

Why does Jesus care where people sit? It's a question worth asking after reading our Gospel lesson for today. Here we have Jesus giving instructions about where to sit at a wedding feast. And that's a little odd.

Does he care where we sit other times too? Does he care where we sit at church? I know we joke about having assigned seats and getting annoyed when people sit in our “our” seat. But do we have assigned seats? Does Jesus actually want us sitting in a particular place?

I think we know that the answer is... no. He doesn't. And yet, we still have to deal with this passage. Why does Jesus give us instructions about our seating habits?

Well, the answer to all this lies in the introduction to this passage in our reading today: “*Now he told a parable to those who were invited.*” A parable. But a different kind of parable than Jesus usually tells. Because those around him are the characters in it.

He's not asking them to imagine a circumstance. He's telling them to look at what they just did when they sat down at this very dinner and then he uses it as a lesson about some spiritual truth he's trying to teach them. Does Jesus care where people sit? No. He cares about what those seats represent about us and about the kingdom of God.

But since this dinner that Jesus is attending has become a living parable of sorts, let's take a step back and look closer at what's going on here. Jesus has been invited to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. Which is an interesting situation to begin with. Because Jesus and Pharisees were never on good terms. And now one of their most important leaders is bringing Jesus into his home for dinner.

That could have been a good thing. After all Nicodemus was also a ruler of the Pharisees. And, by all appearances, he became a Christian after Jesus came to his home. So this might have been a wonderful opportunity.

But it's not. Because it's clear the Pharisees gathered for this dinner are not there to learn from Jesus, like Nicodemus was. They're there to watch him. Scrutinize him. Ensnare him.

And so they set a trap for him. They schedule this dinner on the Sabbath. A day in which no one is allowed to do any work. Even perform an act of healing. And then they seat Jesus right next to a man afflicted with dropsy.

Dropsy is a very old term for a medical condition we more commonly call today an edema, which is just localized fluid build-up and swelling, usually in the arms, legs, hands, or feet. It can be very painful and debilitating and it's often a symptom of a more serious medical condition, like congestive heart failure or a disease of the kidneys. So this man is sick. This man needs a miracle.

The Pharisees know this. But they don't care about this man's suffering. They don't care about this man's poor health. They don't care about bringing this man to Jesus so that he can heal him. They only care about the fact that if Jesus does heal him, they'll have caught Jesus in the act of violating the Sabbath.

Jesus, of course, sees right through the trap. And he asks them, “*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?*” They don't answer. They think the answer is no. And they have every intention of making that accusation against Jesus.

But Jesus knows better. Jesus knows that God's Law is not so heartless that it would force a man to suffer simply because it's the Sabbath. He heals the man. And then he asks them, “*Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?*” That is not just a hypothetical question.

Jesus is actually quoting from Deuteronomy 22:4, where it says that if your neighbor's ox falls down, you are not just allowed to help pull the animal up. You are required to help pull the animal up. Essentially, Jesus is saying that he's not just permitted to heal this man with dropsy. He's obligated to heal him. Just like they are obligated to help their neighbor. Even if it's the Sabbath.

This is not how the Pharisees think. It's not how they think about God or His Law or their relationship with their neighbor. For them, God is the divine rule giver. Who expects them to jump through his hoops. And obeying his Law is a task that they take pride in. They have become masters of jumping through those hoops. The man hosting this dinner is a ruler of the Pharisees because he is the very best at jumping through each and every hoop.

The fact that they're having this dinner at all is proof of that. Do you know how hard it is for a Jew to throw a dinner party on the Sabbath? When they're not allowed to light a fire or set a table or walk more than 1,000 yards from their home? It is a massive undertaking of meticulous preparation and knowledge of every legal loophole you can find. It is an exercise in pride and self-righteousness.

Which is why Jesus tells them this parable. This parable that uses their own seating practices to point out that pride and self-righteousness are often the path to disaster. While humility is the path to glory.

Because the man who exalts himself is setting himself up to be knocked down a peg and publicly shamed. Whereas the man who humbles himself is setting himself up to be honored and exalted in the sight of everyone.

Just as Jesus was. Because, as I said, this parable is teaching a spiritual truth. Not just about ourselves, but about the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of is founded upon the blood of a man who had every right to exalt himself. As he just proved to the Pharisees, Jesus knew and kept the Law of God better than any of them. Better than any person who had ever lived. Jesus was the very embodiment of God's Law. God's Law made flesh.

But he didn't use that obedience to the Law as a reason for pride and self-righteousness, like the Pharisees would have. No, he emptied himself, taking the very form of a servant. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And for that, he was exalted. Exalted by the Father and given the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus humbled himself in his birth, in his life, in his ministry, in his death on a cross, so that he could be exalted in his resurrection and ascension and at the right of the Father. That was his entire purpose on earth. And that is our entire purpose as his disciples.

Because our lives are meant to be lived in humility. They are meant to be lived inviting the poor and the crippled and the lame and the blind. They are meant to be lived being generous to those who cannot repay us.

And in that way, we take the lowest place at the table. We don't sit with the powerful, with the rich, with the famous. We don't do things to be seen and complimented and well-known. We don't work for the sake of pride or self-righteousness.

That is not how we live, because that is not how Jesus lived. No Jesus lived with his eyes always watching for those in need. Always searching for an opportunity to heal and to relieve suffering and to forgive sins and to give peace. That was his mission. That is our mission.

It's a mission we have often failed to accomplish. Because the tendency of the Pharisees to see their neighbors as tools for their own gain is a sin that we're guilty of as well. The desire of the Pharisees to puff themselves up with pride is a desire in our own sinful hearts too. The belief that we can maneuver God's Law so that we are right and everyone else is wrong is a lie that many Christians have believed over the centuries.

But, thanks be to God, the one who gives the example of love and humility to us also treats us with that same love and humility. For just as Jesus healed a man sick with the disease of dropsy so also he heals you of the disease of sin. He restores you to spiritual health. And he sends you away to walk in newness of life.

Why does Jesus care where people sit? Well, because he wants to see you sitting at the wedding feast of the lamb in his kingdom on the last day. But that isn't a table for the proud and self-righteous. It is a table for the humble. For sinners. It is a table for those that he has exalted and said, "Friend, move up higher." And sit at the table of your Lord. Amen.