

Sermon Proper 17 Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

What Seat Do You Choose?

“People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”

So American monk Thomas Merton tells us something we may not really want to hear, but we can immediately connect his uncomfortable truth to Jesus’ teaching in our gospel today.

We find it easy to connect with Jesus as a healer, as our savior, as a teacher and even as a prophet. But Jesus as a countercultural revolutionary, someone who speaks against the way our society works? That’s harder to stomach, especially when we realize that he is preaching against behavior that we engage in regularly.

In ancient Israel’s society, who sat where at a dinner party conveyed status as clearly as who has the corner office, who gets the Employee of the Month parking space, or whose child has the most attendees at her birthday party. Our lives are full of subtle status signals and we use them to communicate who we are and how we want others to see us.

Our clothing, what car we drive (or whether we have a car to drive), what neighborhood we live in, where we socialize—it all sends a message about our worth and prestige, usually based on our economic power. We buy a rung on the ladder as often as we “earn” it.

These signals were conveyed in Jesus’ time by the seating at a meal. And the seating as arranged by the host was not just a signal but a tool. If you hosted a dinner and wanted an advantageous marriage match with a certain young man for your daughter, you could seat her father at a higher place at the table than he usually would have. If a competitor in business shorted you in a deal, you could seat him lower at the table to communicate your displeasure.

Seating at the table was currency, and it was the stage on which political and social relationships were played out. It was the public display of an individual's or family's place on the spectrum of honor and shame.

A similar display in our society with similar messages might be the public encounter with a grocery clerk at the check-out counter. When you pay with food stamps, people draw many conclusions about you. And when you pay with an exclusive, members-only platinum credit card, people draw other conclusions about you. You are labeled and judged and placed within a strict hierarchy based on that public encounter. That is how these dinner seating charts worked in Jesus' time.

One of the most interesting parts of this gospel is what Jesus does *not* say. He does not say, "This entire status-by-seating system is bogus and I want you to chuck the whole thing." Jesus proceeds on the assumption that we will work and live within this system. Jesus says, "When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

So Jesus leaves the status system intact. That kind of seems like a let-down. You would think that he would get rid of it entirely. He seems to be promising us, "You're not in the corner office now, but if you take the rattiest old cubicle purposely, one day you will be in the corner office." At least that's how we would interpret it. But what if there's another way to think about it?

Let's think for a moment about what it feels like to jockey for position as we do so often at work and socially and at church. The endless competition. The unspoken cues and subtle put-downs. The unfairness of who is rewarded and who is shoved down to a lower rung. It's exhausting, isn't it? When we get caught up in these games of who's getting promoted or who's chairing the new church committee or who's got a new car in the driveway—we are disconnected from God and our true selves. And that drains us of life and vitality.

Jesus says, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled." What if he's referring to the soul-sucking exhaustion of the rat race? He's telling us that as long as we search for satisfaction in ways to put ourselves above others, we will find

ourselves with many shiny things and diplomas and titles, but cold and empty hearts. Exalting ourselves drives us to new lows of integrity and new poverty of happiness.

Jesus says, “All who humble themselves will be exalted.” What if the exaltation Jesus promises is not the corner office? What if it’s not the most Facebook likes? What if it’s not letters after our names or the senior warden’s role or a clergy collar around our neck? What if the exaltation Jesus promises is liberation from the whole status system?

If we decide we’re not going to play the game anymore, we start to make different choices. We stop searching for a leg up at work and look for a chance to lend a hand. We stop thinking we’re too important to set out chairs or wash dishes at church and instead show up early or stay late to do humble tasks. We keep our cars and our clothes and our phones an extra year, thinking of those around the world who make do with so much less than what we’re blessed with, no longer needing to display the latest and the flashiest.

Those choices begin as a spiritual discipline. It goes against our nature that drives us to seek comfort and status and power. But what begins as a discipline—choosing over and over to humble ourselves as Jesus asks us—starts to transform us. Suddenly, that craving to be the best, to have the most, to win at everything, starts to ebb and die away. This is the exaltation Jesus promises the humble. And if we keep working at it, small choice by small choice, the seed of peace that was planted by hard-earned discipline starts to flower.

“Those who humble themselves will be exalted.” When we are still trapped in the status system, we might assume that Jesus means that at the Great Dinner Table in the Sky, the humble will finally, finally get to have the choice seats at the head of the table. They’ll have an eternal corner office, a never outdated smartphone, and an infinity sign where their Facebook like number used to be. But that would not be heaven. It would be the same prison we lived in on earth.

We read in the Letter to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” The only way out of the chains of the status system is to follow Jesus in his example of downward mobility. We must of course avoid the trap of ostentatiously taking

on humble tasks and refusing honor loudly—that’s simply climbing a rung on the ladder of martyrdom and noble morality. It’s the same prison.

We can’t free ourselves from the status system. Jesus points that out by assuming that there will always be a table and there will always be fighting for higher positions at the table. Where we have a choice is where we choose to sit. And if we ask Jesus to be with us and help us to take the lower seat, help us to quit playing the game, help us to abandon the quest for success and money and power, he will exalt us to freedom from the need for status at all.

We won’t need to make a big show of it. We will know our true worth. We will know deep in our bones that our worth is not determined by where we sit, but by whom we are loved. And we are loved by Jesus. Amen.

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