

**Reserved Seating**  
Psalm 84:1, 10-16

August 29, 2010  
Luke 14:1-14

I have a particular memory attached to this passage of scripture. Several years ago I was at the home of a church member, Rod Philipps. Rod and I often shot basketball in his driveway, and often we would play Horse, that game where opponents challenge each other to hit difficult shots. Rod's seven year old, very smart little boy was in the yard, watching us and playing. Rod's yard had a fence around it, and so there was a twist to Horse at his house. If you could hit a shot from beyond the fence, the BTF shot, and your opponent missed – it was double letters! If you attempted a BTF and missed – you got double letters, or if your opponent hit the shot – double letters.

So Rod went into the yard for a BTF shot from near where Collin was playing. It was a ridiculously long shot and a bad angle. Rod launched it up and it arced a long way and swished in the net. Needless to say Rod shouted and juked and postured and flexed – typical in-your-face stuff. So, I took the ball and walked over to the same place. Collin stood up near me and gave me a look that said he knew I was never going to hit that shot. It was a long way. So, in desperation, I tucked back, from the waist, shot a big arc, that glanced just off the backboard and drained into the hoop. Rod's mouth dropped open and I laid it on thicker than he had.

We met at the fence and were filled with prideful boasting on our tremendous shots. Collin stood by. Finally, Rodney said to him, “Well, Collin, what do you think?” And he looked at us, and with utter innocence said, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” We looked at him, and we looked at each other. And Rod said, “Sweetie, why don’t you go in the house and see if mommy made some lemonade.”

It turned out that Collin’s mother had prepared her Sunday School lesson that morning and Collin had memorized the memory verse that was meant for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade class. We aren’t sure whether he knew that what he said had such application, but it hit its mark!

Though Jesus was not talking about a game of Horse, he was talking about the way we sometimes play the game of life. We jockey for the lead position. We angle for the best seat. We may feel smug when we prevail at this, or what is worse, we do it and don’t recognize we are doing it; we are not aware of who is being left out and pushed to the side.

Jesus knows about this. Even though he has been invited to this dinner in this Pharisee’s home, they are watching him closely. The worldly powers will accommodate Jesus as long as Jesus plays the rules the way the world has set them down. If he will not play the worldly way, then he will have to sit at the far end of

the table, or even in a seat away from the main table, or maybe Jesus won't be invited in.

The worldly way is kind of hard on folks. Jesus meets a man at the punch bowl who is breathing heavily and struggling to get around – he has congestive heart failure and is retaining a lot of fluid – that is what dropsy is. I imagine this man was once younger and healthier and maybe an established member of society. And Jesus has the power to restore him – maybe so that he can sit at table with all the muckety mucks again. But when he asks the power brokers if this kind of mercy is permitted – they seem to prefer to let the man be sick and made to sit away from them. Jesus reminds them that the law says it is legal to treat an ox better than they would treat their friend. This is power in religious clothing.

Jesus advises those who follow him to fly below the radar. He advises his followers to not play the worldly game. We have lived the worldly rules so long that we are accustomed to scratching those old itches – doing those things that build us up while at the same time moving other people down. As I said, it is such a reflex we may not be aware we are doing it. Jesus had to point it out to those with him at the dinner party. Jesus tells them that the better way is to be faithful to God and faithful to one's own true self. Stick to the truth you know and live and speak the truth in love. You may always sit on the outskirts, or you may not be invited, but you will not be caught in the machinery of the worldly game –

machinery that may take you up high in a hurry, and the same machinery that may grind you up and spit you out, too.

Back on our mission trip to Nashville we drove around the Tennessee capital building, and I was cognizant of something that happened in that state house building 90 years ago this week. It is hard to believe it now but there once was a day that women could not vote and could not hold office in this country. For almost 150 years of our nation's history women could come to the dinner party but when the real discussions started, they had to move back from the table, so to speak. Before the Civil War some women began to speak up about the injustice of that. It took more than 70 years of continuously raising the issue while being politely but forceably denied a basic right of citizenship. Tennessee was the state that ratified the amendment that changed our constitution and finally recognized the full citizenship and rights of women.

Jesus looked around at the people feasting there and saw how comfortable and close knit they were. I know that I too enjoy the banquet at holiday time when it is kith and kin gathered in a very familiar little bunch. The idea of inviting in strangers, and accommodating crippled, blind and lame folk kind of shakes the Norman Rockwell picture up, making it more like Clark Griswold's Christmas dinner.

Just last week a member of our church wondered if maybe it would be a good thing to host a Christmas lunch at Northminster and invite in people in the

community who have nowhere to go on Christmas Day, or who do not have resources to make a nice dinner. She said that her family celebration was done in such a timely manner that they have nothing to do on Christmas Day anyway.

When we lived so far from kin we often had wacky mixtures of people together for Thanksgiving and other holidays – not so much in careful obedience to Jesus’ teaching as in a kind of shrugging acceptance of the fact that we were strangers and sojourners far from home, so why not join up with the others in the same boat. Oddly, those mix and match dinners, the funny dishes people brought, the things learned about people you did not know, and the general joy and gratitude from having a place to be when it is time to celebrate the mystery of being, those have formed some the most fruitful times and fondest memories.

Collin quoted a great teaching – and not one to be observed slavishly, but almost a proverb, a statement of real truth that comes from God.

Our friend Jack Davidson, a Presbyterian minister in our community, adjunct faculty at LRU, who has preached her and whose sons in the military we support, recently had a great thing to say at the installation of a new session at a church that is finally getting over a big dispute. He told them – Humility is ability. And by that he meant to tell this church that had been playing way too much by worldly rules that God does not operate that way nor does God honor that kind of power. In humility, as Paul writes so beautifully in the letter to the Philippians, count others as better than yourselves. In humility we actively put our trust in the

great power in the universe – the power of God and the outworking of God’s love and purpose and justice. To be humble does not mean to be a doormat for people to walkover, but it does mean to state the truth as we see it, to act out our love as we can, to question systems of power without challenge or confrontation, but clearly and carefully and lovingly as if something really precious and grand depended on it – and it does. But to do so trusting God, trusting the power and purpose that is at work. To do so persistently like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and like Jesus, and clearly, like little Collin, and in humility trust in the redeeming power of Christ.

That is how we learn the way of opening our hearts and our minds, of opening our hands and our doors, of loving with care and right motives, and of discovering in Christ the way, and the truth, and the life to which he calls us.

That is how we realize that those reserved seats that we coveted and then protected and clung to, and defended, are really not such a big deal after all, and, in fact, they are better suited for those who will not, in this world, ever be able to get them. And so we hold them for someone else, the one whom Jesus is leading to that seat, and whom Jesus is leading to us and we to them, when we take our place with Jesus, in all Christ-like humility. Amen.