

“The Kingdom”  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church  
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Luke 14:1, 7-14

At first glance, in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus seems to be taking on the role of Miss Manners. To begin with, he addresses the guests, offering them some good advice: when you come to the table at a feast, don't assume you're one of the most important people in the crowd and take the seat of honor. You might find that you'll be embarrassed when the host comes to reseat you because someone more important has arrived. Wouldn't *that* be terrible?! Instead, take the seat of least importance at the lowest end of the table or the back of the room, and then maybe you'll be surprised and honored when the host invites you up to a seat for more important guests.

Then Jesus puts a little twist in his etiquette lesson, turns to the host, and suggests that he not invite people to his parties who are able to reciprocate with a return invitation, but instead should invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind, who are unable to offer payback. It's sort of the Pay it Forward version of party invitations, except those you invite probably can't even pay it forward.

Certainly Jesus' advice to the guests seems like common sense. But in first century Palestine, Jesus was doing much more than filling the role of Emily Post. In the culture in which Jesus lived, honor and shame were very important. Everyone knew exactly what his or her place was in the pecking order. You knew who was above you and who was below you. So where you sat (or I should say reclined) at the table and who you invited to the

party indicated what your status was, where you fit in the first century social scene.

As usual, Jesus turns everything upside down with what he says. He suggests that the pecking order isn't important. Because, in the kingdom of God, it isn't. In this world seating arrangements and guest lists may be important, but in the kingdom of God, all seats are equal, and everyone is invited to the party.

What would it mean for all seats to be equal?

On my flight back from England earlier this month, I had a pleasant surprise. I was getting settled in my seat on the plane in row 60, feeling grumpy because I was not by the window as I had requested, when all of a sudden a flight attendant showed up with two passengers and said to me, "Ma'am, are you flying by yourself today?" When I tentatively said yes, he responded, "Please gather your things and come with me." I wondered if I had done something wrong. I heard him explaining to the two passengers that they could sit in my seat and the one across the aisle from it. Then he led me up into the premium economy section and explained that I had been upgraded so that a couple could sit together in aisle seats. That seemed okay by me.

Because my dad worked for the airlines, I have had the privilege of flying in business and first class before, but it's been a long time. When I sat down, I luxuriated in the extra leg room. I was amazed at the amount of food and drink that was offered to me throughout the trip. The staff was very deferential, speaking with soft voices, continually asking passengers if they

needed anything and making requests respectfully instead of ordering people around. I watched how the flight attendants carefully closed the curtain dividing premium economy from first class, clearly keeping us in our place. Then I turned and saw a similar curtain dividing premium economy from economy. None of them would get into our section.

When I got up to go to the lavatory, I looked back across the seats in the economy section and thought about how lucky I was to have been bumped up. And I thought about how the people sitting in the back were no different from the people sitting toward the front. They just didn't pay as much and so forfeited the extra comforts. Of course I didn't pay as much either. I just got lucky.

This may sound sort of silly, but if there are planes in the kingdom of God, then I imagine that Jesus would tell us that everyone would be riding in First Class. Here on earth we are divided by race, class, title, profession, finances, social status, education, and the list goes on and on. You name it, we will define it and figure out where each person or each group of people belongs in the hierarchy. In the kingdom of God, all the boundaries break down. What would it be like if the screaming babies and teenagers with nose piercings and unwed mothers and illegal immigrants rode in First Class while the business people and the gold medallion travelers and the all-star athletes were stuck in the back? It's a little frightening, huh? We don't much like it when the order we have imposed is destroyed. Certainly the people living in Jesus' time didn't like it. Opposing the social order was an offense that could lead to death.

Jesus challenged the people of his time and he challenges us, not to have better manners, but to break down the barriers that exist between us. That's how it will be in God's kingdom – no divisions, no way to determine who is in and who is out, no seats that are more equal than others. In God's kingdom we are all on a level playing field. We can't earn it. We can't achieve it. We simply receive our invitation and come on in to the feast with everyone else.

I'm going to close with a poem that I think sums up what Jesus is saying. During my time in Oxford, we had lectures in the morning and evening. The lectures in the evening were mostly poetry readings. One of my favorites was by R.S. Thomas. It's quite short. I'm going to read it through twice because I know it's hard to hear a poem on the first time through. It's called, *The Kingdom*.

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed: mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back: and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured by life.  
It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.