

The 12th Sunday After Pentecost: A Seat at the Table

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If the bags under my eyes are more pronounced, in contrast to the warm spiritual glow that still emanates from the rest of me, it's because I just spent the weekend here at Calvary with about 70 young people at what we call "Happening." Happening, for those who don't know, is a spiritual retreat for teenagers, led by teenagers, overseen by several adults, many of whom are in their early to mid 20s, all of whom are still in the building until the closing eucharist this afternoon. Happening is a miraculous thing to behold. And it went off mostly well.

But I wasn't so sure it would as things were getting started Friday night. The "Happeners" (as they call the kids attending for the first time) had just arrived, and ice breaker games were beginning. Everyone had formed a large circle in the Crook Auditorium, and the person on the inside of the circle had to walk up to a Happener and say, "Hi. My name is Jack. Do you love your neighbors?" And then the person who's just been greeted would say something like, "Hi my name is Jill. And yes, I love my neighbors. Especially those who have cats." And then everyone who has a cat... At home, that is. No one brought a cat to Happening that I know of. The cat owners in the circle would have to leave their place and rush to take someone else's spot. The person left without a place after the scramble is now in the middle.

I'm sure you can see what offended me about this game. It's basically musical chairs. But there is no music. And there are no chairs. What is this generation coming to? Are there no rules at all in this world anymore? What's next? Pin the tail on the donkey with no tail and no donkey? Baseball without bases or balls?

Well, after I got over my very justified righteous indignation, I realized that the game did somehow manage to achieve something good. In the old game, chairs go away and the circle gets smaller until there is only a seat for one. The prize was to end up all by yourself when the music finally stops. Somehow in the new version, amid a similar frantic chaos, everyone was finding a place in an expanding circle. Everyone was being given a seat at a wide and widening table.

Maybe we should be watching these kids and their newfangled games a little more closely.

Jesus was being watched, we're told, when he went to eat a sabbath meal at the home of an important leader in a local congregation. There were lots of rules and customs and conventions about meals in Jesus's time. There were laws about washing one's hands and what foods were clean and customs about who gets to sit where. Jesus was being watched, I suppose, because he was getting a reputation for disregarding customs when he thought the situation warranted it or the people involved deserved better.

Jesus was being watched, but he was doing a little watching himself as people jockeyed for the best seats, as we do. Ardelle likes to point out that this was a religious leader and that I'm a religious leader and that my seat in church is right there. But we're going to move right along from that unhelpful observation.

Jesus makes two responses to what he sees. It's easy to miss that there are two, but take another look. When he notices what the guests are doing, he tells them his little parable about a wedding banquet where, after everyone has sat down, the host rearranges them according to how he thinks people should be seated. Whatever's on the menu at this banquet, if you chose a good place, you'll be eating a species of crow, as you're sent to down to a cheaper seat. But if you've chosen humbly, you'll be asked to move up. And won't that feel better than the demotions you're all setting yourselves up for?

That's his first response. Maybe the dinner guests could begin to break out of their self serving habits by seeing that those habits might not always serve them very well.

But the second response is just for the host, to whom he turns and says, "Why did you invite these people to dinner? Why does anyone invite people to their parties who are trying to prove how important they are?" Actually, what he says, if you read a little more closely, is, "Don't invite these people to dinner. They might invite you to their house in return, and wouldn't that be dreadful!"

It would. It would be dreadful in a very particular way. It would be dreadful because you would be repaid, Jesus says. It would be dreadful because you'd still be living in the quid pro quo world and you could be living in the world of grace.

"When you give a banquet," Jesus says, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." He says, "Just quit the game. Drop the rules. Step off this conveyer belt to despair and don't invite anyone into your life because of what they can give you. You'd be so free if you could do that. So free."

Much of the strongest language in the Bible is about our obligation to be generous to the poor. Our obligation to make room at our table for the immigrant, the outcast, the alien. Just glance over at our reading from Hebrews and there it is again: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers..." It's a persistent teaching throughout scripture. But I don't believe we're told to welcome strangers and invite people too poor to repay us into our lives so that we'll get a bigger payment in heaven. I think Jesus wants us to come more fully alive right now.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," is what Hebrews goes on to say. Angels. Like those who Abraham welcomed by the Oaks of Mamre, who said Sarah would have a child in old age. If we'd just drop the self-serving rules we usually use to decide who we'll let into our lives and who we'll sit beside at the banquet, an angel might walk in and change everything. An angel might enter and even change what we want.

In 1985 a Dutch Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen went to live in a L'Arche community in France for developmentally disabled adults. This sounds like a good, noble, Christian thing to do. Choosing the humbler seat, and all that. But here's how Nouwen describes the experience:

"The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, 'Don't give him meat, he doesn't eat meat, he's a Presbyterian.'"

Henri Nouwen's story is about getting up from a dinner table with a very familiar set of norms about who sits where and how people are valued, and sitting down at another one. "These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people," he wrote, "forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments."

To put his story in the realm of our gospel reading, Henri Nouwen had the best seat at the table that was his world. His books were bestsellers, his teaching appointments were plum ones at Ivy League schools, his classrooms were packed with adoring students. And it all just didn't add up to joy. A life jockeying for the best seat at the table can be empty even for the guy who gets the best seat at the table.

So, he changed tables, and watched his needs and desires and even his joy begin to change.

Because the need to be admired, affirmed, exalted is an old human burden, isn't it? And I'm becoming more and more convinced that when Jesus ends a teaching with something like, "...for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous," his first intention is to simply push our hope for repayment right out of this life and into the mystery of the next. He's saying, "Just take getting what you're due—whether in wealth, or status, or admiration—just take getting repaid or admired by other people in this life right off the table. And see what it's like to live this way. See if your desires and your needs begin to change. See if a burden is lifted.

Because as natural as it seems to live clambering for the best seat or for the praise of important people, that's not the life God intends for us. That's the life Jesus wants to set us free from.