

An old man lay sprawled across three entire premium seats in a theatre. An usher walked by and noticed this. He whispered to the old man, “Sorry sir, but you’re only allowed one seat.” But the old man didn’t budge. This made usher very impatient.

“Look sir, if you don’t get up from here, I’m going to have to call the manager.” Once again, the old man just muttered and did nothing. The usher marched briskly back up the aisle, and in a moment, he returned with the manager. Together the two of them tried repeatedly to move the old, disheveled man, but with no success.

Finally they summoned the police. The officer arrived and surveyed the situation then asked, “All right buddy what’s your name?” “Eric” the old man moaned. Where you from, “Eric” asked the officer.

With a terrible strain in his voice, and without moving, Eric replied; “The balcony” .....

Premium seats, that’s our focus in week 4 of our Lenten Series, Meeting Jesus at the Table. This series is based on a book written by Cynthia Campbell. Some of you may remember our Advent series a few years back where we compared each gospel account of Jesus’ birth to a style of house. She was the author of that series too.

Today we look at the types of relationships we might build through our concepts of reciprocity. Jesus gives us two compelling examples in this short parable from the gospel of Luke. These two examples further highlight a common theme in Jesus’ messaging. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Today’s parable about seating arrangements and who to invite as dinner guests brings back a flood of memories about meals shared in our own family. There was always an order. My ex at the head of the table course, me on his right side. Meg on his left side. Jon, our son, next to Meg and Suzanne next to me. From there, with the magic of table leaves, we could more than double the amount of people who could join us for dinner. It may have required every chair we had,

even an office chair, but we always managed to find a seat for everyone who joined us for dinner.

For the longest time, a house was not a proper house unless it had a separate dining room. Today most new homes are not designed that way. The dining area is a more open space where it is easier to engage in hospitable activities all the time and not just on certain occasions.

I personally am glad for this change. I hated being separated in the kitchen with cooking and cleaning up. Talk about FOMO (fear of missing out) But, I can also understand the appeal of a separate dining room. A place of honor. A place where you might, just might get to sit close to the host or the most interesting guest. Maybe you'd get to sit next to that grandparent who made you laugh constantly through the meal. Maybe you'd get to sit next to your favorite aunt. As I got older, there was one place I didn't want to sit. The kids table. Adult conversations and arguments were so much more interesting. I'm sure as you think back you can agree that at a dinner gathering, where you sat meant something.

In Jesus day, dining arrangements were significantly different than they are today. Honored guests did not sit in chairs. Instead, picture a room with tables in the middle and couches set around it. Male guests would be reclining on these couches. There would be couches on the sides and also in the center. The couches in the center were the seats of honor. If you had great wealth, if you had great power, if you held an office of some kind, these would be your seats.

Here's the deal. Your chosen seat was not certain. You might pick a couch close to the center. Or dare you pick a seat in the center. But if someone with greater rank than you walked in, you could be ousted from your chosen of seat. You as a lower ranking guest would have to move down to a location further from the seats of honor.

When Jesus was telling his parable, he perhaps was recalling Proverbs 25:6-7 where King Solomon says, 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.

Jesus' advice? Don't choose a seat of honor when you arrive at a party. Wait to be invited to a greater place of honor. As Jesus will repeat in many different ways in his teachings. "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

As Jesus is so apt to do, he takes his idea further in this parable. "When you give a lunch or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors. But invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."

In Jesus day, special events required a give and take. It was an "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine" type of relationship. Someone who was pushed to the edge of society, ostracized because of some physical ailment, or lacking in wealth. These types of ilk were not able to participate in societal niceties like parties.

So here is Jesus at a dinner party telling a parable about a dinner party. One that would have smacked the attendees right in the face. But this wasn't his whole intent. Jesus was also raising awareness to the dangers of transactional relationships. Relationships that obscure real hospitality. Relationships based on quid pro quo, a Latin phrase that means "Something for something." I invite you to a party and expect that you will invite me back. I will connect you with a job opening and I expect the same kind of help when I need it. It's a relationship of obligation. It is built on a mutual understanding of give and receive.

Jesus is witnessing these very transactional relationships unfold in this dinner party hosted by the Pharisee who invited him. With his parable Jesus is saying, "Friends, we are capable of so much more. We are so much better than this."

Jesus parable invites them into a different kind of relationship. One that is not transactional. One that is a transformational relationship. A transformational relationship.

What is a transformational relationship? It is one that is not survival-based. It's not a get-what-I- a transformational relationship is a table-turning one. A "reign of God" kind of relationship. In a transformational relationship, traditional tables are flipped. Doors are open. Table leaves are brought out. Bread is broken...together...all of God's children included.

Pay attention to who has a seat at the table. That's Jesus point in this parable. It's more than just about where people are seated. It's more about WHO has a place. It's more about WHO is invited. This lesson goes far beyond a dinner table. It even goes far beyond our homes. It's a lesson that extends to our workplaces, our schools, our sports teams, our book clubs and yes, it even applies to our church.

Honestly, we don't have to look very far back in church history to find the very types of transactional relationships that Jesus was speaking against. After the Protestant Reformation, worshipers who traditionally stood, knelt, or sat on the floor in worship developed an appetite for sitting in pews and they started building them. How else could you survive those lengthy sermons and never-ending worship services? Enter the wealthy families. They would pay to have, not just a pew, but the best pew. Custom built. They actually held deeds to these pews and would pass them down to their heirs.

Instead of couches of honor at the dinner parties of Jesus time and places where seating arrangements were chosen based on power and wealth, we now had the same thing with church pews. Those who were wealthy had their pews up close to the front. If you were poor, you sat in the back or in the balcony.

This sounds bad, doesn't it? And truth to be told, it didn't take long for the average church person to feel this way too. But here was and still is the problem. It takes money to build and maintain a church. Those who paid for their pews helped keep the church doors open. So that meant a little hierarchical seating. How bad was that really in the grand scheme of things?

According to Jesus in our passage today, it's everything. Anytime advantage allows some to have a bigger seat than others. Anytime advantage allows someone to have undeserved and

unlimited influence or power at the expense of others, we start slipping away from transformational relationship. We yield to relationships driven by fear, the give-and-take system, the survival mentality. And we move farther away from the kingdom that Jesus spoke of and envisioned.

It's not just pews we're talking about, when it comes to wielding power. It plays out in ways like, who's attended the longest. Who has the most power in the community. Who has the most wealth. At St. Johns, I am proud to say that we work hard towards embracing transformational versus transactional relationships. But humans are inclined to transactions. So can we commit to keeping St. John's transformational? We will commit to keeping St. John's transformational.

Because in the kingdom of God, Jesus tells us we are invited to more. We are asked to root our relationships in faith and love and trust. We believe in the power of a God who can open our doors and expand our tables. We serve a God who frees us from worrying about how we will be reciprocated or about our Return on Investment.

At Christ's table, we are asked to pay attention to who has a place in our church, in our community, and in our world? Church family let us ever be aware of who has a place at our table and what drives our seating arrangement. Let's commit to making these places mostly about world-changing, love-lifting, transformational trust. Let's resist the urge to make our survival about repaying favors and restricting who has a seat at our table. Can we accept Christ's invitation to trust in a God who opens doors, makes room at our tables, and always provides enough?

Jesus proclaimed a God whose bread will never run out, where hospitality is endless, and whose grace can overturn the tables of our weary world. We are invited to trust and set our tables accordingly. So go ahead, set your dining room table, set your conference room table, set your classroom table. Trust that the right people will show up to your invitation.

When we do, we will find that our world becomes more like God's world, where there is always enough, and all God's people have a place. Let us pray