

“Take your seat.”

It’s a classic line for today,
right before the First Day of School.

“Choose your seat.”

It’s the First Day of School’s opening invitation,
full of opportunity and newness on that day back in the classroom.

“Find a seat.”

It can also ring full of anxiety and dread and trepidation
as you wonder where you’ll sit.

Even those long past their school days remember

what it feels like

when on that First Day of School

the pecking order begins.

What it’s like

to be picked first

or last

or not at all

for the team.

How it feels to be pulled out for Special Ed or Gifted and Talented.

What arises inside when asked to find a buddy in a room of strangers.

At the mere mention of First Days of School

perhaps we feel again that pit in our stomach

of walking through the classroom door

or into the cafeteria

or onto the bus

and wondering where to sit,

questioning where we belong,

speculating about our status.

I learned this week that at the beginning of school

the teachers also consider questions about belonging and status.

In the days before the students fill their rooms,

teachers wonder where to seat each of them,

how to configure students’ seats to best promote learning,

make the shy comfortable,

and account for differences.

Some teachers I talked to let the children pick themselves,
 knowing full well that, within a day or two,
 after sizing the class up,
 they'll shuffle them.

Others take a more researched-based approach,
 using scientifically tested methods for grouping
 different types of achievers together.

Whether you are a student or a teacher,
 the invitation to sit
 brings up a host of options, thoughts, emotions
 which are, at their core,
 questions of status,
 worth,
 and belonging,

All on the First Day of School.

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Today in our gospel reading from Luke,
 Jesus is walking into a First-Day-of-School kind of situation.
 He's on his way for a meal at a Pharisee leader's house.
 Keep in mind that not all Pharisees in the gospel texts are the same,
 and not all Pharisees oppose Jesus;
 more than once they extend the hand of collegiality and friendship to him.
 This is one of those times.

At the luncheon,
 Jesus watches the other guests,
 who are choosing their own seats.
 Some are probably jockeying to sit next to him,
 some casually elbowing their way toward the host,
 maybe a few lingering too long near the wine.
 "Take your seats,"
 perhaps the host says,
 the perfect opportunity for Jesus
 to launch into a teaching on where to sit.

If you are a guest, he says,
 don't take the seat of honor, lest the host has to come and make you move
 down.

Take the lowest seat, so that your host would have to make you move up.
 This part of Jesus' teaching is for the guests:
 how to take your seat.

And then, he goes one step further:
 he also has a teaching for the hosts,
 about whom to invite, and how to seat them.
 Don't invite your rich friends and well-off neighbors.
 Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.
 Give preference to the vulnerable.
 Regard those at risk or trapped in low regard.
 Seat them at the same tables as your honored guests.

This is the wisdom Christ gives,
 sitting down to lunch.
 Alternative wisdom, we may call it,
 because it turns the tables
 on where we usually choose to sit
 and how we usually choose to seat people.

For example, if you travel all the way to a conference or pay for a show,
 you aren't always content with sitting in the back.
 If the birthday party is thrown in your honor but your spouse or best friend
 is seated far away at another table,
 you'll probably be upset.
 We like the best seats. Or at least the best seat we can get.
 We want the seat we *deserve*. The seat we *earned*.
 That's us as guests.

As hosts, we're not too different.
 We know who deserves to come to our parties.
 When constructing the Christmas open-house guest list,
 isn't there's always at least one person for which we wonder,
 "Do we really have to invite *them*?"

We, guests in the world, students of life,
 we are so used to climbing and clawing and striving and earning
 to be at the top or first in line or in the best seat.
 And we, hosts of the party, like the teachers in charge,
 relish the opportunity to plan and orchestrate and scheme and configure
 to make the occasion the best or better
 or at least bearable
 for those who come into our midst.

No wonder Jesus' teaching feels odd to us,
 perhaps even dramatic or drastic.
 And what can read to us like polite dinner party advice from Jesus,
 the teacher Sirach paints
 in much starker terms:
 "The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers,
 and enthrones the lowly in their place.
 The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations,
 and plants the humble in their place."

This is weird, alternative wisdom.
 And yet,
 that is exactly what Jesus came for.

From the day of his conception, his mother Mary sang that in her child,
 God had cast the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly,
 filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 And Mary's son does, certainly, grow up to overthrow selfish arrogance
 and uproot tyrannical leaders,
 like last week, when we read about him healing a woman bent over for 18
 years,
 overthrowing the community's authoritarian leader
 who held up the law as a false idol.

Every time he offers bread where there was nothing to eat,
 every time he sits next to a sinner at dinner,
 every time he heals someone with the words,
 "Your faith has made you well,"

Jesus is filling the hungry with good things,
 enthroning the lowly,
 exalting the humble.
 This is the life of Jesus:
 uplifted himself, ultimately, on the cross,
 humbled, to the extreme, in death,
 enthroned, by God, in the resurrection and ascension.

This uplifting and humbling,
 this is the life of Jesus.
 A life lived,
 a death died,
 and resurrection wrought,
 to give life
 to all.

That's the good news today.
 That it's all been done.
 Our efforts as either guest or host, student or teacher,
 mean nothing
 when it comes to taking a seat.
 Your worth is not dependent on where you sit.
 Your status is not dependent on who comes to your party.
 You already belong.
 And so does everybody else.

No more worrying or fretting,
 climbing or striving,
 orchestrating or planning.
 For the one who is both Earthly Guest and Heavenly Host,
 insists that everyone is worthy of a seat
 right next to God.

Because at God's banquet,
 the place cards have all been shuffled away.
 In Christ's classroom,
 the seating charts are erased for good.
 On the Holy Spirit's bus, there's always a seat for you.

And for anyone.

At the eternal feast, yesterday and today and forever,
the tables have been turned.

We ALL get ONE seat,
right in front of The Teacher,
next to our Host *and* our Guest,
at the right hand of God.

AMEN.