

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Fitting In”

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Luke 14

14 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

The beginning of the school year tends to evoke some memories. Last week as Maren and Amelia were together, discussing how life was when they were younger, I thought of Amelia’s first day of kindergarten back in West Bloomfield in 1998. As nervous as she was about the rest of the school day, she was looking forward to riding the bus to school. I think it was helpful that big sister Maren was getting on the bus at the very same time. I recall that while we were waiting for the bus on the very first day of school, Amelia informed us that she planned to sit in the back seat of the bus. Maren let out an audible gasp. “Amelia, you can’t sit in the back seat of the bus. That’s where the fifth graders always sit!” As usual, Amelia wasn’t impressed. “I can sit in the back of the bus if I want to.” Maren tried to explain it all to her. “Only older kids sit in the back of the bus. They don’t want any kindergarteners there. They will make fun of you.” Amelia still wasn’t ready to give up the fight. “Is it a rule that only fifth graders get to sit in the back of the bus?” Maren got a little frustrated. “No, it’s not a rule but everyone just knows that only fifth graders get to sit there.” Amelia then simply said, “Well, I’m still gonna sit there.” Maren took a deep breath and looked at me for help. I told her to stop arguing with her sister and let Amelia figure it out for herself, just as

Maren had done years earlier. As I recall, when the bus arrived and the doors opened, Amelia sat down near the front of the bus.

As I remember, and it was oh so long ago, the hardest transition for me in school was the beginning of junior high. It was sixth grade. School was pretty simple until then. But sixth grade changed all of that. It was the first year in which I had to change classes, with different teachers for Math and English and Social Studies. It was the first year I had gym. I had to worry about putting on the baggy shorts and showering in front of all of the guys. And sixth grade was the first year with lockers. Suddenly I had to remember two different padlocks combinations, one for books and the other for my gym basket.

But I remember that something much more difficult lurked in the halls of Stanton Junior High School. That something was trying to understand and fit in with the established social order. It was by following these rules that you were proclaimed worthy. There are all sorts of unwritten rules in junior high. I learned that as a sixth grader, I was supposed to use the bathrooms on the lower floor only. If I ventured upstairs to use the rest room, I was subject to having my head lowered into the toilet. I learned that during lunch hour, I was to sit at the tables furthest from the bleachers. If I sat too close to the eighth graders in the bleachers, I could lose my sandwich or have my potato chips smashed to pieces. I learned that during noon recess, sixth graders were to use the playing field at the far end of the playground. The eighth graders of course occupied the finest baseball diamond with the benches and backstop, right next to the school.

As I recall, I spent most of the year worrying about how the seventh and eighth graders expected me to act so I would be accepted and fit in. It was senseless debating the merits of these unwritten rules. It was pointless determining which one was the most important to follow. I simply had to accept the rules, to follow along, and to almost make myself sick wondering whether or not I would mess up. I prayed for the day when I would be an eighth grader and get to make some poor sixth grader nervous.

I recall a news item about the activity surrounding the incoming freshman class at a military school. There is an unwritten rule that the school's upperclassmen get to haze the freshmen. The first year students even have a special title- they are called rats. I saw a film clip of a senior screaming into the face of a rat. It wasn't pleasant. I also saw seniors running to a line of rats to find someone to do a few pushups or to put their nose to the wall for a few minutes. One second year student was interviewed, a woman who as a rat did not like the hazing. But having survived it herself she wanted the practice passed on to the next class. She said, "It is tradition. Rats need to learn to respect authority." And here I thought Stanton Junior High School was tough!

Where does this fit with the Scripture lesson for the day? Jesus went to dinner with some church insiders. For them, faith was a matter of following proper rules and fitting in with expectations. These were people who studied and even worshipped the written and unwritten code of religious behavior. They wanted to figure this Jesus character out and to decide if he really would fit in with them. They had heard about how little he respected the prized religious and social rules of the synagogue. So they were watching him closely. But Jesus wasn't too worried about fitting in. He seemed to have something else in mind. He was watching the insiders, evaluating their behavior.

Imagine if you can, a sixth grader, confident enough to be sitting in judgment of an eighth grader!

Jesus must have thought that whatever he saw was pretty funny. Everyone was jockeying for position at the best tables. For those trying to fit in and to impress, it really wasn't funny. It was deadly serious. For one thing, hierarchy mattered. Priests were at the front of course. Scholars of the law were next at the table. Then everyone else sat down according to their rank. It was kind of like the school bus pecking order. If people sat down at the wrong place, there's no telling what would have happened. I suppose this is one of the problems that some people in the American South had with the lunch counter civil rights sit-ins. If one person sits where they are not supposed to sit, suddenly the whole system is challenged and things can change.

After watching this for a while, Jesus offered a suggestion. "Why don't you try something new," he said. "When you come into the banquet hall, head for the worst seat available. Sit where the sixth graders are supposed to sit. Then maybe the host will come up to you and say in front of the entire gathering, "Friend, you must sit in a better seat." Think about how wonderful that might feel!

I suppose that everyone thought about Jesus' message for awhile. It was an idea worth considering. God's grace filling each and every seat in the room with a feeling of worth and importance. But they weren't certain about the guy promoting it. After all, Jesus had a pretty shaky track record when it came to following rules. He seemed to enjoy stretching or even breaking boundaries. He didn't seem too concerned with fitting in. And sure enough, while they were mulling over his first suggestion, he came up with another. He said, "The next time you invite people to dinner, don't ask those who you think might invite you back. Ask the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the powerless, and the sixth graders-those who can't be concerned about sitting in the best seat. Model God's behavior where everyone is accepted, whether or not they fit in. What a party you will have!"

That was where those who sought to fit in drew the line. They knew their place. They expected others to know their place also. They could not tolerate this social mess that Jesus was proposing, everyone communing and talking and celebrating together. They didn't want a school bus or cafeteria where nobody worried about where they should sit. They cringed at the thought of everyone sharing in the abundance of what was available at the moment. It did not make sense that no one should be concerned about impressing or outdoing others. They knew that when the grace of God was realized and everyone was made worthy, they would lose their power and their bearings. No one would be concerned about just fitting in.

There is an old rabbinical tale about how the Sabbath was originally a thing of joy. But too many religious leaders kept issuing one injunction after another about how to observe the Sabbath. Soon people felt they could hardly move during the Sabbath for fear they might be breaking some religious law and would stand out in front of the community. One day a man named Baal Shem had a dream. An angel took him to heaven where there were two empty chairs, one for him and another for a companion. Then the same angel took him to hell where there were also two chairs, one for him and another for a companion. As the dream continued, Baal Shem visited the home of his companion in heaven. He was a man ignorant of all Sabbath customs. Every Sabbath he gave a banquet where there was much merrymaking. The man did this because his

mother had always celebrated the Sabbath in this way and he knew of no other way than to celebrate by singing, dancing, and making merry. Still in the dream Baal Shem went to home of his companion in hell. He found the man to be a strict observer of the Law, one who constantly worried about fitting in, always apprehensive about the correct conduct of others. The poor man spent each Sabbath day in a tension as if he were sitting on hot coals. When he woke from his dream, Baal Shem gained new understanding. He understood that when people came to know God's grace, they were joyful and tended to be good in action. But when they thought they had to earn God's love, they worried about fitting in and were seldom joyful, treating themselves and others with anger and spite.

Jesus understood this. He tried to communicate this. We are not to spend our time and energy trying to "fit into" faith. In Christ we embrace a new way, grounded in the knowledge that we cannot earn a place at the table, that we cannot do anything to get a better seat. We are to simply trust in God's grace and to celebrate who we are in the circumstance, a child of God who always has a place.

Life in the Kingdom of God is not a struggle to find a better place, fearing the judgment of others who have already established the rules. Life in the Kingdom of God is an understanding that we live under the grace of God, where our goodness comes from celebrating the abundance of God for everyone who is invited to the table.