

Season after Pentecost [Proper 17, Year C]

August 31/September 1, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Proverbs 25: 6-7; Psalm 112; Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Grace to you and peace from God - Father,+ Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus was invited to the house of a Pharisee for a meal on the Sabbath. The very invitation was expected to be perceived as an honor. Jesus was being accepted as worthy to eat with the religious leaders. There was an obvious ulterior motives to the invitation. Luke notes, "they were watching him closely." The Pharisees and his cohorts wanted a first hand experience of this itinerant preacher who had garnered quite a reputation, quite a following. What they failed to appreciate was that Jesus was watching them, too.

Jesus is watching. When I was younger, that seemed like a threat. In fact, it was used like one. "Jesus is watching" could be made to sound like the dreaded, "Wait until your father gets home!" or "You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout. I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town." I hope we've all grown out of any ominous notion that our Lord wants to frighten us into good behavior. Coercion and force are not God's ways. No, the truth that "Jesus IS watching" and "Jesus is WITH us" is a gift. "Jesus is watching" is an invitation to look at situations, people, circumstances, and ourselves through the eyes of Jesus. What would **he** notice? How would **he** respond? Our vision and understanding is limited by our human bias, self-interests, and fears. Our resurrected Lord has no such limits. He has an eternal eye that sees everything through the lens of God's love and grace, through God's kingdom dream for all creation. That's why Jesus saw the scene in the Pharisee's house so differently then his host and the other guests.

Do you remember the first days of eating in a school cafeteria? No, I'm not talking about the questionable food. I'm talking about worrying where you would sit.

Your old friends might not be in your middle school or high school. Or they might have

lunch scheduled at a different time. With whom would you sit? How do you find a place? It's nerve racking because it's about more than just where you will physically put your tray and your bottom. What if you ask if you can sit somewhere and they say no, maybe laugh at you when you turn away? If you sit with certain people or by yourself, will you be labeled a "loser"? Your nerves convince you everyone else knows where they belong, they have a table with people they know or a group to which they belong. There seems to be some kind of pecking order and you don't want to look foolish but want to have a place to sit that shows you belong. As adults we may look back at that first day and laugh, but at the time, it was not usually a laughing matter.

Jesus is watching. When Jesus looks at the room where he is eating with the leader of the Pharisee and his other guests, he sees the adult version of the middle or high school cafeteria. In this case, EVERYONE knows where they want to sit. People are jockeying for the seats that indicate you're one of the esteemed, worthy of first class not economy seating. Their status, their place in the social ladder is of paramount importance. The invitations they accept, reject or extend all reflect their position in this honor-and-shame culture. The seat they have or offer is also about perceived status, one's place in the set social system. Jesus is watching. He also sees that the only people allowed are those who can meet their obligation to repay this invitation with one of their own. It's a closed system with very clear rules about who will NOT be allowed to participate. Jesus was watching as people participated in a way of life that did not look like's God's idea of life. This one was all about status, favors, counting, "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine." Even a meal was a form of social commerce which you would not waste on those who have nothing to give you, who can do nothing for you in return.¹

The thing about Jesus watching that makes us easy is that Jesus will speak his mind. And when Jesus speaks his mind, he only speaks the truth — the God's honest truth! And like the host Pharisee and his guests, we don't always like God's truth,

especially when it applies to us and not just “those other people.” We may not want to hear or accept God’s truth, because it calls us toward change in the ways we think and act. And even when it’s more healthy or kingdom-right, change is not easy. But that doesn’t stop our Lord from trying. It never will stop our Lord from inviting us to a different way of seeing and living that will bring lasting peace, wholeness and joy for *all* people — ways that others may call foolish as we choose not to go with the worldly flow or let our happiness depend on what others think of us.

Here’s what I hear Jesus telling us today. All people are of infinite worth and value to God — including you and me. It is not money, prestige, press coverage.... It is not the car we drive, our social network, banquet seating... It is not our looks, brains, athleticism... It’s not any of these things or the lack of any of these that define us — unless we let them. If we accept and grow in our Lord’s baptismal declaration that we are God’s claimed and beloved children, then we let God define what is good, worthy and precious. We step into each day and even a school cafeteria, we face each challenge and circumstance knowing *whose* we are and how much our Lord values us. And *no one* or *nothing* can take that away.

Here’s what else I hear Jesus telling us today. The God who is creator of the universe, time and all that is good wants us to treat each other the way God treats us. God created us, gives us what we need to flourish, cares for us, forgives us, redeems us even though we really have nothing of equal value to give God in return. We are among the poor, crippled, lame and blind invited to God’s banquet and God’s eternity though we can not repay that generosity. And all this grace and generosity is God’s delight and pleasure, not a grudging chore or requirement, but freely given out of love. It’s to that kind of freedom and open generosity and kindness that Jesus asks us to imitate in our imperfect but genuine ways of living... sharing our resources, time, the seat next to us, a greeting, a helping hand to those in need because it’s the right and wonderful thing to do for another

child of God, not because you expect anything in return.

Jesus is watching. Jesus is hoping we'll watch, too, but through *his* eyes and a kingdom-of-God-lens. Jesus wants us to humbly but boldly claim our identity as children of God, defined not by the world's standards but by the heart of God. Our Lord wants us to live free of the hurt and limits of popular culture's measures and opinions, so we can be all God created us to be. And though we have no way to repay God, in freedom and hope we can use what we've received to live like Jesus showed as a thank offering for all God has done for us. Let the Lord's Supper that we share in this place remind us that no one is to be excluded from God's table — whether it's here, in a cafeteria, playground, board room, office or any other place in a child of God is to be found. Loved and accepted with abounding grace, we are God's partner in bringing about the Kingdom dream in which all are welcome, everyone has a seat of honor, no one is left out.... and hopefully, the food tastes better than it ever did in the school cafeteria. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 8/31/13

ENDNOTES

1. Final two sentence inspired by David Lose's comments on this text in "The Kingdom of God... at School" posted on worshipingpreacher.org August 26, 2013