

“Seating Arrangements”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
October 18th, 2015
21st Sun. after Pentecost
Installation of Minister of Visitation

Isaiah 53:4-12

Mark 10:35-45

And [James and John] said to him,

*“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left,
in your glory.”*

But Jesus said to them,

“You do not know what you are asking.

Mark 10:37-38^a

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to know we are loved and have a place at the table in our celestial home
and may we likewise welcome others as we have been welcomed,
even those we mistook to be strangers and enemies.

Amen

Do you remember Bob Uecker? He is the TV personality nicknamed ‘Mr. Baseball’
who used to be on commercials, in which he presumed to have a free seat
at a baseball game because he was a former major leaguer.

But then, an usher comes over to inform him that he was in the wrong seat,
so as he is getting up to move, Bob Uecker just smiles and says,
‘I must be in the front row...’

At the end of the commercial, he’s sitting in the last row, just under the lights,
saying to a guy about 8 rows below him,
‘Great seats, eh, buddy? Hey! He missed the tag! He missed the tag!’

This is kind of like James’ and John’s request to sit on either side of Jesus
in the heavenly kingdom.

In Luke 12: 8-11, Jesus taught his disciples about making this kind of assumption
when choosing where to sit at a big social function...

⁸ *“When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast,
do not sit down in a place of honor,*

lest a more eminent [person] than you be invited...;

⁹ *and [the one] who invited you both will come and say to you,
‘Give [up your] place to this [person],’*

and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

¹⁰ *But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place,
so that when your host comes he may say to you,*

‘Friend, go up higher’;

then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.”

But in Bob Uecker’s case, that meant the nosebleed section...

Willard, p.2

What presumptions do we make as Christians?

Do you know you are going to Heaven? Do you *know*?

That was something my West Point classmate, Pete Kingman, asked me years ago.

Pete is an evangelical, conservative Christian – and one of my great teachers.

I don't agree with him on some things – and probably many things, but he is one of those 'born again Christians' who walk the talk and live in love.

I really like that question – though the only way we can really 'know' we are going to Heaven is if we take it on faith that we can be forgiven for our misdeeds and neglect, and that we seek to do the good for others we hope they would do for us.

Part of that 'knowing' if you have a reserved seat at the Heavenly table, is knowing the nature of God – and Christ as the true Heir of Humanity through whom God will judge us.

The God we know through Christ does not seem to be so much concerned with specific actions as with the habit of one's choices, considering how Jesus sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners, traitors and sex workers, Samaritans and lepers.

So, I guess he would sit down with any of us, too.

It was those arrogant scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus frequently challenged for being so sure they had reserved the only table.

There does seem to be some preferential seating in Heaven, but when James and John try to make a reservation, Jesus really didn't confirm their request.

Instead, he asked them if they were willing to pay the price for the privilege of being a servant of God.

Our lesson from Isaiah 53:11, gives a glimpse of what that means...

[The LORD God said,]

After his deep anguish he will see light, and he will be satisfied.

Through his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant, will make many righteous, and will bear their guilt.

Isaiah 53:11

Jesus asked James and John if they were willing to drink 'the cup' he would drink and be 'baptized' in the way he would be baptized.

They said they could and he said they would, and he implied that such a cup can be a bitter one and such a baptism is often by fire.

To serve God – whether that is by ordained or lay ministry, is not only the struggle to make room for one another at the table of Christian fellowship, but also to make room for God.

Willard, p.3

How well we make room for God doesn't just mean saying grace at the table, though it is a good habit to always say thanks.

Making room for God is best answered by asking:

How well do we make room for the stranger? the homeless? the enemy, even?

Today's play readers skit was about making room for those who would otherwise have no place at the table – their own or anyone else's.

The scenarios portrayed are accurate for what happens in many churches and important for you to know what the 'Pastor's Discretionary Fund' is about and how it is used.

The very first church I served had a 3 ring binder that was shared by all the churches in the community, each taking 'the book' for a month at a time.

Coupons for gas and gift cards – that excluded the sale of alcohol and cigarettes, were available, purchased from local gas stations and supermarkets.

We do not have such an arrangement at this time in our community – primarily because The Villages-area is in a relatively wealthy community and not close to principal thoroughfares, so we simply do not see transient homeless people.

When someone does come to our door needing help, it is usually to seek help with rent or to pay an electricity bill.

No checks are made out to individuals directly, but they must physically come to our office with a copy of their bill.

We only pay the creditor directly out of the Pastor's Discretionary Fund in whole or in part to the landlord or service provider.

This is done at the discretion of the pastor and administrative assistant, working together to assess the need.

Records are kept of the person's address and photo i.d. to insure the limit of financial help to no more than twice in a 6 month period.

The question will always be whether or not the request is legitimate – but when someone is reduced to begging money for help, they are hurting.

My policy has always been: When someone comes to our door in need, we are going to give them something – even if it is just the essential services phone number "211" and a prayer.

By the way, the woman who refused to take 'no' for an answer was an actual person who relentlessly called the office of my last church.

Though I don't think we ever gave her direct assistance, we always took her seriously, listened, and worked to get her in touch with agencies that had the responsibility and resources to help.

Not all habits and behaviors are worthy of respect – but everyone is eligible, no matter who they are or where they are 'on life's journey'.

Everyone has a reserved seat at God's table.

Amen

Our scripture lesson today from Isaiah 53:4-12 has been traditionally interpreted by Christians as prophesy about Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection. There are two voices evident in this text – the prophet's voice on behalf of the faithful community speaking of the suffering of God's servant and the LORD God's voice speaking of the servant's vindication...

- ⁴ It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our sufferings that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented.
- ⁵ He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed.
- ⁶ Like sheep we had all wandered away, each going its own way, but the LORD let fall on him all our crimes.
- ⁷ He was oppressed and tormented, but didn't open his mouth. Like a lamb being brought to slaughter, like a ewe silent before her shearers, he didn't open his mouth.
- ⁸ Due to an unjust ruling he was taken away, and his fate—who will think about it? He was eliminated from the land of the living, struck dead because of my people's rebellion.
- ⁹ His grave was among the wicked, his tomb with evildoers, though he had done no violence, and had spoken nothing false.
- ¹⁰ But the LORD wanted to crush him and to make him suffer. If his life is offered as restitution, he will see his offspring; he will enjoy long life. The LORD's plans will come to fruition through him.
- ¹¹ After his deep anguish he will see light, and he will be satisfied. Through his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant, will make many righteous, and will bear their guilt.
- ¹² Therefore, I will give him a share with the great, and he will divide the spoil with the strong, in return for exposing his life to death and being numbered with rebels, though he carried the sin of many and pleaded on behalf of those who rebelled.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zeb'edee, came forward to [Jesus],
and said to him,

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

³⁶ And he said to them,

“What do you want me to do for you?”

³⁷ And they said to him,

“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left,
in your glory.”

³⁸ But Jesus said to them,

“You do not know what you are asking.

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,

or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

³⁹ And they said to him,

“We are able.”

And Jesus said to them,

“The cup that I drink you will drink;

and with the baptism with which I am baptized,

you will be baptized;

⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant,

but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them,

“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles
lord it over them,

and their great men exercise authority over them.

⁴³ But it shall not be so among you;

but whoever would be great among you must be your servant,

⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

⁴⁵ For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve,

and to give his life as a ransom for many.”