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”), but the rule of “Birds of a feather flock together.” As in most human relationships, we tend to hang together with our families and friends, socialize and worship with those who are “most like us”. This has the tragic result of segregating communities, political parties and congregations, unless we intentionally reach out to and invite people who may be “different” from ourselves. We already know that Martin Luther King, Jr. once famously called Sunday morning, 10 am “the most segregated hour in America”. Things haven't changed that much in the Church, even when our communities have become so much more diverse. I know that our own ELCA has struggled with this for decades, to have our church transformed from a denomination mostly founded by white northern European immigrants into a more diverse, racially just Church which better reflects our communities and the whole Body of Christ. We can set a lot of diversity goals and make a lot of social statements and pronouncements about racism or sexism, becoming Reconciling in Christ, and now, “sanctuary”, but our real challenge is actually giving invitations, one human being to another, and stepping out of our comfort zones to walk with one another in life as brothers and sisters. We continue to ask, “*and who is my neighbor?*” when Jesus simply commands us to love.

Over the years, Redeemer has done a lot of inviting to people who live in our diverse neighborhood – maybe we should have worked harder, but we have held Vacation Bible Schools and Halloween parties for community children, plus after school tutoring programs, and we have sponsored Southeast Asian refugees. In more recent years we have opened our doors to Narcotics anonymous support groups – did you know that now we have support groups meeting EVERY WEEKDAY EVENING, Mondays through Fridays? We host immigrant congregations for Christians from Laos and from Zimbabwe, who worship on Sunday afternoons. Families facing the need for emergency housing sleep here during the month of March through Project Home. We have become a Sanctuary church, supporting asylum seekers and immigrants who need safe and secure housing, in an increasingly hostile environment, while they go through the slow

process of getting their visas or other documents. There are a lot of people facing real struggles out there in our community, and we have opened our doors to welcome them into this space. You may not see them here – especially on Sunday morning, because we have offered them space on weekday evenings or Sunday afternoons. That’s when you see them do their work of healing, recovering from various addictions, challenging and supporting one another. But the numbers of people present in Redeemer church throughout the week far exceeds the number you see around you today! I think this is Jesus’ work, in response to his command to love one another. It’s not “us and them”, with us as “members” and others as “visitors, tenants or guests! Martin Luther once said “*We are all beggars trying to tell others where to find bread.*” So we are all the Body of Christ, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, not just in this room, but throughout this facility and across the street, in schools, in jails, in immigration court, on the Green Line, wherever Jesus leads us. Because Jesus is already there, inviting us to follow!

Now a word about the table in the church when we gather – it’s really the Lord’s table, at which our Lord Jesus serves as host, which we call the “Welcome Table”. All are welcome at this table, sinners as well as saints, sinners especially are invited, to receive forgiveness and mercy, sustenance and strength for the journey of life in the bread and wine, in which we believe the body and blood of Jesus is present. To this table Jesus invites the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, the immigrant, the refugee, the prisoner, the fearful, the forgotten, the abused, the sick, the seeker.

So the second lesson from Hebrews says well the charge we have as Christians, human beings who follow Jesus: *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison [and detention], as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured....Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for God has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” ...So do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

God of working people, help us to see the value in all kinds of labor, and to value the work of human being, that all will receive a just, living wage, and have safe conditions in which to work. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**