

At the Table, But Where? – Luke 14:7-14

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You all remember The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson back in the day. I watched Carson some when I was kid back in the 70s and 80s. He was really the king of late night. His was the only late night talk show for all those years, and it was a big deal if you were invited on as a guest.

He had all the big stars of that era. And it wouldn't be unusual for him to have multiple big stars on the same show. He could have Milton Berle, Lauren Bacall, and Liza Minelli on the same episode. Or, he'd have Jackie Gleason and Betty Davis on the show with a young comedian like Robin Williams. Just these HUGE stars or aspiring stars.

And you know how the show would work, right? Johnny, after his monologue, would sit down at the desk, and there'd be a chair next to him, and then a couch on the other side of the chair. And starting off, Ed McMahon, his sidekick, would be sitting next to Johnny. (And by the way, what a gig Ed McMahon had. All he had to do after introducing Johnny was sit there and laugh and applaud.)

So, Carson would introduce his first guest: "Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome one of the biggest actors in the world, Clint Eastwood." And Clint Eastwood would come out, and Ed McMahon would move to the sofa, and Eastwood would sit next to Johnny in the chair next to the desk. They'd spend the next ten minutes or so talking about Eastwood's new movie Dirty Harry movie that had just come out or some story

about his personal life. And then Johnny would go to commercial.

And when he came back from the commercial, it'd be time for the second guest of the night. Johnny would say, "We're always pleased when this next gentleman joins us. He's one of the funniest people we know. Would you please welcome Jonathon Winters!"

Now, these days, on late night shows, when a guest is finished, he or she leaves the stage. But back then, the guests on Carson's show would stick around. They'd just simply move to the couch to make room for the next guest. So, Ed McMahon would move a little further down the couch to make room for Clint Eastwood, who would give up the chair next to Johnny for Jonathon Winters.

And Johnny would talk to Winters, who'd share funny story after funny story for about ten minutes. And Clint Eastwood would just sit there on the couch and not say anything.

Then, after another commercial, Carson would introduce his third guest: "Our next guest is a very talented young actress. She's starring in a new movie called 'Heaven Can Wait.' Would you please welcome Diane Cannon!"

And the same thing would happen: everybody already up there would stay and move down. Ed McMahon is hanging on at the far end of the couch, Clint Eastwood is sitting in the middle to now make room for Jonathon Winters on the couch, so that Diane Cannon can have the chair next to Johnny. And Johnny would fawn over this lovely actress for a few minutes to close the show.

And before the show ended, the camera would pan over the entire set. And sitting there would be all of them: Ed McMahon, Clint Eastwood, Jonathon Winters, Diane Cannon, and Johnny.

That chair next to Johnny's desk was the place of honor. For a few minutes, if you were a guest that night, you got to sit next to and talk to the king of comedy, the one who many times made or broke the careers of rising entertainers.

And Carson was such a force in Hollywood, that even huge stars like Clint Eastwood were willing to stick around for the whole show even though they had to give up the chair next to Johnny for somebody else.

All of us enjoy sitting in places of honor. It's our human nature. Whether it's sitting in reserved, premium seating at an event, or being one of the few invited to an exclusive dinner, or serving on a prestigious board of directors, we all feel special in being offered those privileged seats.

Sometimes it's just ego that drives this yearning. Sometimes it's the boost to our careers or status in a community that makes us long for those special locations. And sometimes, taking a place of honor serves as validation for our worth in the eyes of others we yearn to impress.

It's fitting that, at yet another dinner that Jesus is part of, he uses the seating arrangement of a banquet table to teach a lesson about the importance of humility over self-exaltation.

If possible, Jesus says, choose the lowest place rather than the place of honor. If it's up to us, choose that place that represents a humble spirit.

You know, back to the Johnny Carson illustration for a moment, it would've been fascinating if the producers of the show each night would've said to the guests, "Just you all go onto the set now before the show begins and pick your seat. Johnny will join you when he's ready." How would those three guests have handled the assignment? Would they all have vied for the

chair next to the desk, or would they have conceded it to the others? Would they have risked being told by Johnny to move down to the end of the couch if they had chosen the seat next to him? Or would their egos have given them confidence that they were choosing wisely?

Or, as another example, you might recall a holiday meal with family where there were so many guests that it necessitated an adult table and a kids table. And as a kid growing up, you may have made an assumption that you were ready to join the adult table—only to have been told by a parent or grandparent in front of everyone that you indeed were not ready to be welcomed to the place where the adults dined. And perhaps you blushed in embarrassment.

It all comes down to the importance of exalting others rather than oneself.

And then Jesus takes this parable a step further in Luke 14 by providing instruction as to who, in the first place, you should invite to your own meal that you're hosting. It shouldn't be your friends or family or your rich neighbors, he says, but the poor and the disabled. Because if you're inviting the former, there's a chance you're motives aren't pure—that you'll invite with the intention of having those guests invite you back.

It's funny how at times we're so able to make a kind gesture toward others be really about ourselves and our own need for recognition.

That's faux humility.

We've spent much time this Lent, while looking at these stories of Jesus having meals with others, emphasizing that everyone is welcome at Christ's table. And then in turn, everybody is welcome in the body of Christ and the family of

faith. And in a world where there is much division and intention of keeping people apart that we go overboard in saying to everyone that they have a seat at the table.

And today, this is where we add that not only should everybody have a seat, but it's important to notice what seats everybody has. We, the insiders, are quick to take the seats of prominence, of honor, the ones that keep outsiders from truly feeling part of the banquet at times. We have to be careful that, while we welcome, we don't still shut people out once they're at the table.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines magnanimity as "behavior that is kind, generous and forgiving, especially towards an enemy or competitor."

We find this description on display in Abraham Lincoln's life and speeches. Lincoln's second inaugural address (March 4, 1865), which was delivered just weeks prior to his assassination (April 14, 1865), included these words in closing: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Certainly, Lincoln had the end of the war and reconstruction of the South in mind.

Paul Metzger, writing in Patheos.com back in 2020, said this about the importance of being magnanimous: "One who possesses magnanimity of spirit is not petty. A person with a malicious spirit holds grudges and seeks to do harm, get even. A leader who is characterized by magnanimity will not allow

personal or public grievances to get in the way of pursuing the greater good, as we find in Lincoln's second inaugural. Lincoln looked to reconstruction of the South after the Civil War to bring about full inclusion in the union and a "just and lasting peace" not simply for the United States, but for "all nations."

With the Lord Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and the Spirit's descent at Pentecost, his followers did not seek vengeance, but repentance and forgiveness on Jesus' behalf for the restoration of all peoples to God. They bore the fruit of Jesus' magnanimous spirit with malice toward none."

In other words, it's giving up places of honor for the common good—being humble; not exalting oneself but being the one who exalts others. It's, partly, about the chairs we seek.