

Each of my sons received a copy of this “Lutheran Handbook,” as a confirmation present, so I’ve delved into it a bit, too. Among other things, it has a section on Church Stuff including articles on how to use a bulletin, how to survive for an hour in a non-air-conditioned church, and this one: what to do when you find someone else sitting in “your” pew (that is, your place, your seat in church). Here’s part of what it says: We all carry a bubble of person space; for some people it’s several feet and for others it is only a few millimeters. Wherever on the spectrum you happen to fall, there are a number of situations in which we invite visitors into our little sphere of experience—like Church. As Human Beings are territorial by nature, we sometimes see visitors as an affront. However, these situations need not be cause for alarm. Here are three easy steps to follow:

1. **smile and greet the intruder.**
2. **view the intrusion as an opportunity.**
3. **make an extra effort to welcome them.** (You get the idea)

So, this Lutheran Handbook is trying hard to get us all to lighten up and maybe even make the best of a somewhat uncomfortable situation in the public sphere of church. Clearly, though, not everyone has gotten the memo on the second point—or maybe they just don’t agree with our friends at Augsburg Fortress. I can remember a visitor coming to our little white clapboard church in Vermont and sitting down not too far front, but certainly beyond the halfway mark, on the left side. Anyway, once this visitor was nice and settled in his pew, a woman came up to him and said, “Excuse me, you are sitting in my pew.” My friend, the visitor, thought she must be joking, and so in what he thought was the same sort of light-hearted back and forth, he smiled and said, “Oh, really? I don’t see your name on it.” At which she simply pointed to a little brass plaque on just over the hymnal rack that said, “This pew given to the glory of God and in memory of loved ones by the Nordstrom Family.” I am Jane Nordstrom McCauley,” she said, “this *IS* my pew.”

So, I guess this is not a new problem—where to sit—and what exactly your sitting there may mean in the larger scheme of things. The writer of Hebrews reminds us to not let our guard down when it comes to practicing hospitality—we might just be entertaining angels without knowing it. Congregations like our that want to be hospitable might practice the three-minute rule I mentioned in our online devotion earlier this week—that each of us here make a commitment to spending at least the three-minutes just before worship and the three minutes just after worship going out of our way to welcome strangers guests and newcomers among us and to greet people we don’t know. The handbook would counsel us to take these lemons and make lemonade, to take this awkward moment and turn it into a chance to make a new friend, help someone find their place or simply extend the table of fellowship within the context of a congregation—the equivalent of maybe dropping in another leaf or squeezing in some

extra folding chairs like we might do at a bigger than usual family gathering. But clearly, that is not the obvious response for many of us. Not today, and not in Jesus' day.

And so Jesus tells this parable about a banquet, a common theme throughout his story-telling ministry. He tells it from the perspective of one of those invited to a banquet, telling them to be very careful when it comes to choosing where to sit, a story told within the context of proper behavior in the polite society of his day. He says, when you are invited to a banquet, choose carefully, use your best judgment to decide where is the best place for you. If there are no place cards, for example, no clearly and obviously ASSIGNED seats, then always assume a lower place, leave room to be called up higher, rather than jumping to the conclusion that **you're** a big deal at the event, only to have to have yourself taken down a few notches (literally) by your host. In that case, you'd have to make your way, red-faced, to the very last table, to the only place left.

When you're invited to dinner, Jesus says, go and sit at the last, the lowest place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, 'Friend, come on up to the front.' That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! In other words, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become something more than yourself.**

But see, Jesus is doing **more** than simply passing along sage advice for the ages. Though this may in fact be where he begins, Jesus is not sitting in for Dear Abby or Miss Manners, reinforcing the mores and norms of society. His no-nonsense words about being humble when offered hospitality lead somewhere a bit different than his hearers may have predicted, either back then or today. I imagine this conversation going like this, Jesus tells this first part of his story to a sea of nodding heads who were probably way ahead of him. Don't think too highly of yourself, he says. Be modest, he says. Better to start from a lower position and be invited higher than it is to place yourself ahead of others only to be told to move on down. It's the kind of advice we might give our children as they're heading out the door for that first day of school. Maybe especially if they are starting a new school. Choose your place carefully, choose your friends carefully. Be humble. Be yourself.

And so these heads around the table, the heads of the Pharisees and his disciples alike start nodding. After all, they all live in the honor-and-shame culture of first century Palestine, where status is pretty much everything, and one of the key places where status was displayed is mealtime. Guests of honor were always seated close to the host, while those of a lesser status sat further away. And those who weren't invited at all, well, it might just be because they really didn't *matter* at all, at least not in the social setting of a particular banquet being offered. In that time and place, status was very important, and one's place in the pecking order was fragile. To be invited to a better position at the table of an important host wasn't simply an honor, it could also have tangible benefits to your family or business pursuits as well. By the same token, to be

* Based on the translation by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

publicly invited to move on down to a lower position could wreak havoc on just about every dimensions of your life.

But once he has all these heads nodding, once he knows they're with him on this point, Jesus moves on to a second commentary, this one offered not to his fellow guests, but to the host. This second idea of his seems to move beyond good advice to something that might have sounded to all those nodding heads as something rather silly, something a bit inconceivable, something revolutionary, even. He says when you're giving a dinner party, when you're hosting a banquet, don't invite people just so they can pay you back, don't invite those people who are in a position to do something for you, but rather invite those who cannot give you anything in return. Pay it forward, Jesus says. Invite some people who never get invited, he says. Invite the misfits, the losers, the freaks and the geeks, the folks from the wrong side of the tracks. Invite the people that is has never occurred to you to invite before. And don't do it because they might one day pay you back and invite you to as great or greater a banquet themselves. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Invite the marginalized, the forgotten, the cast-aside. Invite the refugee, the immigrant, the undocumented. Invite the unemployed, the shut-in, transient, the homeless. Maybe *they* won't be able to return the favor, but believe me, the favor will be returned—and greatly returned!—at the coming of the kingdom of God, and the resurrection of God's people."

See, I don't think that Jesus is just telling us to be nice. He's not telling us how to behave in tricky social situations. His story is not meant to show us how to survive an awkward hour at church—or even how to make lemons into lemonade. As a community of faith, he is also not calling us to reach out to others simply because of what they might bring to us—higher attendance, more members, more givers, more tithers. The goal of this seeming advice that he gives, the goal of the the parable he tells is not simply to preach about the importance of offering hospitality to others—as important as that may be. Jesus is reminding us that it matters *why* we do the things we do—to whom we offer the hospitality we do, to what end we practice our discipleship. It is yet another way that Jesus wants to remind us, as David Lose has put it, that God has given us all good things for no good reason and that God in Jesus Christ invites us all to do the exact same thing for others.

Jesus, in moving from the first part of the story to the second challenges us to take our faith seriously enough to act and live differently than the world has come to expect. Jesus is calling us to build a house and a church and a movement and a world where all are welcome, where none are excluded or given a lower place based on arbitrary things.

Jesus is calling the people at this particular banquet, he's calling his disciples, he's calling *us* to imagine a different world; actually, he's not just calling us to imagine it, he's calling us to get busy bringing that dreamed-of world into existence. A world where all are welcome, in classrooms and homerooms and lunchrooms, at supper tables and banquet halls and sup kitchens, in the pews with brass plaques on them and seats saved with jackets, at the font, the table and the pulpit. A world, as Martin Luther King put it 53 years ago today, where the children of former slaves and the children of

former slave owners can come together and find a place at the same table of sisterhood and brotherhood. A world where those not typically invited get warmly welcomed, where there's always enough room to pull up another chair. Where the harvest is plentiful and shared, where strangers become friends, and where everyone together will see and know and experience the kingdom of God. Amen.