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Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“The Heavenly Seating Chart”

Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Whenever Jesus mentions a bridegroom in His parables or teaching, He is most often referring to Himself. When He speaks of a bride, it is usually a reference to His Church. And when He tells us of a wedding feast, He is usually referring to the great celebration of Heaven, when He and His bride are finally and fully united in *“the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end.”* (Rev 19)

And so it is in the Holy Gospel that we heard today. Jesus is not so much playing Miss Manners as He is teaching us of the great heavenly banquet to which we have been invited. And He is telling us that worldly etiquette and heavenly etiquette are not the same thing. The way we do things here is not the same as they are done in Heaven. Who gets to sit where just may turn out to be a great surprise! ***“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”***

For on earth, you know. People with high positions, or particular honors, or the famous or wealthy usually get the seats up front. And if you’re one of those folks, and you’re used to sitting up front, then when you arrive that’s where you go. While the rest of us, we know we’re not going to get those places. We know those seats are reserved for others, and so we go to the sides, or the back. That’s how things work in this world; that’s the system we’re in, and we’re used to it. And it’s not bad! It’s actually a helpful thing, and helps to keep order. . . . And so it was with the Pharisees that Sabbath Day, as Jesus arrived to eat with them. They knew their pecking order. They knew their places. They were the ones used to the seats of honor, and so they took them.

Jesus was not angry about that. We will misunderstand this parable if we think so, and presume that Jesus was trying to teach the Pharisees some manners here! We’ll also probably get moralistic in our interpretation and application to ourselves, thinking that Jesus just wants us to be good mannered little boys and girls. . . . No, rather, Jesus wants us to realize that the heavenly seating chart is going to hold some surprises. For rank and privilege and honor here on earth hold no weight in Heaven. We may just see Jesus

going down to the lowest of the low, and calling them up higher. We may just see Jesus taking the prostitute, the murderer, the pornographer, the man who left his wife and children for his secretary, and other great sinners like you and me – taking us up to the front, and asking those who took the chief seats to please get up and move. Not that Jesus *approves* of any of those sinful behaviours, but it is to say that it is not the high and the powerful that Jesus and the angels rejoice over – they rejoice over the “**one sinner who repents.**” (Lk 15:10) And so the distinguished guests at Jesus’ feast will be exactly those sinners (even great sinners!) who humbled themselves in confession and repentance; those who did not claim or expect a place; those who knew their sin and asked only for mercy and forgiveness; who asked only to be let in the door and to have a seat in the back, by the kitchen, even behind the door! For in this Jesus rejoices! Not in how good we are or claim to be, but that we believe His Word that convicts us, and rely on His promises which save us. And He does not forget His own. And He exalts those who so humble themselves. You have His Word on it.

Now some think that’s pretty scandalous. The Pharisees certainly did. Jesus calls it mercy. It is the mercy that all of us need.

But this surprising seating chart is not only true of the heavenly wedding feast that awaits us, it is true also of the feast that is set before us already here and now. Or as we sometimes say in the liturgy, “*the foretaste of the feast to come*” that we are given here in Holy Communion. For here at this feast, at this table, it is again not those who claim anything for themselves who are the guests of honor. It is rather those who claim nothing. Those who come with their sin weighing heavily on them. Those who have failed and fallen short of God’s expectations. Those who ask for nothing other than God’s mercy and forgiveness. Or in other words, if you are a sinner, this feast is for you! It is not for those who do not sin, or claim some goodness or righteousness of their own. The guests of honor here are sinners. Sinners who come in confession and repentance, to receive what we have no right to expect, but which Jesus Has promised to give and to give abundantly – His forgiveness and acceptance.

And again, it is not that Jesus is pleased with us when we sin! As St. Paul would write in Romans chapter 6, “***Are we to continue in sin so that grace (and mercy and forgiveness) may abound? By no means!***” (Rom 6:1-2) No, it is not in sin that Jesus rejoices, but in faith. The faith that comes to Him, that He might forgive, renew, and strengthen us. That He might exalt the humble, the low, the ones who are nothing. That He might give us everything, for if He does not give it, we would not have it. . . . And so here already, at this feast, He gives us all that we need for this life. For we receive here not just a place at His table, and not just a high and distinguished place at His table – **we receive Jesus Himself.** His very body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your

sins. His perfect body for our sinful body. His atoning blood for our sin-poisoned blood. His life for our body of death. . . . What higher honor and gift could be bestowed upon us than this? And this not just once, but *every* Sabbath Day, *every* Sunday. For *every* time we gather here, He invites you, and He calls to you to come up higher. And there is nothing that pleases Him more than to do so, and to feed you with Himself. You have His Word on it.

But again, some think this is pretty scandalous. Jesus calls it grace. It is the grace that all of us sinners need.

And *then*, once we see this great mercy and grace of Jesus – giving us heaven, inviting us to His Feast, calling us up higher – *only then* after teaching this truth does Jesus then get down to specifics about our life here and now. The order is important. And so with the parable complete, Jesus turns to His host and says, therefore ***“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”***

Those words are, in fact, a summary of what Jesus did. He took the lowest seat. Although He was everything, He came and became nothing. And He ate with those no one else would eat with. Sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, criminals. He even allowed Himself to be treated as a criminal, being arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified, and having Barabbas selected as more preferable than Him! Yet because He did, God exalted Him by raising Him from the dead, raising Him into Heaven, and seating Him at His right hand. And now enthroned as King of all, Jesus invites all to share His kingdom. He still comes and eats with sinners. He brings to Himself those people who can do nothing for Him in return. And this He has done for you and me. It is why we are here. Because He has called us; He is here for us; and He is here to give to us.

And now He invites you to do the same. Not because you have to to keep your seat at His table! No, that’s a gift! A gift promised to you when you were baptized, and a promise renewed and restored every time you come to this table. And Jesus is never going to take that away from you. . . . No, He invites you now to do the same **that you may have His joy!** The same joy that He has in giving to you, and welcoming you, and forgiving you, and exalting you – He wants you to know that same joy! And you know it not when you just hang out with your own, ***“your friends and brothers and relatives and neighbors.”*** When you do for them and they do for you. Not that there’s anything wrong with that – but the joy Jesus wants you to have here is the joy of giving and getting nothing in return.

The joy of giving simply because you have been given to.

And some think this teaching scandalous. Jesus calls it joy. It is being Christ-like. It is what Christ is working in you. Conforming you to His image (Rom 8:29), that you might live that image to others.

So many in this world do not have that joy. Lives are filled with disappointment, drudgery, and weariness. And this in large part because we have expectations that go unfulfilled. We give expecting in return, and when we do not receive what we expect – either at home, or work, or school, or church – we lose our joy, and life becomes one hardship after another. We even sing in one of our liturgies (as some of you will remember): *“restore to me the joy of your salvation.”* Joy, true joy, seems to be in short supply. . . . But it need not be. This joy is exactly what Jesus has come to bring. The joy we have as we are forgiven, and as we forgive others. The joy we have as we are loved and fed, and as we love and feed others. The joy we have as Christ laid down His life for us, and as we, like Him, lay down our lives for others. . . . The author of the book of Hebrews knew this joy, and so after 12 chapters of holding forth what Jesus has done for us, he tells us in his last chapter (as we heard) to do likewise – to who? Strangers and prisoners and those who cannot repay us. Not because we have to, but because we can. Because we have been set free by Jesus – free from our sin, free from worry, to live in His joy.

And then when you do receive the call to the marriage feast of Heaven, you just might be surprised . . . at who’s there; at who’s exalted; and at how joyful you will be when they are!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.