

“Choose Your Seat Wisely”

Luke 14: 7-14

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Saint Luke's Presbyterian Church

Today's scripture includes two separate teachings from Jesus. In verses 7-11 he says when you are invited to dinner, be humble. Select a seat far from the host, down at the end of the table. You'll be honored when you are invited to move up in the pecking order, closer to the host and their “seat of power.” And you'll avoid the embarrassment of being asked to move from a good seat down to the far end.

In verses 12 through 14, Jesus explains to his host whom he should invite into his home. The invitations should go out to those who cannot return the favor. Invite the poor, the outcast, those who do not have the monetary or social capital to invite you to dinner. Invitation and generosity are only pure in motive when you cannot be repaid for what you have shared.

Jesus has been invited to dine at the home of a “prominent Pharisee” and he uses this occasion for a few teachable moments. Pick your seat wisely and invite purely out of generosity.

The Pharisees were religious leaders, a well-respected sect among the Jewish people. But, the four Gospels are counter-cultural: they repeatedly portray religious leaders as corrupt, power-hungry individuals who use the laws of scripture to exclude people rather than welcome them. I doubt every Pharisee was a bad guy. Surely there were a few men called to ministry in those days who were motivated by a desire to align with God's will for humanity and to inspire others to do the same. I mean, not ALL religious leaders are rotten, right?

Scripture paints the Pharisees as a group of strong, vocal leaders who feel threatened. Threatened by the concepts of equality, abundant grace and

unqualified love that Jesus was preaching to the masses. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees enjoyed a superior place in society. Sadly, their culture of judgement and purity had drifted quite far from the original Hebrew leaders selected by God. Moses and Aaron, admittedly imperfect in so many ways, did their best to listen to God and lead God's people.

But Moses and his leadership style was thousands of years ago. And by 30AD, the Pharisees had moved from using the gift of God's law as a safe boundary for living to using the law as a weapon to condemn or "rule over" others. You've heard the saying "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely?"ⁱ Once we humans experience an inkling of power, we are drawn like a moth to the flame. It's human nature. When we are elevated in the eyes of others, we begin to believe we are "better than" and without anyone bold enough to tell us otherwise, we can grow to be insufferable.

And this Jesus, he is the one bold enough to tell us otherwise. He will audaciously preach that truth as he stands in your living room as an invited guest. We can assume the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner needed to hear Jesus' words.

And from 30AD to 2026, here we are, wondering if we are good religious folks, if we've become a tad insufferable, if we have morphed into a type of Pharisee.

In our Wayfarer Bible study of this scripture, Ann Richardson taught me a new phrase. Show of hands, have you heard the phrase "Below the salt?" The phrase originated during medieval times in England, when the cool climate made the harvesting of salt difficult work. As a result, salt was a very precious commodity. It was a luxury good, something placed strategically on the dining table within reach of the most important people, to enrich the taste of their food. The other diners, the less important, were seated "below the salt" and thus unable to access this spice of life. "Below the salt" indicates a lesser importance, something or someone unworthy of the finer things in life.

The host must have been at the head of the table, closest to the salt. Which seat do you think Jesus chose? Which seat would you choose? The Pharisee

says, “Sit down. Be exalted.” Christ says, “Sit down. Be humble.”ⁱⁱ He highlights the embarrassment that comes from being asked to move down because he knows his audience: the worst thing for a Pharisee to endure is public humiliation. They want to save face; to be revered by their peers and those they consider beneath them.

They are concerned about their place in society, instead of their place in the Kingdom of God. *Choose your seat wisely*, Jesus says, *at the table and in life*.

On to Jesus’ second teaching, about which guests you invite to your dinner. If you read all of Luke’s Gospel, you realize it’s a wonder Jesus was asked in the first place. In earlier chapters he describes the Pharisees as full of greed, wickedness, as fueled by hypocrisy, of withholding justice and the love of God from the people, and of taking the best seats in the synagogue for themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ Why in the world did the Pharisee have Jesus, this insulting rabbi, as a guest in his home?

What do you think are the motivational factors for extending hospitality? Why do we invite someone to dinner?

Did this Pharisee invite Jesus because he wanted someone clever to entertain him? NO. Or because Jesus lived in a fabulous home that the Pharisee hoped to see with a return invitation? Jesus didn’t own anything. So, NO. Was Jesus invited out of admiration, as a thank you for how he moved about in the world? Jesus has insulted the Pharisees repeatedly, so NO. Was Jesus invited because the Pharisee wanted to build relationship? Maybe, but most likely NO.

Was Jesus was invited because the Pharisee wanted to learn from him. This Pharisee, a highly respected man who routinely tells others what they should do? Likely, NO. MAYBE he invites Jesus because Jesus is enjoying his 15 minutes of fame, he is the “IT” guy of the moment and the Pharisee wanted to be part of the excitement. Most likely he wanted to influence Jesus, to seat him at his right side so he could set him straight about the true interpretation of the torah, the holy scripture.

Jesus saw right through that invitation, expecting at best a lecture, and at worst a public shaming. An invitation issued under the guise of hospitality. Jesus didn't need what the Pharisees were serving. But he knew many other people would benefit from sincere hospitality. The blind, the lame, the poor, physically and also spiritually. Jesus was telling the Pharisee to *stop gatekeeping God*; to feed the people who need God's justice and love.

Fenway Park, the home of the Boston Red Sox, is famously one of the smaller stadiums in the country. The Sox use every inch of their stadium to create revenue because they simply don't have enough seats for all the fans. Boston residents with limited resources know the best bang for your buck is purchasing a Standing Room Only ticket. This ticket gets you through the gate but does not guarantee you a seat. So the more wily of these fans wait for an usher to turn their back and sneak down into empty seats, ideally right behind home plate. Those are the guys you see behind the catcher, making goofy faces and waving wildly at the tv camera! Sure, they don't belong there, they don't even have a seat at the table, but what a thrill to sit in those prime seats, if only for an inning or two.

If you combine Jesus' two teachings in today's scripture: be humble in choosing your place at the table and invite the under resourced folks to the party, I believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Jesus is all in for that Standing Room Only crowd.

Jesus' teachings tell us again and again and again, open up the gates, invite all, and humble yourself to serve others.

In the Kingdom of God, the only host is God. The tables look like the tables in Saint Luke's Great Hall—they are round. And there are a zillion of them, because every person, rich or poor in body or spirit, is invited to sit at a table where there is no hierarchy. And, I imagine, on top of each round table is a Lazy Susan, so everyone can easily reach the salt.^{iv} Or better yet—we all pass the salt, gladly, to one another.

And now its time to gather at Christ's table. Come forward. Put out your hands and be fed. And ponder how you can pass the salt, pass on this joy, this mercy, this love that you have found in Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

Benediction: Some of us got VERY sweaty yesterday handing out water at the Fourth of July parade. But it was hospitality at its finest, wasn't it? Serving others without agenda, without expecting anything in return. Offering something lifegiving just for the pleasure of being kind. Keep handing out water, Saint Luke's, literally and spiritually. And consider inviting the unexpected person to dinner next time you eat. They will benefit from the invitation. And so will you. And do so knowing that God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the advocate will bless that gathering which reflects the Kingdom of God.

ⁱ John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887, <https://www.acton.org/research/lord-acton-quote-archive>, accessed July 3, 2026.

ⁱⁱ Phrase from Kendrick Lamar's song "HUMBLE," released March 30, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 11: 39, 42, 43 and 12: 1. NRSVUE translation

^{iv} <https://www.thetakeout.com/1657285/chinese-restaurant-circular-table-tradition/>, accessed June 2026