

Finding Our Seats at Creation's Feast
Sermon by Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Luke 14:1, 7-14

Let me tell you about a slumber party I was invited to in the second grade. It was at my friend Melissa Lynch's house. There were about 7 of us there, and we had a blast: we baked cookies, built forts, had a pillow fight, told scary stories with flashlights. At the end of the night, Melissa announced to the girls at her party: "I'm having so much fun with all of you! It's even more fun than the party I had last week, with the popular girls!" At that point I realized Melissa had divided the girls in our class in half, and invited the cool girls the first week, and the rest of us this week. I wasn't sure how I should feel-- ashamed to not be part of the popular crowd, proud that the geeky kids were more fun, or grateful that Melissa had at least figured out how to invite all the girls in our class. It was the first time I realized sometimes, girls sort girls into a hierarchy. It was the first time of many more to come I realized I could not take my belonging for granted.

Social hierarchies are nothing new, according to the gospel passage today. Apparently people put a lot of thought into class and status. In the world where Jesus walked, there were hierarchies of who was a Roman citizen or not, hierarchies on religious status, hierarchies related to wealth and gender and who was part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples... and the list probably goes on and on.

Jesus wanted to caution his followers about this sort of ranking, and he especially wanted to caution those who would jockey to be the ones at the favored seat, or to get the favored invitation, that God's banquet does not look like they are going to expect it to look. God's banquet table was more likely to have the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind at the favored

seats than the popular, wealthy and any of those familiar with high social status.

My Southern grandmother tried to impart on her granddaughters the importance of etiquette as something that soothes the social anxieties that may happen when people come together, because everyone knows what to expect in their roles. When I surveyed advice columns Dear Abby and Miss Manners, there were many questions about seating arrangements, especially questions about seating of mother-in-law and daughter-and-law in proximity to the beloved son/husband. The US State Department has a manual called "Protocol for the Modern Diplomat" that helps those in the foreign service avoid embarrassing table upsets. According to the State Department, table placements should follow rank-- no matter which country guests come from-- and alternate gender if possible, with the highest ranking official sitting to the immediate right of the host and the lower-ranked officials seated below the salt. If a dinner has several high ranking guests, it is best to put them at a round table to avoid unintentional snubbing.

Non-western countries also have their own rules on social rankings-- I'm sure the variety of customs are too vast to mention but that the importance of honor, or of saving or losing face, is a universal concern.

I don't think Jesus meant to sound like Miss Manners in his advice. Considering he was eating in the home of a leading Pharisee when he told this parable, what he said at the table where guests had already sorted themselves in relation to the honored seats had to have created a rather awkward moment. Knowing Jesus, perhaps he was bored by the person who had expertly kept Torah sitting next to him and was instead drawn to the person who had a more questionable story at the other end of the table. If he had been my childhood friend Melissa, he also would have had more fun at the slumber party for the geeky kids.

Today is Blessing of the Animals Sunday, and a good one to remind ourselves that we do not have to sit at the helm of creation's order. Historically we have operated on something Elizabeth Dodson Gray calls "dominion theology."¹ This theology ranks God's creation; not only do we humans rank our worth as higher than that of animals, and then plants, and then non-living things like rocks and oil; those at the top of the pyramid have the right to exploit and oppress those below. And even at the top of this pyramid there is another sort of ranking, with male above female, adults above children, able-bodied above handicapped, and so forth.

But instead of seeing God's creation from a dominion perspective, with humans just beneath God and angels, Sallie McFague challenges us to see ourselves as just part of a vast creation which groans for fulfillment. The atoms that make us up are the same atoms that make up the rocks and the trees; not only that, but we are reliant on each other for our energies to coexist. McFague argues for a spirituality of mutuality in relation to the earth and its creation, noting that the creation around us bears the image of God.²

When I eat at home, my dog Lucy sits on the floor right by my chair looking at me with what I interpret to mean a deep love for me in her eyes. Some would call this begging; I call it company. She is a creature who licks garbage and worse, yet somehow she has wedged her way into our hearts and family tree. Intellectually, I know that those cute eyes and sweet muzzle, and the tail wagging at my presence, are probably more an evolutionary trick to get more food and other things Lucy needs from me than a statement of her true love for me. But the other thing Lucy does for me is remind me of my creatureliness.

¹ Elizabeth Dodson Gray, "A Critique of Dominion Theology" in *Religion and the Natural Sciences: The Range of Engagement* ed. James E. Huchingson. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1993, p. 377

² Sallie McFague, "A Holistic View of Reality" in *Religion and the Natural Sciences*, p. 357

Tending my dog helps me tend my life. Lucy requires two long walks a day, plus short breaks in-between. What I do not realize until I am walking her is that I require long walks too. I need the fresh air that inspires free thought, but without the dog's need, my need would most often go untended.

The dog walk also gives me time and space for confession. Sometimes, when I walk Lucy and bend down for the humbling act of bagging up her poo, I challenge myself to consider what crap in my own life needs riddance, what things still keep me in bondage.

When my mind gets ahead of myself, spinning me in a circle of "What ifs," one look at Lucy can ground me. Cats and dogs know how to exist without pretense. They simply are. And whether it is stretching out luxuriously in a patch of sunlight, or concentrating intently on the fly in the room, or angling to be pet and scratched in just the right spot, dogs and cats, pets model for us ways to be mindfully present in the moment and in that moment only. There is a reason Jesus drew us to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. They neither toil nor spin, but God clothes them in their finest glory!

Eckhart Tolle writes in *Guardians of Being*, "Just watching an animal closely can take you out of your mind and bring you into the present moment which is where the animal lives all the time. It's so wonderful to watch an animal, because an animal has no opinion about itself. IT IS. That's why the dog is so joyful and why the cat purrs."

In the book of Job, God reminds the suffering Job-- right before healing him-- that he's not all *that*. "Where were you when I made the foundations of the earth? Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives? Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?" God is trying to get Job to remember: you did not create this or

order that and you are *not* at the pinnacle of my creation. So take your seat. I will still love and care for you, but you need to be more humble. And then God goes on to heal Job and restore his fortunes.

This God who puts us in our place at the seat of creation's feast still wants us to be fed. But Jesus' parable is a reminder that we do not have to have the first seat in order to eat. Surely if we open ourselves to the design of God's placement in creation, we will find delight at who and what in creation we will meet, and together we will take part in a wonderful feast. Amen.