

Pent15, Proper17, Yr C, 090113
All Saints Episcopal Church

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

In the name of God, the creator, the redeemer and the one who makes us holy.

The summer before I was to start seventh grade, my family and I moved from Sewanee to Nashville, TN. We had been in Sewanee while my dad worked at the seminary library - the result of some grant looking for priests who were trained in library science. But after 2 years, the grant was not renewed and we had to leave. He found a new job at the Vanderbilt University Library and we were going to move --- again.

It was not a great summer leading up to the move. Sewanee was a paradise at the age of 11 - almost total independence - a town small enough to ride your bike almost everywhere you wanted to go - a safe place. I was really sad to leave all my friends, and really angry that we had to move. I made a big deal of it with my parents. They were not happy with me.

On top of that, my mother had to have some kind of operation, so she would be just getting out of the hospital right before it was time to go. I guess they thought it would be better for all concerned if I were not around causing trouble over something none of us had any control over, so they sent me to Girl Scout camp for two weeks, and moved to Nashville while I was there! (I have no idea what they did with my brother and sister during that time.)

I hated camp. I was miserable there. I remember that I had a red ball point pen with which to write letters home, and I scribbled all over the paper in HUGE letters that I HATED it, and I wanted to come HOME. But, of course, there was no longer a home to go to. Just a different house.

When they came to get me, we drove to Nashville instead of Sewanee, to Rodney Drive instead of Alabama Ave. Soon after that, it would be time to start school - 7th grade in a school that had 7th through 12th grades, and over 2200 students... more than the entire population of Sewanee, including the university students.

Before school started, a couple of girls who lived down the street knocked on our door one day and said they had come to meet me. I think they were going into 8th grade. I took them back to my room. They asked me questions and I did my best to answer them. Then they opened my closet and began to look through my clothes. They whispered to each other. I didn't have a clue what they were saying, but then they left. After that, I saw them on the same school bus that I rode, but they really never talked to me again.

I quickly learned that there was a complete system of rules - unwritten, of course, - but rules nonetheless, surrounding being in 7th grade - or really any other grade in that school. But, if you were in the 7th grade and already not observing the rules, you never stood a chance of being accepted. In Sewanee, so many of us had come from different places, dads and some moms to be college professors, dads but definitely no moms to go to seminary to become priests (it was the 1960s) - there didn't seem to be enough of any one group to decide we had to dress a certain way, or to hang out with the 'right' people - so none of that mattered.

Now things had changed. Now I not only had to learn to change classes and to work combinations on lockers, to get used to all those different teachers and a homeroom class, but the really hard part was learning the secrets. Which was the right lunch table to sit at? What if you were smart - did you need to act less smart? Almost all these kids had known each other since kindergarten. If they had older brothers or sisters, they had a head start, too. For girls, it was expected that to be 'in' you had to have the right brand skirts and blouses, the right brand sweaters to match, even the right brand of knee socks, and certain kinds of shoes. All my stuff came either from Sears or my mother's sewing machine.

Needless to say, it was scary to face these rules, to be brave enough to think that you didn't have to obey a particular rule. It is such a universal (or at least universal in this country, if that makes sense) social order that movies & TV shows have chronicled it at least as long as I can remember. One TV show was called *Square Pegs*, another was called *Freaks and Geeks*, another called *The Wonder Years*; movies like *The Breakfast Club* and others.

This social order is one of power - who's got the power, how to get the power, and why we would want or need that power - but for some of us, it doesn't go away after high school or even college; sometimes it lasts for the rest of our lives.

But there is another way. There's a bigger, more interesting world than my experience at Hillwood. In today's Gospel, Jesus goes to supper with some church folks. They are trying to figure him out and decide where he fits in, if he really does fit in. They think he probably doesn't fit in, since they've heard stories about all the ignorant, ill-mannered, disrespectful things he's done on the Sabbath. So they watch him very closely, but instead of trying to make polite conversation and fit in, Jesus has the nerve to watch *them* instead.

He watches everybody angling around the table, looking for the best place to sit. There is a very serious seating hierarchy: priests are at the top Levites next, then other people according to their rank. If people sit down in the wrong place to eat, there's no telling what else might fall apart. After watching the folks settle in the highest places they can manage, Jesus says, "Hey! Why don't you try this? Find the lowest seat available, then your host will say in front of everyone, 'Friend, move up higher,' which would be a very satisfying experience."

The dinner crowd thinks it over for a bit. They have to admit that Jesus has a pretty good idea. Of course, it is difficult to trust him about an issue like supper hierarchy because everyone knows he has terrible taste in dinner companions. He always sits down at the tacky end of the table with those who don't have place cards and aren't even on the seating chart. He sits with the low and the left-out and - what is even worse - he seems to have a great time!

Sure enough, while they are considering the idea and thinking about how it can be used to their advantage, Jesus comes up with another idea - a really terrible one. He is sitting in the middle of the crowd of unsavory-looking characters he has chosen, when he calls out to the people at the best end of the table, "And the next time you have people over for dinner, don't ask those who can pay you back. Don't ask anybody who can do you any favors. Ask the poor who won't know how much money you spent on the hors d'oeuvres, only that they are delicious. Ask the crippled and the lame who won't be dancing around worrying which chair to choose, but will be grateful to sit down. Ask the blind, who won't be watching over your shoulder to see who else is coming. Ask the powerless. Ask the empty. You won't believe what a party you will have!"

The crowd at the best end is appalled at his words. They are the ones who know their place, and know the rules. They look waaay down the table at the smiling man in the middle of the ne'er-do-wells who are feasting, enjoying every morsel, singing,

telling stories, crying or laughing until tears stream down their faces. The ones who know just how to behave and where to be and how not to make fools of themselves - they watch and they wonder. What in heaven's name is going on at the other end of the table?

What's going on is communion. The deaf are buttering biscuits for the blind. The leper is going to get more strawberry shortcake for the lame. And the poor are toasting the broken-hearted with fine, full-bodied wine.

The evening grows late. The etiquette lessons are over. It's time to move on. Jesus stands up and his group of odd fellows stands up with him. They are having the time of their lives, and they will follow him on and on because everywhere he is, there is a feast. And there is room for everybody at the table. Nobody cares who sits where. And everyone shares in the abundance.

It beats the heck out of junior high.