

Over the last thirty years, I have presided at a lot of weddings. When I was an Associate Pastor, a lot of the weddings were for people I had never met before. They would be looking for a nice church and a willing pastor - and since we had both, I would preside at their wedding. For the most part, I would do the counseling, lead the rehearsal and do the wedding – and then it was over. More often than not, I would never see these people again, which was okay with me. I went into it willingly knowing that we were doing something for folks that might not come back to our congregation. Sometimes though, things would be different. Every so often, there would be a connection and my family would receive an invitation to the wedding reception.

When you're the pastor, you are most often seated with the grandparents, the great-grandparents or maybe the second cousins. It's family people. It's people, they figure, that won't say something weird in front of the pastor. At the Ravelo's wedding we were seated with the Bride's dad, his partner and the grandparents. It was a full sit-down reception with at least six pieces of silverware, bread plates and three glasses as well.

Matt, my husband, was seated next to Ken who was the Father of the bride. When the rolls were passed around Matt used the bread plate *to the right* of his water glass and began buttering his bread. A few minutes later, Ken asked if there was another bread plate and since there was one on the other side of Matt's plate- he passed it over. Matt was just like "Ha ha, that's weird." So then when the salad was served, Matt started eating right away and when Ken asked him if he could have that fork to Matt's left. Matt handed him the fork making a joke about whether or not the server realized that the Bride's father hadn't gotten a bread plate or enough silverware.

For those of you who haven't set fancy tables, my husband was using the plate and the silverware that belonged to the father of the bride. I wasn't paying close enough attention. Kate was eight and so I was watching out for her, so I didn't realize all of this was happening. So, when my husband said, "Boy that was strange! The father of the bride didn't have enough silverware. You would think they would have treated him better." I wanted to crawl under the table and cry. It was like "Oh gosh!"

The good news is that the bride and the groom became members of our congregation and every time Ken visited his daughter, he and Matt would have a good laugh about forks and bread plates. And I got permission to tell this story and if you asked Matt, he would tell it to you himself and I think he now knows that when you set at a dinner, the forks on the left are yours along with the bread plate. And if there's a spoon at the top, that means there's dessert. So, always look for that spoon.

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In today's gospel, Jesus had been invited to a banquet. It wasn't the first time in the gospel of Luke that a Pharisee had asked him to dinner. It's actually the third time. And although we sometimes think of them as being the opposition, it wasn't always the

case. There was a certain collegial relationship that meant the Pharisees might be willing to both observe, debate and even host Jesus of Nazareth.

Since Pharisees were pretty well paid, it's likely that this was a fancy dinner that Jesus was at with a long table and lots of silverware. Lots of dishes, lots of people. Those little bowls with water in them. All that stuff, the way they did it back then.

And while the locals were watching Jesus, he was watching them. The guests all seemed to be jockeying to get the best seats at the table which was the norm in Greco-Roman society. Meals were a time when social ranking was especially important. People noticed where you were seated and whether you had moved up or down the social ladder. Banquets were a time when it was very obvious who was your peer, who was your better and who was beneath you.

Ancient libraries were apparently full of books on etiquette and how to behave when out and about. The Jewish book Sirach gives lots of advice about how to act at meals including warnings against being greedy. It says when you go to a banquet...

- ✓ *Do not say, "How much food is there?"*
- ✓ *Do not reach out your hand for everything you see, and do not crowd your neighbor at the dish.*
- ✓ *Eat what is set before you like a well brought-up person and do not chew greedily, or you will give offense.*
- ✓ *If you are seated among many persons, do not help yourself before they do.*

While this kind of advice would have been in the minds of some of the people at dinner that day, Jesus goes further in warning against seeking out the most honorable seats. He tells those who are gathered that they should pursue humility, which was very rarely considered a virtue in society at that time. It wasn't important. It wasn't something people talked about. It wasn't a significant idea. And yet, humility was to be the hallmark of those who were disciples of Jesus in that time and this. It comes up again and again in the New Testament that we are to live lives of humility. It's in Luke, Philipians, Colossian, James and the first letter of Peter. That's who Christians are supposed to be. But Jesus doesn't scold the guests that day. He doesn't shame them for wanting the best seat at the table. In fact, he assumed that the question is a part of their daily life. That this is something that is just going to happen. But what he does want to talk about is how you navigate that kind of social setting.

Really, nothing has changed. The best seat is where we all want to be if we're honest with ourselves. I have a friend who always has to sit facing the door in a restaurant. If I sit in that seat first it makes her absolutely nuts. She has even threatened to sit next to me if I don't move. She insists it's her army training, but I also suspect it's just where she likes to sit. When we pick the seat, we are thinking about our comfort. Our safety. Our pleasure. And how it is that we can control those things.

Jesus cautions us to pay attention to those kinds of decisions. To try and think of ourselves after we think about everyone else. Which is good advice when you go to a party, but Jesus wasn't just offering rules for etiquette. What he was trying to teach all of us, is a way of being that will shape our entire lives and he especially wants us to be

aware of those times when we make those choices as if having the best seat is something we need to do.

He also wants us to make sure that we include everyone at the table. Rather than limiting our guest list to people who are just like us, people with whom we're comfortable, who don't threaten us or even challenge us, we are called to invite those who are different, people who make us uncomfortable, because there may be a blessing to be had in doing it. The banquet table is a metaphor for our lives. Jesus calls us to think less of ourselves and more about others.

Yesterday I read a Facebook post that said, Jesus thought there were only two kind of people. Our friends, whom we are to love. And our enemies, whom we are to love.

Jesus didn't just tell us about how to give of ourselves, he demonstrated it. His whole life, all the stories we've heard, again and again. His ministry, his death and resurrection. Over and over he takes the worst seat in the hall. He puts himself in uncomfortable situations for the sake of others. There's never a question of leaving anyone out. No matter their background or story or station in life- Jesus loved each person he met and gave his life for all of us.

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Earlier this week, I read a story that talked about a congregation that had been prevented from serving breakfast to needy folks in a local park. The church folks found a way around the cease and desist order from the police by moving the meal to a church parking lot, but the story reminded me of something that happened in 2013. You may have even seen it on the national news.

My friend Hugh Hollowell served for many years as the pastor of Love Wins Ministries in Raleigh, North Carolina. Love Wins serves the homeless community of Raleigh in a variety of ways, including at that time weekend breakfast in a park in the heart of the city.

One Saturday, the volunteers all showed up at 9:00 a.m., just like they had done virtually every weekend for six years. They provide, without cost or obligation, hot coffee and a breakfast sandwich to anyone who wants one. They do this work in cooperation with five different suburban churches that help with volunteers and funding.

But things were different that day. Three officers from the Raleigh Police Department prevented them from doing their work. An officer said, quite bluntly, that if they attempted to distribute food, they would be arrested.

They had brought 100 sausage biscuits and large amounts of coffee. Hugh asked the officers for permission to share the food to the over 70 people who had lined up, waiting to eat. But the police said no. And so, Hugh had to tell the hungry people who were waiting that he could not feed them, or he would be arrested.

Nobody from the Raleigh Police Department was willing to tell the people from Love Wins which ordinance they had broken, or why, after six years and countless friendly and cooperative encounters with the Department, they were now preventing them from feeding hungry people.

So on that day Love Wins was unable to fill its promise to feed the poor of Raleigh. In the days that followed, Pastor Hugh Hollowell, his colleagues and volunteers spread the story through blogs, Facebook posts, and other social media. Their story was picked up by local radio and tv stations along with newspapers. And after eight days, the story was on Good Morning America.

At one point it seemed that the Mayor of Raleigh was going to continue to prevent Love Wins from feeding people. But after a two-and-a-half-hour meeting of the City Council, it was ultimately agreed that the city would not enforce an ordinance that prohibits the sharing of food with people in a public place. Love Wins and its partnering churches were able to continue making up for the gap in social services that exists on the weekends.

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Jesus calls us to step away from the comfortable seat at the banquet. To feed and show hospitality to each child of God no matter who they are and if there are challenges that come our way, to keep following his path, living a life of faith.

Lutheran writer Walt Wangerin said this is the acid test for caring for our brothers and sisters.

*Do you love Christ Jesus? (This question embraces the next one.) Do you love the real manifestations of the Christ in the world around you? (A question which is the same as asking): Do you love the Body of Christ, the people whom Jesus loves? (And then the question which makes the sharpest and purest of points is this.) **How** do you love the ones you do not meet, who cannot punish or reward you, blame or praise you, or in any way make the action anything more than the unvarnished (spontaneous) revelation of your natural self?*

We are called to love without regard for how it impacts us. Without knowing what the results are. Without knowing even who we're helping. We are called to be of service.

The writer to the Hebrews gives great advice on how to do just that and reminds us that God has said, "I will never leave you; I will never forsake you. I will always be by your side." And because of that promise, we are bold enough to say, "God is my help. I'm not going to be afraid of anything. No one can harm me, because God is with me."

We are always playing with a safety net. Even when it feels like the things we are called to do might be a little bit dangerous or maybe a little bit more than we thought we were willing to give; we are playing with the security of knowing that God is with us. We are safe. We have been redeemed. And so, in that safety, in that redemption, in that love we are called to share knowing that Jesus love is our constant. Jesus' strength is a gift and Jesus has always been with us, yesterday, tomorrow, today, the next week, forever. God's love is with us and so we go out to share the good news. And share it not just with our words but in the things we do. Not worrying about where we get to sit at the table. It doesn't matter. We may not even get a chair, but as long as we are serving the people of God, we're in the right place.