



“Please Be Seated”

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
5:30 p.m. Saturday, August 27, 2016
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Our gospel lesson today is one of those that I think all too often we tend to focus on the first aspect of it, and kind of gloss over the second part. I know that I usually have.

We all hear that first part: when you go to a party, don't head right for the seat of power. Don't go to the head of the table, because, what if somebody a little higher up on the social scale, or at least, higher on the hosts scale, comes in, and you're asked to change seats?

That's not even so much a Christian standard, that should just be some simple, common sense. Or maybe even just plain etiquette. Don't seek out those opportunities where you can embarrass yourself. Take a humbler seat. Might not be as prestigious, but it's better to be asked to move up, then to move down. And if you choose a seat, and the host doesn't ask you to move, all the better for your choice of seating.

I think that the reason that a lot of us tend to resonant with this passage, is because we imagine *ourselves* as taking that humbler seat, and then the host comes along and says, “Friend, what are you doing here, move closer to the action, be part of the conversation.” Because I know that's what I've often imagined when I've read or heard this passage:

“Of course the host would ask ME to move up, to be part of the conversation.”

But how often does that really happen in our lives? To be honest, in my life, if it's happened at all, it's been both rare and a long time ago.

The thing that in this passage, which we tend to gloss over, because we don't really understand it, is that whole “invite the blind, the lame, the crippled, and so on.” Our twenty-first century North American ears don't catch what this is actually saying. There were social mores, and laws, as in Law of Moses laws, against people with skin blemishes, with certain diseases, of specific economic strata, that said “regular people” should not associate with “those” people. A skin disorder could be bad acne, it could be psoriasis, or eczema; the first century definition of leprosy was basically *Any* skin disorder, not only what we know as Hansen's Disease.

Regardless, those folks were Not supposed to go near the general public. Admittedly, part of that was to help curb the spread of disease. still, if you happened to be one of those with simply Really Bad Acne, you'd get stuck having to stay with people who had infectious diseases. As a matter of fact, in Leviticus 21:17-23, people with any kind of

physical blemish are not allowed to serve in the temple or be a priest:

¹⁷Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. ¹⁸For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. ²¹No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. ²²He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. ²³But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD; I sanctify them. (Lev. 21:17-23 NRS)

And more specifically, one of the local religious communities, in Qumran (that is the community that made the original version of the Dead Sea Scrolls), they went so far as to make it illegal to enter their community. This is from one of the Qumran scrolls

And let no person smitten with any human impurity whatever enter the Assembly of God. And every person smitten with these impurities, unfit to occupy a place in the midst of the Congregation, and every (person) smitten in his flesh, paralyzed in his feet or hands, lame or blind or deaf, or dumb and smitten in his flesh with a blemish visible to the eye, or any aged person that totters and is unable to stand firm in the midst of the Congregation: let these persons not enter. (1QSa 2:3-8)

That's pretty harsh.

Yet what does Jesus say? Invite them to the banquet. Have them join the sit down. Which is goes against their social norms. which could be even illegal, depending where you lived. Once again, Jesus is encouraging his followers to do something radical, to do something that will stretch the box, that will make them uncomfortable. In this case, Jesus is saying that going against the norms of the Law of Moses is fulfilling the **love** of God.

I know that we can sit here and think,

man, were they foolish back then, eliminating certain folks from public, from parties, from gatherings.

So what happens when we attempt to bring this into the twenty-first century North America? Well, instead of

³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. (Lk. 14:13 NRS),

we would hear

"invite the Mexican migrant worker, the Iraqi war double amputee, the homeless bad smelling guy downtown, the Muslim kid who works the counter at the store."

Inviting any of those folks to *Anything* is Not illegal. It's not immoral. Why don't we do that more often? And I'm saying that to myself just as loudly as I'm saying it to all of you.

This last Thursday evening, I spent a couple of hours at Zion Lutheran church in Enola, along with folks from four other congregations. We talked about problems and

difficulties we all are facing: building repairs; aging congregation; small percentage of folks doing the vast majority of the mission. And one of the folks present, who happened to be the youngest one there, brought up the very obvious, and usually never mentioned in most congregations, and is that we as a Church (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, not simply Trinity Camp Hill) are overwhelmingly made up of people of European descent. There is not necessarily anything wrong with that. But those of us of European descent are not real good at stepping outside of our comfort zone. We tend to be not very good at inviting ANYONE to join us for worship, or a social gathering, or a whatever.

If we as a Church - the ELCA - or a church - Trinity Camp Hill - want to continue to thrive and grow and witness our faith, then we **need** to become comfortable inviting *the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind*.

Do you happen to remember what's happening tomorrow afternoon? We're having our "Goodbye to Summer" picnic and concert. We've been trying to encourage our members to invite neighbors, co-workers, friends, family, anyone you'd like, to attend. It's free. It will only cost them their time. It's outside, so it might be hot, but they can easily leave whenever they want to. It's a nice, simple, *free*, event, no commitment on anyone's part to be more than however long they want to eat and listen to some good music.

This is one of those things that I think we all want: we want to be the ones invited, we want to be the ones asked to move our seats up, we want to be the ones made to feel important. And sometimes, I think, that's okay.

I think Jesus is ALSO saying that we need to remember that *others* want, and maybe even need, to be invited to as well. I know it's not comfortable. I know it's not something we're accustomed to. Yet I *do* think it's what Jesus calls us all to do. To invite others to join us in worship.

To invite others to enter in, and, please, be seated at the table.

Amen.

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