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Your Welcome: Your Pew

Luke 14:7-11

Welcome to worship. For those of us visiting us this evening/morning, you are going to listen in on a little family business. What I'm going to share does not apply to you...yet! But I hope you'll pay attention so that when YOU become a part of the Chapel Hill family, you will be ready to roll! We drawing near the end of a sermon series on hospitality in which we've asked ourselves the question, "How are YOU doing at welcoming the newcomers that God brings through our doors? And honestly, this is a sensitive issue, isn't it? I shared last week how this study has convicted me of my own inhospitality; I suspect that the Holy Spirit has been working on many of you, too.

But as convicting and, maybe, as irritating as some of these topics might have been... you ain't seen nothing yet. Because tonight/today, I'm going to touch the third-rail of church hospitality: I am going to talk about your pew! Where you sit...and how you sit there...may be the single most important act of hospitality you can perform. Now...I'll pause a moment to allow those who are already infuriated with me to storm out. OK... for those who remain...let's get started. Luke 14: 1; 7-11

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ... (v 7) Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in 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 table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

The Middle East was, and still is, a culture of shame and honor. There was a definite pecking order in society and one of the ways to move UP that pecking order was at a banquet table. Banquets were an important part of their society. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, we find ten different banquets mentioned. In addition, Jesus sprinkled his teachings with stories of meals and food...like last week when the prodigal son returned home and his father threw a great feast in his honor.

But one of the sleazier aspects of a banquet was this: it was a chance to figure out how important you were compared to others in the room. The closer you were seated to the host, the more important you were. To be seated right NEXT to the host was the ultimate honor. One of the most embarrassing moments in the Mark's gospel is when the mother of James and John's goes to Jesus and twists his arm to secure for her sons the places of honor on either side of him when he came to power. Essentially, she was calling shotgun for her sons before any other disciple--or mother of a disciple--could.

We shake our head at this...but is this jockeying for position REALLY so unfamiliar to us? I think of two banquets I attended last year. You walk in, not knowing where you will sit. You go to the hostess, she gives you a table number, and you begin to scan the room to see where that number is. Pretty quickly you find out where YOU fall in the pecking order. In both of my banquets, I found out I was not so important. In fact,

in one ...where I thought I'd be at least a moderate bigshot...I was seated at a table that could not have been FARTHER from the head table... and still been inside the building.

It was good for my ego. The only thing that would be BETTER for my ego would be if I sat down in the wrong place...and was asked ...in front of everyone... to move.

Two years ago our family was traveling to Salt Lake City for Christmas. Rachel, who was 24 at the time and in her final year of seminary—in other words, an accomplished young woman in graduate school—was seated in the exit row. The flight attendant stopped by our row, looked at Rachel and said, "I'll need to move you out of this row. You have to be 15 to sit here." Rachel was livid. And the fact that her mother, seated next to her, was laughing her head off, didn't help at all. We finally convinced the flight attendant that Rachel was, in fact, of age and capable of opening that door all by herself in case of an emergency ...but to this day, she still seethes over the memory of almost being booted out of her exit row seat when she was, as she put it, "24 freaking years old!"

This is the subject of the parable we just heard. Jesus was dining at the home of a ruler of the Pharisees. Pharisees were the strictest Jews. Fundamentalists. They believed you got into God's good favor by carefully observing all the religious rules...including hundreds of them that they just made up. The Pharisees were Jesus' arch-enemies and were always looking for a way to discredit him. It says something about the courage of Jesus that he would accept an invitation to dine with them...especially when we are told right out of the gate that they were "watching him carefully." You know what that means right? They were trying to trap him!

But, to his credit, Jesus accepted the invitation. And while he was there, he noticed how the guests jockeyed for position at the table. He tells a parable in which a person suffers the humiliation of being asked to give up their seat to a more distinguished guest. To avoid that, he says, choose the LOWER place for yourself. Let others be more important than you. Who knows, the host might even give you an upgrade to first class.

Of course, this parable is not about seating charts, is it? Remember, Jesus was surrounded by Pharisees. These were snobby, rule-keepers who believed they had EARNED a place of favor with God because they were so well-behaved. Because they followed all the rules about fasting and eating and cleansing and Sabbath-keeping...they had EARNED their spot in heaven. They were God's favorites. ESPECIALLY compared to rule-breakers like Jesus. The Pharisees believed they had EARNED a prominent seat at God's table...maybe not NEXT to God...but certainly within earshot. And they felt confident they could walk right up and take that place.

But, Jesus says, that's NOT how you get a place at God's table. You don't walk up and claim it. How, then? The host invites you! Five times in this story, Jesus refers to the one who invites. He is talking about God. The God who invites. The God who sets a place at his table for his people. We don't presume to march into God's banquet hall and take a seat. Rather, to our amazement, we discover God is throwing a party and has invited us. Not because we deserve it but just because he loves us. Like the Prodigal Son. Dad was so excited to have his black sheep of a son home that he threw an extravagant party in his honor...and invited the whole village to celebrate.

Now, according to Jesus, what is the root of the desire to claim the best seat for oneself? Pride. The desire to be important; at least more important than the person next to you. That's why Jesus concludes with those powerful words: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

OK... now I'm going to touch that third rail. I've preached many difficult sermons in the past. Sermons about sex and abortion and pre-destination and money. But I've never preached on a topic more dangerous than Sermon Notes

this one: pews. I think most of us suffer from pew envy. And when we talk about what we can do to be a more welcoming congregation, this may be the single issue that can do more GOOD...or cause more harm. Because we LOVE our pew. When we opened the doors of this sanctuary back on November 23, 1997, I told everyone present, "Take a look at where you are seated. Because you are likely NEVER going to move far from that place as long as you live." Once we stake out OUR place in church, we never move. And woe be unto the hapless stranger who sits down in our spot!

This is such touchy topic. And I'm not just talking about pews in the balcony, although that certainly struck a nerve. I have received more notes about closing the balcony than any other topic in my 32 years of ministry here. EVERY single week since the summer. This issue has the half-life of uranium. And for those who accepted my invitation to come in and discuss the reasons for this—and it is a standing invitation—it has led to some very gracious conversations which I hope felt honoring to those who took the time to share their perspective with me.

But the fact is, nearly EVERYONE has pew issues; not just balcony folks. Where we sit matters to us...in surprisingly intense ways. And by the way, I get it! It matters to me, too. I love holding MVP status on my airline. Being able to book Row 17, the RECLINING exit row, on-line...boarding ahead of the masses so that I have room for my carry-on...the occasional business upgrade! I love it. IN fact, one year I booked a flight to San Diego and back in one day just to get enough miles to keep my MVP.

And I want to be MVP when I visit a church. I like to sit on the end of the pew. I feel trapped in the middle. So I show up early enough and take that desired seat. I figure, if you want that place, get to church early and claim your spot. But don't make ME move into the claustrophobic zone because you can't get to church on time. (Can you hear MY prideful heart showing through?)

You know my nickname for this church, right? My Sweetheart Church. But honestly, this whole pew thing has brought out a side of us that is not so sweet. Newcomers have tried to sit down and were told they couldn't sit there because it was saved. One young woman, new to our church, was already seated when someone came up and said, "You are sitting in my seat." She thought she was kidding. Nope. Dead serious. So, she got up and moved. An usher tried to seat a family with a man in a wheelchair and the person next to the wheelchair area refused to move. Some have threatened to go to another church because they can't sit where they prefer. One person said he wouldn't give another dime until he could sit where he wanted to sit. And to all of that, I say, Wowza...is that really healthy? Is that really the church we want to be?

These stories feel like the pride issue Jesus spoke of in that parable, don't they? "This is MY church; you can't tell me where to sit!" (I heard that, too!) And when we reach that point of pride, I think it's because we have forgotten what it feels like to be unwanted. Don't you remember those days, as a teen, when you were the last one picked for the team? When you waited to be invited to the prom? When you showed up at a party and no one noticed. I remember them... all...very well... and it was painful. And scarring.

We might THINK we have a right to sit where we want...we might THINK that we've earned the right because we have worshipped here for 30 years. But surely that misses the point. After a while, don't we stop being guests...and start being hosts? This becomes OUR home, OUR family...OUR party...and it falls to us to welcome those who come after us. This is a heart issue. It is a pride issue.

So, what would it be like if, instead of claiming our rights to sit where we please as honored guests, we began to think of ourselves as gracious hosts. The issue isn't whether I have the RIGHT to claim a spot on the end of the pew and make you crawl over me. The issue is...do I have a heart that is humble enough to defer to others. TO make it more comfortable for the late-comers. More welcoming.

So...here's what I've started doing. I'm sitting in different places. I normally sit right up there, but I'm spreading my wings. It makes me a little uncomfortable. I can't lean over and complain to Pastor Larry about some detail that displeases me. (But Pastor Larry loves this new arrangement.) But I figure I can't ask YOU to consider mixing it up a little if I'm not willing to do so. What if you joined me in sitting in a different place for the next four weeks? What if you actually invited someone to sit down next to you and introduced yourself? What if you came early, looked for someone who was sitting alone, and joined them? Or how about this, what if you came on time for church? How can you be a host to your guests if you are always 20 minutes late for your own party? You'd never do that at your OTHER home.

Of course, we can do things differently, but the real change must come in our hearts. You can't fake humility. Perhaps that change of heart will come when we remember that the host of this party is the divine Son of God who sat enthroned in heaven next to the Father but who...for our sake...left all that behind to come on a rescue mission for us. Paul put it in these majestic terms: Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be clutched but EMPTIED himself taking on the form of a servant." The only way can claim the right to a seat of honor in God's house is because we forget that we were invited by one who gave UP his seat of honor in order to make a place for us.

We are working hard as a church to do a better job of welcoming those who wonder if there is room for them in this family. It seems the message is getting out. We have experienced six months of significant growth in our worship services...the first time that has happened in more than ten years. In fact, in January we will be moving our Saturday night worship into the sanctuary because we have outgrown the chapel and we want to make a place for the person who LONGS to have a home. In other words.....you're doing a good job! You are inviting and you are welcoming our guests. Good for you!

Now...comes the toughest thing. Will you consider giving up your MVP status for the sake of the one who gave up HIS MVP status...that we might make a place for our new friends? We have talked a lot about moving beyond these walls. How can we move beyond these walls...if we cannot move beyond these pews?