

# The Humble Seat

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Preaching on:

Luke 14: 1, 7–14

Well, I think you can all hear in my voice that we had a little cold go through our household this week. It's not COVID so don't worry and I'm feeling much better. But a nice thing about a cold for a preacher: it gives you a little added a little something, right? A little more authority in those rumbling undertones. Listen to me, listen to this voice! This is gravitas. It's the authority in my voice. This is, believe it or not, something that preachers struggle with sometimes. I mean, there is something sort of contradictory, strange about standing up in front of people and preaching and having that spotlight shone on you. And also trying to remember that you're not better than anybody else, right? And it, it doesn't help. Sometimes when you have a voice that people naturally respond to as that voice of authority, you begin to think that maybe the authority comes from inside of you, rather than from somewhere else.

And that's a problem that some preachers can have. A video went viral last week. I don't know if you saw it, but it was a preacher who was scolding his congregation for not buying him a watch—a watch that he wanted. And he was calling them all kinds of names. He was not being very nice to them about

it. He was not speaking to them nicely and somebody thought that they would embarrass him, I guess. And they posted this video and it went viral because it wasn't very nice. And I think when that minister went back and watched that video, he probably realized that the way that he was speaking, the way that he was talking about what he wanted and what he expected of the people in his congregation was that he believed that he was better than they were. Now, It's difficult because sometimes a minister's job is, or the job of anyone speaking in public is, to try to get a point across, right, to remind people about our shortcomings that we all share. But sometimes if you do it in a way that insults other people, or that places yourself above them, then it becomes very problematic. You begin to think that you deserve the good things and that these people should provide them to you and you are better than they are.

It's a been difficult I think, in our culture, to think about humility, humbleness. We live in a culture that is so divisive and so divided now, politically and socially between left and right. And there is arrogance on both sides. And I really think it's arrogance that is driving us away from each other. Folks on the right feel like folks on the left don't listen to them, think that they're smarter than them, think that they have all the solutions think that they're making up all kinds of problems that don't exist and think that they're doing it because they think that they're better than everybody else on the right. And sometimes it's true. Sometimes folks on left might think that they're a little bit better than folks on the right, that they don't have to listen to them. And sometimes folks on the left feel that folks on the right think that they are smarter and better than folks on the left. They think that the problems that people on the left care about people on the right are dismissive of, and that they think that sometimes people on the right uphold traditional values in a way that undermines values that people on the left truly care about. And they feel like they're insulted and called snowflakes and told to sit down and stop whining and stop crying. And sometimes it's true. Sometimes that's exactly what's happening.

Arrogance drives this division in our culture, pushes us away from one another—this idea that my side, my opinion is better than yours and that the only way that we're actually going to get to a better place is if we drive one another out, not coming together and figuring it out together, but by beating each other up. And it just drives us apart. I'm here to suggest something that I think is a little bit counterintuitive in our culture. I believe that humility is a prerequisite to kindness. Now kindness seems to be a virtue that is celebrated both on the left and on the right. People do believe in basic human decency and kindness. And yet we see that the left and the right are driving one another, are separating from one another, and beating one another up. Why, if they both seem to uphold kindness as a basic human decency that they want to teach their children. Why then?

And I think it has to do with this lack of humility, that is such a part of our politics and such a part of our culture. You may be suspicious of humility and in our culture there is good reason for that. Just listen to how similar, the word “humility” and the word “humiliation” are. We think it's the same kind of thing, but it's not. Humiliation is something that somebody else does to me, without my consent, without my best interests in mind to disempower me, right? That's what it means to be humiliated, to be beaten, to be

dismissed, to be thrown out. But humility is something that I choose for myself in order to become the kind of person who never chooses to humiliate another, the kind of person who recognizes and understands that I am no better than anyone else. I do not want to defeat anyone else. I do not want to drive anyone away. I do not want to beat you. I want to live in a difficult but loving relationship with all of you. And the only way that I'm going to get there, the only way that I'm going to get there, that we are going to get there as a culture is through kindness that is founded in a humble understanding of who I am.

So, let's turn to our scripture reading this morning. It seems funny that Jesus is out there giving this tricky social advice to rich and powerful people at a banquet, but he tells them, he says, "Hey when you're throwing a banquet, don't go sit in the place of honor. Because if you go and sit in the place of honor, you may be asked to move down and wouldn't you then be humiliated. Instead, go and seek for yourself the lowest seat, the seat of humility. And you may then be honored by being called up." Now in our thinking about what humility is and how it works we cannot imagine that anyone would voluntarily seek out the seat of humility for themselves without having some sort of broken self-image. How could you think that that's all you deserve? How could you think that that should be the place for you? The lowest place?! That must be some sort of oppression laid upon you. That can be the only way that you would want to do that. Somebody has told you that you're not good enough for good things that you don't deserve them, that you don't have a right for them. And so out of self-hatred, you go and you just seek the lowest spot for yourself.

And our culture says, instead, if you really love yourself, if you really believe that you're as good as anybody else, then you should believe you deserve the very best things. Of course, you should go for the highest seat for yourselves and you should fight for it and you should earn it for yourself, because aren't you as good as anybody else is? Of course you are! So get out there! And if you get it, good for you, you deserve it because you got it. What we fail to recognize here is that no matter what we may be consciously thinking when we fight for the highest place of honor for ourselves, we are *fighting* for it. Somebody else has to be underneath us in order for us to put ourselves at the highest seat of honor, right? There has to be a whole bunch of people sitting in all the other seats down the line in order for me to be there. And not everyone can share that high seat of honor with me. That's the way that human hierarchy works, right? Somebody is on top, usually a small number of people. It's why it's a pyramid. It's a small spot on the top and everybody else is down below. And when we actually do get ourselves to the top of the social pyramid, we tend to think, "Well, why not me? I worked hard for it. I'm a good person. I don't believe I'm better than anybody else." And yet the system that we have participated in suggests that we actually think that we are better than others and that we have a right to fight them for our place above them on the social pyramid.

And this is the problem that Jesus has. This is why he tells this strange little parable. Jesus says, "No, no, no, no, no. Don't hate yourself and go seek the lowest seat. Love yourself and love your neighbor and go and seek the lowest seat. Because when you seek the lowest seat for yourself and only when

you seek the lowest seat, the humble seat for yourself, can you really do it in a way that acknowledges that you are better than nobody else, that you do not desire to threaten anybody else's place in this world, and that you desire for everyone to have an equal access to good things, and to honor, and to love every bit as much as you have it. You want it for others. When you fight for the seat of the highest honor, no matter what you may think about others consciously or unconsciously, you're participating in a system that says people lower down on the pyramid are not as deserving, not as good, not as beloved as you are.

When we seek the lowest seat for ourselves, the humble seat, we do it with this mantra in mind, "I am a child of God. I am a child of God. I am a child of God," no better, no different than anyone else. I choose this humble seat knowing that I am not sufficient unto myself. That's just a fancy way of saying I'm not anything without God. Everything that I am, everything that I have earned, every gift that I have been given comes from God. And so I choose the humble seat. I choose the humble seat, accepting the fact that I am finite. I can't do it all. I am not God. I choose the humble seat and I believe that there is a God, a God who is infinite, a God who gives every good gift, a God who is seeking and searching for me in my smallness, in my recognition that I am just one of God's children. And when that infinite finds me humble and ready, knowing my place among my sisters and brothers and siblings, that is the only way that God can call me up.

And when God calls us up, that is the true honor: to be called up from a place of knowing my position in God's beauty, God's love, God's kingdom here. I am no better than my brothers and sisters wanting only to live in difficult, trying, painful, but loving relationship to all of them. And when we find that place of humility, where we do not think that we're better than the people on the left, the people on the right, that is when God can begin to call us all up together. I don't want to be great in this world. I want to be called up with all of you. I wanna be called up with everybody. The way that I get there, the way that we get there, is by seeking out the humble seat. I am nothing without God. And I choose this seat because I love all of you.