

The Best Seat in the House

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About a year ago, Beth and I went to a concert down at the Anaheim Pond. The opening band was called Chevelle, a alternative metal trio out of Chicago; and they were followed by Southern California rock band Hoobastank. Finally, the headline act came on: a Canadian hard-rock band called Nickelback.

When we'd bought our tickets a month or so before, we had the opportunity to get "floor" tickets. In other words, we could get close. Who would've imagined that we were only about 15 feet from the stage, close enough to feel the sound which was cranked even louder when Nickelback came out. It was so loud that we had trouble with any normal conversation for at least half-an-hour after the concert. And still, it almost didn't matter. We were about as close to the front as we could get!

Position is important to us, isn't it? Think about that; we like to be up close, to be up front. We like to be first in line. Think about sports. What position does your favorite athlete play? Shaquille O'Neil is a Center; Peyton Manning is a Quarterback; Barry Bonds plays Left Field. In NASCAR, the best position is the pole position, right there up front with the best advantage.

Positioning invades our vernacular, too. We talk about it. Being on *the inside track* comes out of track and field. *Jockeying for position* comes out of horseracing.

Attorneys, politicians, students, and countless organizations write and publish Position Papers. And our own position on any number of issues including political, socio-economic, and religious matters can have dramatic affect on what others think of us.

When I arrived here at Pasadena First a year ago and started getting to know some of our Youth, I found out that Anthony Capp played Water Polo. What did I ask? "What position do you play?" More recently, at the Youth Summer Camp a week ago I met Katie Dickerson and found out that she plays soccer. What was the first thing I wanted to know? "What position do you play?"

And here's one that hits close to home. We identify each other here in this Sanctuary by where we sit! Take a second right now; ask yourself if you've ever described a member of this church to another member and included that vital information. I've done it! Not long ago, I was talking about Paul Cogger, and part of the conversation was that he sits in this section here, left of center.

Clearly there are some advantages to some of these things. We can easily identify others; we can find familiarity in some of this knowledge, or even commonality. When I find out that someone was an Outside Hitter in Volleyball, that's familiar to me and I can share that we have something in common.

But when we worry about our own positioning and how it relates to others, isn't that more of a comfort thing? Isn't it about being in our Comfort Zone? Of course, we might say that comfort is subjective. Here's an example: if you ask me where I like to sit in a movie theater, it's almost the exact center of the room. I'm not so close to the screen that I have to turn my head, and I get a pretty good "surround sound" experience. Others like that front row. And if you ask some of our Youth, I'd bet the majority prefer to sit in the back! But isn't position also sometimes about status?

Have you ever been to a wedding reception where there are those fancy cards letting you know where to sit? Do you feel disappointed when you're in the back corner right by the bathroom? Wouldn't you feel better if you were right up front next to the dance floor?

When you're out to dinner with a big group, especially family, isn't the best place to sit right there at the head of the table?

And why do you think there's the big rush to be the first in line for tickets for that hot new band (or for some, the latest concert at the Hollywood Bowl)? Because we want the best seats! If you work it right, you can get seats right up toward the front. And if you're *really* good, you can get those coveted Box Seats, right? Well then, it's not about getting a good view is it? It's about setting ourselves apart, being more important! It's about getting away from the "common folk." It's about status!

So right now, I want us to do something radical. We're going to change our perspective here. How many of you have seen the front page article in the latest Messenger, the August 31st edition? Pastor Frank writes this: "Hey, all of you who sit in the far right and far left of the Sanctuary, would you mind terribly if we roped those sections off and had you sit just one section nearer to the middle?" And, "Hey, all of you who sit in the balcony, do you think you could do the same thing? Cozy up a little?" So let's do it, right now. Let's get up, those who feel able, out of our seats, the ones where we always sit. Get up and move into another seat. Right now. Let's change perspective.

All this positioning stuff isn't new. This has been going on for a long time, and the church certainly isn't immune. When the Youth Choir toured New England this past summer, we had the opportunity to visit Old North Church. You've probably heard of it, it's the church in whose steeple hung two lanterns at the start of the Revolutionary War. Remember: one if by land, two if by sea.

We saw something unusual: the use of *Box Pews*, which were walled-off sections of seating. At the time of the Revolution, members of the congregation at Old North Church would *purchase* their pews if they wanted to worship there, and different pews had different prices. If you could afford more, you got the better position. It was a sign of status. In fact, stories abound of persons new to the area who would purchase a pew near the back. When a more prominent pew opened up, they would reserve it and, in many ways, moved up in social circles.

That practice wasn't the start of it either. We can trace this kind of positioning all the way back to Jesus' time. Did you know that in those Synagogues, you were getting a pretty good seat if you sat right in front? It doesn't necessarily appear that way now, does it? And the *very best* seats were up here on the platform facing the congregation. That way everyone had a continual reminder of the importance of those who managed to find their way into these seats.

In our Gospel lesson, we hear about seating at meal times. Meals are important in the Gospel of Luke. In chapter seven, Jesus is criticized for eating with the wrong crowd (tax collectors and other undesirables); in chapter nine he feeds 5000 men (not including women & children) with five loaves of bread and two fish; in chapter twenty-two he shares a Passover meal and does something extraordinary with bread and wine; and in chapter twenty-four he reveals himself to his bereaved followers by breaking bread with them. Jesus understands that gathering at the table is an intimate experience, and he's intentional about sharing the experience.

A formal banquet of the time generally had tables arranged in a kind of U-shape. The host sits at the center of the head table, and the most important guests sit on either side of him. Then the other guests

sort of filter down the line in order of importance until we get to the end of those side tables. The least important people sat there at the ends, as far away as possible from the host.

Jesus observes that as people gather at this meal to which he's been invited, they all jostle for the important seats right up there in the front. They want to rub shoulders with the *right* people. They might even be wearing brightly colored clothes and have extravagant jewelry, both of which were status symbols of that time. Perhaps they were especially boisterous, drawing attention to themselves. So he does something that we're not really surprised by: he calls them on it!

He reminds the guests how embarrassing it must be to get that seat right next to the host, only to be asked to make space for someone who's more important. Can you imagine? How humiliating! "You need to go ahead and move to the back of the bus." Instead, we are invited to *choose* the far-away seats; to *choose* the low-status seats.

Jesus' parable is not just about offering some instruction in social etiquette; it's a parable about the Kingdom of God. It'd be foolish to ignore its implications, and even *more* so use these ideas as a strategy for self-promotion. For one thing, can you imagine the commotion and confusion of a whole gang of people fighting for the bad seats? More than that, we must understand that the entire concept of self-promotion, whether overt or surreptitious, is the "old way."

All over the Old Testament we read that service to God gets us tangible rewards. We get riches, we get victories in battle, we get fame and fortune, and we get lots of descendents. But as good as all that sounds, Jesus offers us something *more*. He offers us *eternal life*. But it's harder to stomach, because we don't get it now. We don't get that immediate gratification. It's a polar reversal: the familiar is turned upside down; the rules are all changed. It's as if Jesus, sitting in that banquet hall, turned his chair around and said, "It's all reversed now. The important people are those sitting on this side, and you all who worked and fought for those seats up front are in the cheap seats now." Can you imagine how foreign this concept must have been?

And then Jesus, able to see things from many perspectives at once, tosses out one more lesson. He says to the host, "Why'd you invite all the important rich people? Why'd you bring in the 'beautiful' people? Why the people that you want to be seen and associated with?" It's almost as if the host was *investing*, and he was banking on a return. Do we treat people like investments, only welcoming those who can repay *with interest*?

So he says to the host, get out of your Comfort Zone! Invite the people that you *don't* necessarily want to be seen with. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Invite the people who can't throw you a big party in return. Invite the people who won't nudge you up the social totem pole.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus had a knack for inclusiveness, didn't he? We might wonder why he even accepted the invitation to this pompous shindig anyway. He may have known that this was just that sort of group that would rely on position. But Jesus didn't exclude the "in-crowd" so that he could include the "out-crowd." He thought bigger than that. Being filled with pride and self-importance doesn't make grace unavailable. It just means that there's some work to be done; there are different decisions to think about. Jesus doesn't walk away from us because we've made a poor choice; it's by sinning that *we* turn our back. It is *our* action.

The scripture we read today was Luke 14:1, 7-14; I want to touch for a minute on those verses that we skipped. It's the Sabbath day, and as Jesus is on his way to this dinner party he runs across a man who is in need of healing. Not only does Jesus heal the man on the Sabbath, he practically dares those who are watching him (remember, he knew he was being watched) to say something. He uses it as a lesson. Our actions are more important than our appearances. What *better* way to honor the Sabbath day than to offer our compassion, our mercy, and our love?

Remember, this seating-arrangement thing is a parable; and meal times can impact our lives. While we're fed physically, the company we keep, that intimate setting around the table, is food for our souls. We *see* through Jesus' example that we must put the needs of others before our own. We *see* by example that we must humble ourselves and offer places of honor to others. We *see* by example that doing good, *regardless* of what day of the week it is, honors God's creation.

When we are invited to an event, we must arrive full of humble graciousness rather than pride and self-importance. It's through that humility and service that we bring ourselves closer to our Creator. We can put less energy into outward appearance and prioritize inward grace.

What good do you think we could do if we toss aside our fear about what other people think of us? Imagine running into that smelly, un-showered, unshaven man outside the restaurant. Instead of ignoring him, or maybe tossing a couple of loose coins at him from a distance, imagine taking him into that restaurant and sitting with him and sharing a meal. Who cares what the host might think? Who cares what the waiter or the other patrons might think?

We sang a song at Youth Camp by Tommy Shane Steiner that you might have heard called "What If She's an Angel?" The first verse goes like this:

*There's a man standing on a corner with a sign saying "will work for food."
You know the man, you see him every morning, the one you never give your money to.
You can sit there with your window rolled up
Wondering when the lights are gonna turn green
Never knowing what a couple more bucks in his pocket might mean.*

Adding my own thought here, what more could spending our time and energy and spirit mean? The Chorus continues:

*What if he's an angel sent here from Heaven
And he's making certain that you're doing your best
To take the time to help one another
Are you going to pass that test?
You can go on with your day to day
Trying to forget what you saw in his face
Knowing deep down it could have been his saving grace
What if he's an angel?*

The table is an intimate place in our home. When we invite the disenfranchised, we wipe away the boundaries that we've set up. The marginalized are welcomed into meaningful relationships. We know this; we just don't always practice it. A line from Emma Lazarus' sonnet *The New Colossus* reads, "Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," and is imprinted in bronze on the Statue of Liberty. We *know* it!

So don't spend all your time in your Comfort Zone, surrounded by familiar faces. Challenge yourself every day, every moment. Surround yourself with the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In fact, run *away* from comfort and *toward* recklessness; we can show *true* grace by *recklessly* giving to those who are unable to give in return.

I heard someone say once that the Church isn't a country club; it's more like a hospital. And I think that's true! We're not all here for social renewal or to be seen in the right crowd or to impress one another. We're here because we're *all* in need of healing; *and* we're here to offer healing, to minister to one another. We're here *to be* hospitable.

So let's invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Let's invite those who wear the right things *and* those who don't. Let's open the doors so that we might humbly serve. Let's leave our Comfort Zone. Let's heal, and find that we too are healed. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

You might be familiar with a commonly told story about the funeral of Charlemagne, the European leader of the Middle Ages:

During the funeral procession to the Cathedral, the air is full of pomp & circumstance. The procession approaches the door and (in line with custom) the Bishop says, "Who comes?"

The Herald responds importantly, "Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire."

So the Bishop calls out, "Him I know not. Who comes?"

Well the Herald is understandably shaken and a little unsure. Finally, he says "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth."

Again, the Bishop denies them entry. "Him I know not. Who comes?"

Of course, at this point the Herald is completely baffled. He finally says out of desperation, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ."

"Enter!" the Bishop responds with enthusiasm. "Receive Christ's gift of life!"

Let us humble ourselves, because none of us are *above* another; none of us are *better*, none of us are *more important*. Remember, the best seat in *this* house is the one we give to someone else. Thanks be to God! Amen.