Sermon | Proper 17C

TEXT: St. Luke 14:1—14

28 August 2016

Unworthy Guests at the Lord’s Banquet

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints,

Summertime is wedding season. We’ve had a couple of our own weddings here at Zion. Many of you have been to weddings already this year yourselves. We know how it works at weddings, particularly wedding receptions: you show up to the hall, each person is assigned a table. And you go to your table, and there’s a place with your name, and that’s where you have to sit. Sometimes, you’re placed nearer or farther away from the action—the head table, the dance floor, the food—and you hope that’s where you’re placed. But I guess that depends on how much the bride and groom like you.

In the ancient world, seating arrangements were a big deal. If you went to a feast and were seated close to the host—if you were, let’s say, at the host’ right hand—that was the place of honor. The place furthest from the host was the place of humility, or shame. We sort of have this custom a little bit in our own culture. But in the ancient world, it was much more pronounced. Where you sat at table was a big deal: it showed your status, how important you were, the gravitas you held in the community.

And so Jesus in the Gospel is invited to this dinner party. And he’s watching all the Pharisees, and he’s seeing how they’re all skulking around, looking for that place of honor. And he tells them this parable. Jesus says, “*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, 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*.” [7-9]

Now I’ve been invited to plenty of weddings. But one thing I’ve never done, I’ve never been bold enough to go to the head table and sit down right next to the bride and groom. Because that place we know is reserved for the closest friends, the closest relatives, the best man, the maid of honor. I don’t belong there. And if I did that, the bride and the groom would say, “Uh, pastor, we actually have you set up at table 79, the one in the dark corner by the bathrooms next to Uncle John who doesn’t say much, isn’t particularly friendly. If you could shove that way, we’d appreciate it. Because these seats are for special people.”

So don’t go to a wedding and assume that you can sit in the place of honor. You might have to endure the shame of being sent down lower, and then everyone around will see that you’re really not that special. What should you do instead? Jesus says, “*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*.” [10-11] Don’t presume that you have any status, any honor by which you might sit close to the host. Go and take the lowest seat. And who knows? The host might say, ‘Friend.’ (In the Greek, it’s really, ‘beloved.’) “*Beloved*, come up where I am. Sit with me at table.”

This is more than Jesus doing the Miss Manners thing, teaching on table etiquette. Because this is a parable. And what are parables, but earthly illustrations with spiritual, heavenly meanings? And so, what’s the meaning of Jesus’ words?

Well the first thing that we have to understand is that Jesus is talking about the Church. And what is the Church? Think of the Church as a marriage feast. “This is the feast of victory for our God,” right? “The marriage feast of the lamb in his kingdom which has no end,” as we say in the prayers every week. And why? Why is the Church a marriage feast? Because this is where Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom, comes to meet us and to take us as his own dear bride, to lavish us with his gifts—forgiveness and life—to make us holy by his Word, spotless and without blemish, his radiant, perfect bride, covered in his own holiness and righteousness. And so coming to Church is coming to a wedding feast. And don’t forget that when we come to Church, we actually are feasting here. There actually is eating and drinking going on, as we sup on the body and blood of our Savior in the Lord’s Supper.

And, so apply everything that Jesus just said—about not taking the highest place, about taking the lowest place, about the host might invite you higher—take all of that, and apply it here, to the Church. We’ve come together in the presence of God this morning. But we haven’t come to God on the presumption of our own holiness. We haven’t come before God like the self-righteous Pharisees, who trusted in themselves, boasted in their own works, and presumed that by all their strict law-keeping they earned for themselves a place at table in the kingdom of God. We don’t come before God presuming anything.

Because we know who we are. We know what the Law says. That we are sinful and unclean. That we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. And because we are sinful, we are not worthy of the least of God’s goodness toward us. And so, this Supper: we don’t deserve it. We haven’t earned for ourselves a place at this table. In fact, if seating assignments were given at the Lord’s Table on the basis of our merit, we wouldn’t be at table 79. We’d be miles outside in the dark and the cold.

But you see, this feast, the feast of our Lord’s body, crucified for you on the cross, and our Lord’s blood, shed for you to redeem you from sin, death, and hell—this feast is precisely for the unworthy and the sinner. Because it’s a feast of God’s grace and mercy. And what is grace but the undeserved, unearned love and compassion of our God, which he shows to us because of Christ, and what Christ has done for us. This is the feast where the Lord takes those like you and me who are in the lowliest positions in life, and invites us up higher, gives us the place of honor at his own table, forgives our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. And it’s all by grace, without any merit or worthiness in me.

[Jesus] *said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”* [12-14]

Why is it so important to invite specifically those who can’t pay you back? Because we’re the one who could never pay God back for all his goodness to us. And yet he loved us anyway by sending his Son. That’s the very definition of Christianity. And so the love we have for others as Christians, is a grace-filled love that embraces the little, the least, the lost, and the last. Because that’s who we are, and that’s how God loved us. So that our love as Christians is shaped and patterned after God’s love toward us.

*“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* The one who exalts himself is the one who comes before God is self-righteousness and pride, but the one who humbles himself is the one who comes before God in repentance, realizing we have nothing to bring to God but our sin, and in faith, believing that Christ alone is my salvation, my righteousness, and that salvation alone is a free gift. And the Lord exalts the humble to the place of honor and calls them higher to receive the marriage feast of the Lamb in his kingdom which has no end.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*