

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“Take a Seat—Next to Jesus”*

Sirach 10:12-18 (Pride is the beginning of sin)
Psalm 112 (Happy are they who fear the Lord)
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 (Mutual love in all relationships, whether strangers or family)
St. Luke 14:1, 7-14 (Jesus urges, welcome the least among us)

“We may spend our whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to find when we get to the top that our ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”¹ So, wrote the late theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton, telling us something we may not want to hear, yet we can immediately connect this uncomfortable truth to Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel lesson. We find it easy to believe in Jesus as our healer, savior, teacher, and even as a prophet. But Jesus as a countercultural revolutionary who speaks against our society? That can be harder to accept, especially when we realize He’s preaching against behavior in which we regularly engage.

In ancient Israel, who sat where at a dinner party conveyed status as clearly as who has the corner office, who gets the Employee of the Month parking space, or whose grandchild has the most attendees at her birthday party, in our society. Our relationships are full of subtle status signals and we use them to communicate who we are and how we want others to see us.

Our clothing, what car we drive (or whether we have a car to drive), what neighborhood we live in, where we socialize—they all send a message about our worth and prestige, usually based on our economic power, or how many rungs on the ladder we have bought or earned.²

When I graduated from college, I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, self-described as “America’s most prestigious academic honor society, founded in 1776.” Members are given a gold insignia to wear, either as a pin or on a neck chain. Although I tended not to display mine, one time I did and encountered a man who demanded to know, “Why are you wearing a Phi Beta Kappa Key?” I knew he recognized it, and was highly offended by my perceived arrogance. So I called his bluff and answered with sarcasm dripping: “To show off that I’m a stuck-up intellectual who’s earned a ton of academic accolades.”

Those kinds of signals were conveyed in Jesus’ time by the seating at a meal, which was arranged by the host as not just a signal but also a tool. If he hosted a dinner and wanted an advantageous nuptial match with a certain young man for his daughter, he could seat the father at a higher place at the table than usual. If a competitor in business shorted him in a deal, he could seat him lower to communicate his displeasure. Table seating was societal currency, and it was the stage on which political, social, and economic relationships played out. It was a public display of an individual’s or family’s place on the spectrum of honor and shame. I suspect many of today’s seating arrangements at wedding receptions or embassy dinner parties might convey the same sort of bias.

Another comparable display is seen in our public encounters with the grocery clerk at check-out. When you pay with food stamps, people tend to draw negative conclusions about you. But when you pay with an exclusive, members-only platinum credit card, people may have a more positive opinion about you. We’re labeled, judged, and placed within a hierarchy based merely on a brief public encounter. And that’s how dinner seating charts worked in Jesus’ time.

One of the most interesting parts of this Gospel story is what Jesus doesn’t say. Rather than calling out, “This entire status-by-seating system is bogus and I want you to chuck the whole thing,” Jesus proceeds on the assumption that they can work and live within it. He points out: “When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So, Jesus leaves the status system intact, which may seem like a let-down. You’d think He would get rid of it entirely. He seems to be promising us, “You’re not in the corner office now, but if you take the rattiest old cubicle on purpose, one day you’ll have the one with the penthouse view.” At least that’s how we might interpret it. But what if there’s another way to think about it?

Let's think for a moment about what it feels like to jockey for position as we do so often at work, with our neighbors, and at church. The perpetual one-upmanship. The unspoken cues and subtle put-downs. The seeming unfairness of who is rewarded and who is shoved down to a lower rung. It can be exhausting! When we get caught up in the snarkiness of envying the person who's chairing the church committee, the one who gets more of the pastor's attention, or who owns that Mercedes or BMW in the parking lot—we start to become disconnected from God and our true selves. And if we keep it up, it will drain us of life and vitality.

Jesus says, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled.” He understands the destructive power of the soul-sucking rat race. And He's telling us that as long as we find satisfaction by putting ourselves above others, we may find ourselves with many shiny things, hifalutin' diplomas, or puffed-up titles, but with hearts that are cold and empty. Exalting ourselves brings us to new lows of impoverished integrity and the absence of true happiness. Remember, when on August 14 we celebrated the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and learned about how she magnified *God* instead of herself? And how, in turn, the Lord magnified *her*? Jesus confirms this divine dynamic when He declares, “All who humble themselves will be exalted.”

But what if the exaltation Jesus promises is not the most likes on social media? What if it's not letters in front of, or after, our names, or the Rector's Warden's role, or trophies we can display on the mantel? What if the exaltation Jesus promises is liberation from the whole status-seeking, status-making system?

If we decide we're not going to play the game anymore, we start making different choices. We stop seeking to climb the next rung at work, or aiming for a better yard than our neighbor's, and instead, look for a chance to lend a hand. We stop thinking we're too important to set out chairs or wash dishes at church, and instead, stay late to collect the trash and sweep the Hall. We keep our cars, clothes, and phones longer, now that we find we don't need to display the latest and greatest, but instead, thinking of those around the world who have so much less than we're blessed with—and extending ourselves to give to those in need.

Our human nature is to seek comfort, status, and power. But if, with God's help, we make an effort to, over and over, choose to humble ourselves as Jesus asks us to, what begins as a spiritual discipline will gradually transform us in deep and lasting ways. Progressively, that craving to be the best, to have the most, to win at everything, ebbs and dies away. This is the exaltation Jesus promises the humble. And if we keep working at it through small choices and minor decisions, the seed of peace that is planted by sincere self-effacement starts to flower.

“Those who humble themselves will be exalted.” When we're still trapped in the status system, we might assume that Jesus means that at the Great Dinner Table in the Sky the humble will finally get to have the choice seats at the head of the table. They'll have an eternal corner office, a never outdated smartphone, and an infinity sign where the number of their Facebook likes used to be. But that would not be heaven. It would be the same prison we live in on earth!

We read in St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians (5:1), “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” The only way out of the chains of the status system is to follow Jesus in His example of downward mobility. Of course, we must avoid the trap of ostentatiously taking on humble tasks and refusing honor in a loud or overt manner. To do that is simply climbing rungs on the ladder of self-congratulation. It's the same prison.³

We can't free ourselves from the status system itself. Jesus points that out, knowing there will always be a table and a fight for higher positions at it. Our options are choosing where to sit at that table. And if we ask Jesus to be with us and help us take the lower seat, help us quit playing the game, and help us give up the quest for success, status, power, or control, He will exalt us to freedom from the desire for all of these.

And, like the old Alka-Seltzer jingle used to sing, “Oh, what a relief it is!” We'll no longer need to make a big show; we will know deep in our bones our true worth in Christ, and that it is not determined by where we sit, but by Whom we are loved—Jesus Christ, our Lord, Savior, and dearest Friend. *Amen.*

¹ Thomas Merton, qtd. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass/Wiley Imprint, 2011) p. xvii.

² Adapt. Whitney Rice, “What Seat Do You Choose?” 28 August 2016, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/what-seat-do-you-choose-proper-17-c-2016/) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/what-seat-do-you-choose-proper-17-c-2016/>> 15 August 2022. Used with permission

³ Rice, *op. cit.*