

The Seat Not Taken

Intro. Some dinners are informal and have open seating. Others such as a wedding or anniversary are more formal and the seating is often assigned. One recent wedding reception had a chart near the door with names and table numbers. That saved everyone from wandering around aimlessly looking for their place. Though it seems so, this gospel is not about seating assignments.

I. The first verse raises a warning about this gospel. The Lord went to dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee. This was no *friendly* dinner. It was a hostile crowd. Previous verses identify it as Pharisees and lawyers, never fans of the Lord. And all were watching his every word and move. But he was also observing *them*. It might be similar to the Hatfields and McCoys; or Blue Devils, Panthers and

Eagles in the same room, eyeing each other across the table. Luke doesn't tell us from where the Lord was watching. It might have been at the door as he wondered where his seat was. He was a special guest even if he wasn't an honored one. Everyone knew that. He might have been given a low seat to indicate what the leader of the Pharisees thought of him. That would have given him a good view of the other guests choosing a good couch on which to recline. The suggestion he gave to the guests about choosing a lesser seat was entirely contrary to the Pharisees who "loved the front seats of synagogues and places of honor at dinners." The lawyers had their own issues, but nothing about preferred seating. Similar to today, the culture then greatly valued honors and titles. Shame and embarrassment was as bad as a having a terrible disease. The host received

some advice as well: to think outside the usual group of people he invited to dinner. Sometimes when we receive an invitation, we feel a slight obligation to invite others to *our* home. That isn't the usual purpose of such invitations. It's to gather in a friendly atmosphere: food and drink and get to know each other better and to realize we have a lot more in common than we do different.

Concl. The people at that dinner knew what the places of honor were: nearest the host. The further away you were, the less important. Today the seat next to the kitchen is often seen as the least desirable because of clattering dishes and shouting waiters. This gospel is not about dining etiquette. It is a much more profound lesson in Christian living. As one scripture commentator wrote, it is about “the frame of mind that seeks exaltation in any fashion”

[L.T. Johnson, Luke, Sacra Pagina, p. 227] and how we should avoid that. It is about someone who would cut in front of us in line to get a front seat or pass us recklessly in traffic just to get to the next red light ahead of us. The reverse of that mindset is to hold the door for another and invite them to go ahead of us. Or let another driver into traffic in front of us. We are asked to widen our circle of friends to include people different from us. Unlike in so much of our world it is not *always* the most important thing to be number one, whether at the head table for dinner or at the deli counter. There is only one number One: *the Lord*. He decides where we “sit.” For us, sometimes it is about the seat not taken.

Fr. Michael Pendergraft

September 1, 2019