

*Exalted in the Humble Seat*

Psalm 113: 4-9      Luke 14: 7-14

Upon entering the place of dining, the first question is, “Where should I sit?” It doesn’t matter if it’s McDonalds or a fancy banquet occasion like you see on the bulletin cover or if it’s the widely famed Fairfield Presbyterian Pot Luck. “Where should I sit?”

The criteria of where to sit, or where is the place that I would most like to sit, is going to vary from person to person. It may have to do with where it’s clean and well-lit, or where the bathrooms are, or who is sitting at that table or nearby. Watching the baby throw food from a highchair is cute and entertaining from a distance, but up close can be a bit messy.

Famed gunfighter of the Wild West, Wild Bill Hickok, was known for always sitting with his back to the wall and facing the door so that he would always be able to see who was in front of him and might pose a threat. With his reputation, there was always someone who thought they could gain fame and glory for shooting gunslinger Wild Bill Hickok. Wild Bill kept this practice until one day, actually August 2<sup>nd</sup> in 1876, when he sat down to play poker in Deadwood. But on this day, he had his back to the door. Sure enough, a fellow named Jack McCall, a down-on-his-luck gambler, shot Wild Bill from behind and killed him. In such a case, “where should I sit?” can be a matter of life and death. For most of us, that level of concern about seating is unwarranted.

We will be mindful of positioning in other contexts, like the supermarket checkout line. No one wants to be behind the old lady in the express line who, even though it says “No Checks” on the sign, pulls out her checkbook, or rummages around in her voluminous purse to scrounge up three pennies while your rotisserie chicken gets cold and your ice cream melts while the kid is crying for candy.

Or, heaven forbid, someone should try to cut in line ... anywhere. This is how people die. We all know about the vicious scrum on Black Friday after Thanksgiving to get into the big box store and get the best deals.

With all of you horse people, you know position matters in racing, whether its horses or cars or whatever. Position matters. Everyone wants to have the best position.

God’s word is, of course, entirely different. Beginning with Psalm 113, we get reminded who is in the top position. *The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.* In other words, there is no higher position. And then the psalmist paints us a picture. *Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?* We can just about see God leaning from the throne, way, way down, in order to see what is going on in God’s creation. Stooping down, as if getting close to an unruly child to let them know that you are watching their every move, God is up high and looking down on those in lower positions.

What does God do with what God sees? *God raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; God seats them with princes, with the princes of his people.* God changes everyone's position. God messes up the standard order of things in the world. The poor and needy are seated alongside the princes and the elites. The poor and needy have gone from the beggar to the banquet. They're seated at the main table in the banquet hall on the cover, probably up front with the highest visibility, the place that everyone wants. God blesses the poor and needy, taking them from the bottom and lifting them to the top.

But God isn't done yet. The psalmist continues: *God settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children.* The "childless woman" is the object of scorn and condemnation. This kind of woman has been married, likely divorced by her husband for failing to produce any children. She may have been ostracized by her family for having failed to fulfill what the marriage was supposed to produce, thereby bringing dishonor to the family. Unable to produce children, she is unsuitable for another marriage. In social status, the childless woman is in an even *more* unenviable spot than the proverbial widow.

Yet in stooping down to correct some things that have gone awry, God takes this "childless woman" and sets her within her home as a "happy mother of children," whether hers or not, it probably doesn't matter. All the women at the well are somehow jealous that she has been so favored, having not apparently deserved such blessing at all as far as they were concerned. It is as if she became a happy mother of children without the discomforts of pregnancy, without labor pain, and moreover without some stupid, useless husband hanging around being needy.

Remember how I said people get ugly and even homicidal when someone cuts in line. Well, God is going to take the poor and needy, and the childless woman, and jump them up to the front of the line. Imagine how the people who were jumped over are now feeling? Yeah, not too happy for the blessings of those others who are now rubbing elbows with ... um ... their betters, the good people who came by their status the right way, not by jumping the line.

Like Father, like Son: Jesus has similar kinds of instructions about seating.

First, Jesus talks about seating at a wedding feast. By now, you know when Jesus is talking about a wedding feast, he is code-talking about the messianic banquet at the end of the age when the righteous gather amid the abundance of the Kingdom. And we could allow that he is also code-talking something practical about the Kingdom of God in worldly terms as well. Is he talking about seating etiquette. No, not really.

Jesus teaches that rather than picking the most desirable seat, you should sit in a less desirable seat and then see if you get moved up by the host. This way, you can avoid the embarrassment of being moved off to a lesser seat. Who is the host of the messianic banquet? That's right; it's that line jumping regent known as God. Of course, this is not simply the eating and seating arrangement in the Kingdom of God, it is the way of the Kingdom itself. He concludes: *For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and*

*those who humble themselves will be exalted.* It sounds a lot like ‘the last will be first in the Kingdom’ or ‘the least will be the greatest in the Kingdom.’ It is all on the same theme – the reversal of worldly standards brought about by the Kingdom.

Then he takes another angle. He tells his listeners that, when they host a lunch or a dinner, don’t invite the people who are in your circle – the people who are like you, comfortable, well-fed, and in the habit of trading meals back and forth within the circle. Jesus wants his followers to reflect the ways of the Kingdom when he says: *when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*

Jesus’ teaching is a bit different from the line jumping that God was practicing in Psalm 113, and it teaches us something more about the Kingdom that many don’t realize.

While the world and its worldly standards and desires are big on *upward* mobility, the Kingdom is a call for the faithful to practice *downward* mobility. That’s right, I said it. Downward mobility. Jesus has just crossed into a worse no-man’s-land than his line jumping Father-God. I mean, it’s one thing to be generous, give your tithe, be kind to people not-like-you and your people, and all that. But *downward* mobility?

The story about the humble seat is really a way of teaching that *downward* mobility should be the goal of the faithful. At the end of the age, when things are reversed, the worldly powers are overcome as God establishes sovereignty, then you will be in a position of righteousness **because** of your *downward* mobility, and given the seat of honor in righteousness.

What does this mean exactly? Jesus wants his disciples to bring into being a ministry of transformation, the transformation of individuals and the transformation of society. Both individuals and the society need to be transformed together; one without the other is simply not the Kingdom. The promise of the Kingdom relies on the transformation of both the individuals and the social structures in which they live. If a person gets saved in the lifeboat, that’s great, but if two hundred others drown, that’s failure. If two hundred people are saved in lifeboats, but your neighbor drowns, that is a failure, too. In the Kingdom, all get transformed or it isn’t going to happen.

In practice, how might this work? Let’s start with the tricky part. You may think that you are going to be charitable and help out that needy person. Your charity may help them for a moment, but that’s all. They’ll be back later, or tomorrow, or next week, or next month. Charity is a band-aid that makes the donor feel good, but it is not the healing that Jesus expects his disciples to perform.

Jesus wants transformation and *that* is hard work. The person accustomed to playing the donor role may think that they are the agent of transformation; they don’t imagine themselves as the recipient of transformation.

This process started when we had volunteers at Weirsdale Presbyterian start working with the kids at Stanton Weirsdale Elementary. They went to read to them and stuff like that. After a few weeks, they realized that some of their kids were wearing the same clothes, some smelled, some had shoes that were literally falling apart, some didn't have underwear.

Their initial response may have been to blame the parents, but then they realized that *they* could do something. They bought school supplies and personal hygiene items, socks, underwear, pajamas, and shoes. When it got cold, they bought them winter outerwear so they wouldn't be chilled to the bone waiting in the dark for the bus to arrive because poor folks who can't afford to buy basic clothes aren't shopping for winter outerwear.

These church volunteers were being transformed by poverty; not theirs, most lived in The Villages. Rather they were transformed by the children and their eyes were beginning to open. Yes, they were having a transformative impact on those kids, too. In fact, it was transformative for the whole school as the C and D school became a straight A school for years afterward. The volunteers saw a different life from theirs, and they were beginning to learn *more* than they taught.

The next step would have been to build a meaningful relationship with the parents. Then they could have discovered the limits of low wages, distant commutes, unreliable vehicles, frequent periods of unemployment, transiency because no job means no rent, the cost of child care, and oodles more obstacles that the poor face, preventing any secure and stable life like we would expect, like we enjoy every day.

The step after that would have been to recognize the structures that society has erected that keep the poor in a permanent state of poverty for one generation after another after another. Then they would need to raise up a prophetic voice and directly address the powers-that-be, insisting on the social transformation that gives all people dignity, respect, justice, equity, and peace.

Jesus invites us to the humble seat where we can be exalted in terms of the Kingdom, not on the world's terms. Jesus invites his faithful disciples to transform lives and worldly society with *downward* mobility. Jesus wants us to live the Kingdom life now, to continue his ministry and bring healing and new life to others, and interestingly, also to ourselves.