

The Seating Plan
Sermon on James 2:1-17 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, September 10, 2006

I was watching a program on PBS several weeks ago about Windsor Castle, reportedly the Queen of England's favorite official residence. Buckingham Palace is her office, you see, so Windsor is more like home. Windsor employs more than 300 staff members, from the standard domestic servants such as the maids, butlers, footmen, gardeners, and cooks to the more esoteric roles such as the fender smiths, whose job it is to mind the castle's fireplaces, and the timekeeper, whose job it is to keep the castle's 450 clocks in good repair, and the flag man, whose job it is to raise the royal standard when the queen is in residence.

Perhaps the most demanding job is that of the Lord Steward. It is his job to devise the seating plan at all royal functions. In this particular episode, he was arranging the seating for 150 of the queen's guests at a celebration of the Entente Cordiale, an agreement between France and England that ended the two countries' historic antagonisms. Managing to get the French and the English to sit down together for dinner requires considerable diplomatic skill in the first place, and even more skill to arrange people according to their relative status, rank, and potential interest as a conversation partner. Even when he is making arrangements for the annual Garter Day celebration, an occasion honoring Britain's distinguished war heroes and Knights of the Garter, the Lord Steward has to take care to rotate the seating charts for the luncheons so that no one sits next to the same person more than once every 10 years!

And while none of us would typically require the services of the Lord Steward even for the most lavish of our dinner parties, we nevertheless exercise considerable care when deciding on the seating plan for charity banquets, business lunches, society affairs, or Thanksgiving dinner. Miss Manners is quick to remind us that the highest-ranking male generally sits to the

right of the hostess. The wife of the highest-ranking man or the highest-ranking woman herself sits to the right of the host. The second-ranking male will usually sit to the left of the hostess. The seating should be arranged such that no two women sit side by side and no two men sit side by side. And for whatever psychological reasons there may be, husbands and wives are generally never seated next to each other, although engaged couples are seated side by side. Even at informal family dinners, seating should be arranged so that everyone is comfortable and will enjoy the meal.

Our place in the seating plan says a great deal about how others view us: If we are asked to sit at the head table or to the right of the hostess, we feel important because we have been offered a place of honor. If we are assigned a place at the back of the banquet hall or at the children's table, we feel dishonored, excluded, left out. The seating plan reflects the priorities of whatever community gathers to eat: who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down.

That is why the writer of James says in no uncertain terms that there is to be no favoritism in the Christian community: no head table, no seats of honor, no sections reserved for the especially righteous. When we come to church, the ushers are expressly told not to size up worshipers by what they are wearing and seat them accordingly: Brooks Brothers and Anne Taylor to the front, Abercrombie & Fitch in the middle, J. C. Penney in the back. These acts of favoritism call into question whether we really believe in the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1).

But God, we might object, haven't you called us to be a people of discriminating taste? Don't we show our love for you by wearing our Sunday best? Isn't it a sign of disrespect to come to church in jeans or shorts? Doesn't the Bible somewhere say, "Clothes make the man"?

I confess that I find this text hard to preach. Hard not because its teaching is complicated or difficult to understand, but hard because it finds me where I am and convicts me. I don't like

it when somebody starts preaching that it's not about the clothes because I am a clothes horse. I can't pass up a sale. And despite my decided taste for plaids, checks, and all things seersucker, I like to think that I exercise considerable care for how I look. I want people to look at me and think, "He's got it made."

But therein lies the danger: What other people see, our surface appearance, becomes more important than what is within. We not only dress to impress, we dress to kill. We dress to the nines, even at church, so that we will get a good seat, someplace where we can see and be seen. We want to be noticed, to be thought well of, to have others think, "They've got it made."

But this should not be so in church, in the community of faith, among those who follow Jesus as Lord. When the Christian community judges people based on outward appearances and when Christians show partiality or favor to those who look good, the danger is that we make distinctions among ourselves, distinctions that God does not make. And when we begin to make distinctions, when we mentally assign people to the head of the class or the back of the line, we make judgments about those people. Showing favor to some and treating others with contempt violates the most important law of all—the law of love for God and neighbor.

Jesus himself lived according to this law. He happily accepted dinner invitations from the rich and powerful, and he just as happily ate in the homes of sinners and outcasts. He didn't make distinctions among people; he didn't show partiality. We see this plainly in Jesus' encounter with the woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit. Everything about the situation said Jesus should not get involved, for this was a woman, a foreigner, and a Gentile, and Jewish men should not associate with any of these. And yet this woman knew that despite the unwritten rules of who belongs, she was not outside the realm of God's love and power, that her daughter was not beyond God's ability to heal. And because of her faith, Jesus gave this woman and her

daughter a place at the table of the people of God. He recognized that this woman and her daughter were humans created in the image of God and so deserving of dignity and respect.

Thus to show favoritism or partiality to any particular group, be they rich, powerful, well educated, or socially astute, is wrong “because it contradicts God’s own attitude, as revealed in his gracious election to salvation.”¹ And God has some very interesting criteria for choosing people to save. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that when God called them to faith in Jesus, “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

And that is amazingly good news: When God arranged the seating plan for those who would join him at his table, he didn’t check our IQ, or the size of our bank account, or the designer labels on our clothes. God isn’t terribly interested in any of those things, at least not in the sense that they might secure us a place at God’s table. We have a place at the table not because of what we have or whose clothes we wear. We have a place at the table because God in his grace has invited us there.

So the seating plan for the banquet called the kingdom of God is broadly inclusive. There is a place for everyone who believes that Jesus is Lord and so works hard to love their neighbor as themselves. There is a place for rich and poor and in between. There is a place for black and white and brown and red and shades thereof. There is a place for young and old, for able-bodied and disabled. God reaches out in love to all, offering all a place at the table of God.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) 105.

There is plenty of room because there is plenty of love. The seating plan includes you. Let us come to the Gospel feast.