

Sermon
The Rev. Kelsey Kresse
Lectionary 22C
August 28, 2022
First English Lutheran Church, Austin, TX

Grace and peace to you from our creator and redeemer. Amen.

I cannot begin to tell you how incredible it is to be standing in this place and worshipping with all of you. When I left Austin at the end of June 2020, it was with the caveat: see you later! The plan was to come back in the fall to properly say goodbye to all of you. But as the pandemic ravaged across this country and only got worse after I left, those plans never materialized. I moved back to Chicago and then later in the year, finished my Master of Divinity on Zoom in the office I hobbled together in my parent's basement.

Then, I entered the first call process and ended up at an incredible congregation in Northern Virginia. But through it all; the beginning of the pandemic during my internship, the completion of my degree, my ordination, and in the first year of my ministry, I have carried you all with me. I've carried your support, I've carried the relationships I built, I've carried the things I learned here, I've carried the spirit of this place, this ministry, with me throughout these two years. You taught me how to "wonder" you taught me what it is to walk alongside you, you taught me what it is to mourn together, I witnessed true leadership here, you let me hold your babies, you challenged my assumptions, you gave me the space and live to grown into my pastoral identity, and you taught me to love a little thing called a Mexican Martini.

So, now I have returned to you but this time it is not to say goodbye. It's to say "so good to see you," "I've missed you," "thank you," and then "see you next time." This place left an indelible mark on me and my ministry, and it is so, so, so good to be back with you.

In our gospel passage this morning, Jesus is being watched. He is being watched closely as he makes his way to Jerusalem for Passover, as he makes his way to Jerusalem for betrayal, as he makes his way to Jerusalem for the crucifixion. Jesus knows what he is headed into and the tension is rising as he continues to preach and heal in direct opposition to the Romans and their puppet ruler Herod. Jesus and his followers are headed for Jerusalem and the religious authorities are watching him closely, hoping to gather evidence against him, plotting to trip him up in an argument, keeping an eye out for drama and intrigue. They were watching him. But he was also watching them.

Jesus was watching them to see how they would act, to be able to use their behavior as an example of how not to act in the new way of living in God's kingdom. And so these observations lead him to this parable about arrangement of seats at the dinner table.

As I was thinking about this parable this week and also about how all of my students went back to school on Monday, I began thinking of a high school cafeteria and how tables and friend groups are arranged. And then, of course, I remembered the iconic scene in the classic movie of my generation, Mean Girls, when Janice leads previously homeschooled and new girl Kady through the cafeteria and school explaining the mapping out and geography of the animal-kingdom-like world of a suburban high school.

There are never real maps of these things, of course, but Janice can articulate exactly who sits where, and why, while warning Kady of what might happen if she makes a misstep. At some point in the movie, Kady simply elects to eat in the bathroom rather than navigate the unspoken hierarchy of the lunch room.

People in Jesus' time also adhered to very specific rules about where people were to sit when they ate together. Anyone in the room would know precisely where you ranked in the life of the host, and in the greater social scheme of that day. And while a high school lunch room is different than a Roman dining room and our lives outside of cafeterias are also different, we still often fall into the rank and file of unwritten social rules. We too separate ourselves from each other based on race, socioeconomic status, political party, education, or any number of other borders and barriers we can think of to install in our lives.

SO Jesus watched those people at the dinner and he watches us as we arrange ourselves around earthly systems that only serve to keep us apart. At the end of the parable Jesus suggests they upend the social systems that scaffold their ideas of what it means to eat together. Jesus suggests that they invite people not in order to win favor or in the hope that someone else will invite them to dinner someday, but that they invite those who could never repay them for the hospitality of being welcomed into someone's home. Jesus isn't telling the people around him or even us that we shouldn't have our friends over for dinner but he is saying don't view your relationships with others as transactional.

When we stop viewing the people around our tables as people we can use to further our own ends and start making sure that the people who get invited to the table are the ones who most need to eat we are living into the community that Jesus intends for us. We are called to love, support, and help our neighbor not because they can help us in return but simply because they are children of God.

In the first half of the parable, Jesus suggest that one starts at the lowest ranked seat. What if the lowest ranked seat out in our daily lives is simply the one that is next to someone who is very different than us and a little out of our comfort zone. Imagine what we all might learn by heading to those seats first rather than the comfortable ones that we'll be able to leverage to our advantage later.

Jesus is inviting us to go check out a different group in the high school cafeteria, go meet someone new, go learn from someone who is different. We are being invited to step out of our comfort zones to be in relationship with others, in a new way that isn't always supported by the social structure in which we live. This is a counter cultural idea- to do something because it is the right thing to do, even if it doesn't further our self interest, or even works against that self interest.

This way of life won't help us in a world of transactional relationships that are based on power imbalances or social capital. But they will help guide us in the building of the kingdom of God where the lowly are brought up and the mighty are cast aside.

In the kingdom of God, people care for their neighbor, feed the hungry, visit those in prison and nurse the sick, not for show but out of respect of God. But we know someone is always watching might follow that example. What are we doing in our lives that will people will see and know that our actions reflect the abundant promises of God? In high school cafeterias, the kingdom of God makes sure everyone has somewhere to sit at lunch regardless of what they're wearing. I wonder, what does the Kingdom of God look out in your lives, out in the cafeterias of your day to day life and work. And I wonder where you might take a new, a different seat and learn something new about what God is up to in the world. Amen.