

“You’re In My Seat”

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 (Epistle Lesson)

Hebrews 13:1 Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. **2** Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. **3** Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

4 Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. **5** Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

“Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.”

6 So we say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?”

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. **8** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. **16** And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 (Gospel Lesson)

When I became a true student of the Bible, twenty-five years or so ago, some of the writing from the Book of Hebrews and my first reading this morning really touched my heart. Scripture can do that to you, depending on where you are physically or emotionally at any one certain time. I’ve read through this “Good Book,” cover to cover, from Genesis to Maps, several times. In fact, I read it cover to cover every year and it always amazes me, and I’m not sure why, but I can read the same Scripture and it will speak to me differently every time I read it. Kind of like watching a movie or a television re-run, and you see something different every time you watch it. I read through the Bible every year and as we get close to the end of the year, I will make available to you the

reading plan that I have come to enjoy. In fact, I'm considering publishing it in your weekly worship bulletin next year.

“Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Love for strangers. You may be thinking, why love them? I wonder if we all haven't felt like a stranger in one way or another some time in our life. Walking into a new classroom, a new church, a new Sunday school class, a new civic or social group. If you have ever suffered from shyness or that feeling that you somehow just don't belong, you know what I'm talking about. Standing in the back of the room, shaking from nerves, the sweaty palms, eyes darting toward the exit in case you feel that a fast get away is necessary.

Maybe the writer of Hebrews was revealing that God has this quirky way of using the stranger to test us, to let God's self be made know to us, for new life to come through them, the them who could be we or us. If you've ever been a stranger, a newcomer, then you know how great it feels to encounter any show of hospitality, no matter how small.

“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” The writer isn't asking you to pity those in prison or those being mistreated. The writer isn't even asking you to pray for them. He, or she, is asking that you envision yourself right there beside them in their misery, in an act of solidarity, and to realize that we are all in bondage.

And then this Scripture, that for me is the answer to those who think that there are parts of the Bible which are irrelevant for us today. For those who believe we can read and interpret the Bible how we want to, or as some who want to use what they call their “Three bucket approach” (keep some and throw some out) the writer of Hebrews says, **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

Luke Text

Luke 14:1 One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

7 When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: **8** “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. **9** If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. **10** But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. **11** For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. **13** But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, **14** and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

“He was being carefully watched.” Not watched like we might watch a rock star or a star athlete—Jesus was being watched so they could catch Him doing something they thought He shouldn’t do—like healing on the Sabbath, which we dealt with last week.

He hadn’t been invited there to be the entertainment. He hadn’t really been invited there for a delicious meal. He had been invited there with the intent on making a meal out of Him.

But all of the time that the Pharisee and his guests were watching Jesus it is obvious that He in turn had been watching them. He’s observing their manners and the values that were being played out. And Jesus interrupts the party to do some teaching of His own about values and manners—about the values and manners that belong in the Kingdom of God. (Mind your manners.)

What Jesus is seeing at this dinner is the guests choosing the places of honor or the “first couches” which opened them up to all kinds of shame and ridicule if a more honorable person showed up and they were asked to move.

Have you ever attended a ball game or concert and you weren’t sure where your seat was located? Or maybe you did know where your seat was located, and you

spotted a better seat that wasn't occupied. You get all comfortable—you congratulate yourself on the fine seat—you take a selfie to send to all of your friends; and the usher comes along and says, "Sir, or Ma'am, I'm sorry but you are in the wrong seat and are going to have to move." The only thing more embarrassing would have been if the usher photo bombed your selfie.

Many of you probably have a story of being told that you were sitting in someone's pew in church. It's hard to sleep in an unfamiliar pew.

One of my former District Superintendents told about his first Sunday in one of his appointments how a lady told his wife and daughters that they had to move. That they were sitting in her pew. And when he was introduced and then in turn asked his wife and daughters to stand, the poor women wanted to hide under **HER** pew.

In my first appointment I put visitor cards in the pew racks, much like I've done here. You won't have visitors unless you are prepared for them. Anyway, I had this one guy who would come in early every Sunday and remove those cards from his pew. I guess he thought that no one would feel welcome to sit in HIS pew. Every Sunday afternoon I'd replace the cards in his pew and early the next Sunday morning he would take them out. I guess it was our little game since he had to know it was me putting the cards back.

Jesus is suggesting that we take the lowest seat and when the host asks us to move up, we receive glory from those already seated. Basically, what Jesus is saying is, "the way up is actually down."

Jesus is trying to teach us something about God, that God loves an underdog, so He exalts the lowly and humbles the mighty.

In our anxiety about who's in and who's out—our trying to keep up with the Jones's—we face the dilemma that we can never be "in" enough to be truly secure. Jesus saw this at this meal He's been invited to. He saw the guests jockeying for the places of honor—the places where they would be seen.

Jesus says, **“But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’”** Friends, our host at the banquet which will count will be Jesus Himself. We don’t have to scramble for a place at His table! Our names are on the invitation list. There’s a place prepared just for us.

In God’s Kingdom, everyone is welcome! You don’t have to puff yourself up or pretend. Your value isn’t determined by calculations. You don’t have to get and grab and grapple for a place!

Thomas Wheeler, the former CEO of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company told a good story on himself. He said that while he and his wife were out driving, he noticed they were low on gas. So, he pulled off at the first exit and came to this dumpy little gas station with one pump. There was only one man working the place, so he asked the man to fill it up while he checked the oil. He added a quart of oil, closed the hood, and noticed his wife talking and smiling at the attendant. When they saw him looking at them, the station attendant walked away and pretended as if nothing happened. Wheeler paid the man and he and his wife got back on the road.

As they were driving Wheeler asked his wife if she knew the man from the gas station. Well, she admitted that she did know him—they had gone to high school together—had dated seriously for about a year. Well, Wheeler couldn’t help but to brag about himself a little and said, “Boy you were lucky I came along. If you’d have married him, you’d be the wife of a gas station attendant instead of the wife of a CEO.” His wife replied, “My dear, if I had married him, he’d be the CEO and you’d be the gas station attendant.”

Jesus warned His followers often about thinking more highly of themselves than they ought. Comedian Lily Tomlin once said, “The trouble with the rat-race is that even if you win, you’re still just a rat.” Jesus put it this way, **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”** At Jesus’s table the first are last and the last will be first. Everyone will stand on equal ground.

Jesus also has advice for us as to whom we invite to our parties. He says, **“Do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors.”** He doesn’t mean that we should never entertain our relatives and friends but that we should include **“the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.”** These are the folks who can never repay the favor of the invitation because they are too poor or weak—and Jesus insists that in so doing **“You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”**

Albert Schweitzer once said, “The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” And maybe you’ve heard this, but if you only hang around with people like you, you become arrogant and ignorant.

Let’s face it—if Jesus weren’t the Son of God—if Jesus weren’t someone we already know—would we invite Him to our party? He was of Mideastern descent—those we profile now. He was homeless—He had long hair and was unshaven—the clothes on His back were probably the only ones He had—He would have smelled bad and hung out with twelve others who looked and smelled just like Him. Is this someone we would want at our party? Probably not.

There was once a cowboy who showed up at church one Sunday morning to worship. He was dressed as he always dressed and probably sat where he wasn’t supposed to and the people in the church, including the preacher, gave him that look. As he walked out the door the preacher took him aside and said, “If you come back to worship with us next week you may want to talk to God as to what the proper attire might be for attending church.”

He showed up again the next week, in the same attire, and sat where he did the week before. The preacher asked him if he had talked with God as to his attire. He told the preacher he had, and the preacher wanted to know what God said. The cowboy said, “God said He didn’t know, He’s never been in this church.”

“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” May God was testing that church with that cowboy.

Don't we want to make God proud of us? We do that when we look around to those who are helpless, hurting, the destitute, and do something for those who can do nothing for us in return. Jesus says it's all right to want to be one of the beautiful people—if we understand who the truly beautiful people are. They are the ones using their blessings of life to bless others.

Heaven's rewards are heavenly in nature. The hospitality which Jesus commends fills the earth with love, as a foretaste of a heavenly joy.

Thanks be to God!