

LUKE 14:1, 7–14. (EHV)

One Sabbath day, when Jesus went into the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat bread, they were watching him closely. ... When he noticed how they were selecting the places of honor, he told the invited guests a parable. **“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline in the place of honor, or perhaps someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him. The one who invited both of you may come and tell you, ‘Give this man your place.’ Then you will begin, with shame, to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and recline in the lowest place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he will tell you, ‘Friend, move up to a higher place.’ Then you will have honor in the presence of all who are reclining at the table with you. Yes, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”** He also said to the one who had invited him, **“When you make a dinner or a supper, do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or rich neighbors, so that perhaps they may also return the favor and pay you back. But when you make a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. Certainly, you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous.”**

“Know your place.”

I’m guessing that expression is familiar to you, even though it isn’t a very popular one. It isn’t very popular, because we don’t like to think of ourselves as occupying certain places, certain ranks, certain classes, certain stations where we’re expected to act a certain way and are forbidden from doing certain things and saying what’s really on our minds. But like I said, I think you’re familiar with the expression because, whether we like the idea of having a place or not, the fact is that we all do have one. No matter who we are, there are some situations where we need to know that we are not top dog and that we can’t just say and do whatever we want. We maybe haven’t had to be told, “Know your place,” too often as adults, but somewhere along the line, when we were acting or speaking bigger than our britches, we were probably reminded to think about our place, or something equivalent to that.

Jesus is the one who reminds us to know our place this morning. In fact, he tells us that knowing or not knowing our place has eternal consequences. He teaches us to know our place with God, and with our fellow humans.

1. With God

Different people have different practices with regard to their main meal. For some it’s lunch; for others it’s supper. I used to assume that when someone referred to dinner, that person was talking about supper. But I’ve discovered that dinner is lunch for at least some of you. But regardless of when dinner is on most days, I think it’s safe to say that among churchgoers, and even among many non-churchgoers, the practice is pretty uniform on Sunday. On Sunday the main meal is lunch. If someone asked, “When’s dinner?” on Sunday, even I would assume that person was talking about lunch. Some of you perhaps even go straight from church or Bible class to a restaurant for a hearty meal.

The same was true in Jesus's day. In fact, on the other days of the week it was customary only to have two meals, breakfast and supper, and supper was always dinner. But on the Sabbath, Saturday, people enjoyed three meals. They would have breakfast, then attend the synagogue for worship, and then go home to enjoy a hearty dinner around noon.

On this particular Sabbath, Jesus had gone to the synagogue as usual. Afterward, perhaps as people were conversing before returning home, a prominent Pharisee invited him and a number of other guests to his house for dinner. And Jesus accepted.

Back then, you didn't sit yourself down in chairs around a large table for a meal. You reclined on your left side on dining couches, and there might have been one large table in front of you, a little shorter than the couch so that you could easily reach out and access the food, or small individual tables might have been brought to you by servants.

There were usually two or three dining couches arranged next to each other. If there were two, one of them was considered the head couch. The most distinguished guest would recline at the head of the head couch, on the far left side. The reason the far left side was considered the head in a two-couch arrangement is that, since everyone was reclined on their left side, they were reclined facing to the right, so the person on the left side of the couch had a good view of everyone else reclining with him and could most easily address any of them. But if there was a larger arrangement, like three dining couches, they were arranged in a sort of upside-down U from your perspective as someone entering the room, with the middle couch being the farthest back in the room. And in that case, the most distinguished guest would recline in the middle of the middle couch, the next most distinguished would recline to his left, the one after that would recline to the right of the most distinguished, and so on, alternating back and forth as the couches filled up.

We don't know exactly where Jesus was reclining, or if he had even reclined yet, but wherever he was, he was watching where his host's other guests were reclining. He noticed that as they came in to recline, each one was choosing the most distinguished place that was available to him. So for instance, if the place to the left of the most distinguished place was open, he simply went and reclined there, assuming that he was as much distinguished, if not more distinguished, than the next person who might come in.

So once they were all reclined, Jesus told them this parable, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline in the place of honor, or perhaps someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him. The one who invited both of you may come and tell you, 'Give this man your place.' Then you will begin, with shame, to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and recline in the lowest place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he will tell you, 'Friend, move up to a higher place.' Then you will have honor in the presence of all who are reclining at the table with you."

At first glance, this seems like nothing more than some common sense advice about proper meal etiquette. We wouldn't even really need Jesus to teach us this. We heard Solomon say something similar in our First Lesson: "Do not honor yourself in a king's presence. Do not stand in a place reserved for great people, because it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than for you to be humiliated before a ruler." There was even a Jewish rabbi who lived about eighty years after Jesus who explained Solomon's words by teaching, "Go two or three places lower and recline there, until they say to you, 'Move up,' rather than that you should go up and they should

say to you, ‘Move down.’ Better that people say to you ‘move up, move up,’ than to say to you, ‘move down, move down.’” Sounds almost exactly the same, right?

Is that all Jesus is teaching us? “Don’t presume to be the most distinguished guest at any party or event with a meal”? Hardly. There are four clues that show us Jesus is making a much stronger and higher point.

First, Jesus does not say like that later rabbi did, “Go two or three places lower than what you think you deserve.” He says, “Go and recline in the lowest place.” He is not saying, “Don’t presume to be the *most* distinguished.” He is saying, “Assume you are the *least* distinguished.” In order to easily adopt that mindset, you would need to be in a place where the host himself is so much greater than you that you wouldn’t dare to presume anything at his table. Just the fact that you were *invited* to his house would overwhelm you.

Second, Jesus did not tell his guests, “Don’t pick the highest place when you’re invited to a dinner.” No, he told them, “When you are invited by someone *to a wedding banquet*, do not recline in the place of honor.” For Jesus to say that in the middle of a dinner having no connection to any wedding, he must have a particular wedding banquet in mind.

Third, the Bible does not say, “Then Jesus *said* to his fellow guests, ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet...’” No, it says, “[Jesus] told them this *parable*: ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet...’” A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus clearly means to teach these people and us a much more important truth about spiritual things.

Finally, Jesus ends the parable with a striking statement: “Yes, *everyone* who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” As Jesus spoke these words, he was looking around at people who had each grabbed the highest available place, and they were suffering no ill consequences from their selection. They were probably stuffing their faces with food. They weren’t being humbled and they weren’t going to be humbled at that meal.

But what point is Jesus making? There is a much bigger, much more important dinner about to be served, and if you dare to have any presumption whatsoever at *that* Host’s house, you *will* be humbled in short order—no exceptions.

Jesus is not talking about how you conduct yourself at Grandpa and Grandma’s, or where you sit the next time you attend a wedding reception at some fancy joint in Sioux Falls or the Black Hills. Jesus is talking about the wedding banquet of heaven, the marriage feast of the Lamb. He is talking about how you conduct yourself before God’s judgment throne, at the entrance to his house.

Now I highly doubt that on Judgment Day any of you is seriously contemplating stepping out of line and rushing past everyone else, Almighty God included, expecting to waltz through the pearly gates and then find the best seat you can at Jesus’s banquet table. And I highly doubt that when you appear before God’s judgment throne, any of you is seriously planning to say outright to God, “Seriously, God? You want to know why you should let me in? Cut the act! Don’t you know who I am and what I’ve done?”

But let us consider how humble we are before God right now, friends, because even though Jesus isn’t, strictly speaking, talking about how we conduct ourselves on earth, the fact is that the two are related—how we conduct ourselves on earth and how we conduct ourselves in heaven. If we show up everywhere on earth expecting to be treated like somebody, we shouldn’t

think that we are going to do a complete about-face before God's judgment throne. If we presume upon God's grace now—whether by deliberately continuing in any sin, or leaving our Bibles unopened, or treating worship on Sunday like a free sample at Sam's Club that we can take or leave but that will always be there if we want it—if we presume upon God's grace now, we should not think that we will suddenly value and cherish God's grace and appeal to it alone on Judgment Day. Or maybe it isn't so much how we expect to be treated ourselves or how we talk about ourselves. Maybe it's how we talk about and treat others. Maybe we're always finding the worst in them and talking about them in comparatively negative ways which, whether we intend to or not, has the effect of pushing them all down to less distinguished places and elevating ourselves to the highest place. Do we think that we'll suddenly do the opposite on Judgment Day and say with Paul that we are the chief of sinners, deserving of the lowest place? We won't. We will try to exalt ourselves, and we will be humbled. We will be condemned.

Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

But if we know our place... If we acknowledge the truth that we are sinful humans who deserve nothing from a holy God... If we acknowledge that we deserve to experience what we heard last week, to have the gates of heaven shut in our face so that we have to stand outside knocking and begging, "Lord, please open the door for us!"... If we are so overwhelmed by the fact that God has actually invited us to his house in the first place that we wouldn't even think of taking anything higher than the lowest place if he actually lets us in... If we say as the centurion did, "Lord, I do not even deserve to be in the same room as you"... If we say as the Canaanite woman did, "Lord, I know I'm nothing but a dog, so I'll be tickled pink if you just allow me under your table so that I can have the crumbs that fall from it"...

When we abandon our own righteousness, which does not exist anyway, and flee to the righteousness of Christ, which is overabundant, then Jesus makes an amazing promise to us: "*Whoever* who humbles himself will be exalted." Jesus will not only address you, "Friend," and he will not just tell you, "Friend, come in," but he will honor you with the invitation, "Friend, move up to a higher place at my table. You are my honored guest."

Know your place with God. It's the lowest one in yourself, but a highly honored one in Christ.

2. With Our Fellow Humans

And if we know our place with God, if we know that we deserve the lowest place but that he purely by his grace gives us an honored place, how will we view our place in the world? How will treat others that the world considers to be the lowest and least?

"He also said to the one who had invited him, 'When you make a dinner or a supper, do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or rich neighbors, so that perhaps they may also return the favor and pay you back. But when you make a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. Certainly, you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous.'"

If our honored place from God comes not from presuming it should be ours, but when we humble ourselves before God and claim the lowest place, then won't we also know our place with others? Won't we seek to honor those who are just like us—lowly, despised, wretched?

Now Jesus isn't forbidding us to have friends or forbidding us to treat family like family. What he is doing is getting us to emerge from a mindset where we do things only on the basis of merit, only on the basis of what we will or might get in return. If we only have hope because God has freely given *us* what we do not earn or deserve, then we will look for opportunities to freely give *others* what they do not earn or deserve.

It starts in simple ways here at church. Yes, you have your friends here at church, and it's good to talk to them. But how about looking for opportunities to greet and to talk to others that are outside your circle of friends, to show that you care about others even if they're not your friends?

It continues at home and at work. We often hear about employee discounts, discounts for charities and churches, and rewards programs and loyalty programs. That is all fine. But those discounts and rewards are all often given on the basis of merit, or the businesses or people give them because they think they'll benefit from them or get repaid in some way. But what about showing honor to people who don't deserve it and who will never repay you?

I always love reading or hearing true stories, usually around Christmas, where a person in line at the grocery store or at the drive-thru window of a fast food restaurant gives the cashier money to pay for the person behind them that they don't even know. But Jesus takes us even beyond that—people we *do* know, but who are looked down on by most, people who are poor, crippled, blind, and lame, people who will never pay us back a cent or give us one ounce of work in return. God values and blesses such generosity, because it is a fruit of faith. It shows that the one being generous knows that he deserves the lowest place before God, but has been given a place of honor because of God's generosity in Christ. It shows about the one being generous that the only reward he really cherishes is the one that comes from God in heaven out of his grace.

So what is your place?

Let us answer that question with this prayer: Lord, we confess that we deserve the lowest place with you, but you in your unfathomable grace will not let us remain there. So if you have exalted me from my lowest place, then my place is to do the same for others that the world considers to be the lowest and not worth my time. Help me to exalt the place of others, even as you have done for me. Amen.