

# The Best Seat

*David A. Baer*

*Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
August 28, 2022*

*Text: Luke 14:1,7-14*

Has anybody here enjoyed the blessings of air travel this summer? If so, you have my sympathies. With the stories I've been hearing about canceled flights, long lines, and unruly passengers, I'm not in a hurry to take to the air myself. Just this week I was talking to someone who was on a flight from Denver to Newark, almost all the way home, with just about an hour of flight time to go, when the plane was diverted—back to Denver!

Sometimes, though, these stories don't end the way you expect. When my wife and I showed up at the airport for the return trip on our honeymoon, the check-in agents were in contract negotiations with the airline, and the tensions were in evidence. No, they were not going to wave through a bag that was two pounds over. Yes, we would have to repack everything to distribute the extra weight. Once that feat was accomplished, they printed out our boarding passes—or so I thought, until I looked more closely and saw the label that said "departure management card," with a flight number, and a gate, but no seat assignment. The security line was as long as you would expect, but then the TSA agent checking IDs scrawled something rather elaborate on our departure management cards that I came to understand meant "severe security audit." Out came everything from our bags once again, as the TSA agents very politely apologized for the inconvenience.

By the time we got to the gate, it was 15 minutes to departure, we had no seats, our carry-on luggage was all disarranged, and we were at the point of tears. I related our story to the gate agent, who nodded politely, her fingers clicking across her keyboard, till I got to the punchline: "... and we're coming back from our honeymoon." She looked up, then back down. "I have two seats available in first class," she told me. I realize that in the grand scheme of things, our problems that day were pretty small—but this was a kindness we won't forget. From these trying and unlikely circumstances, we were invited to move up.

So, here's the thing—I recognize that those of us who have the means to travel by air are a privileged minority of the 8 billion people in this world, and that puts all our complaints and stories of hassle and frustration in perspective. These are "first world problems," as they say. But today's gospel is a story about and for those with means. It's about people like us, and it's directed at people like us. Over the past few weeks, Jesus has been talking about the spiritual dangers of wealth, and calling us to pursue treasure in heaven—a reward more secure and lasting than the riches we accumulate on earth. But what does treasure in heaven look like, and how do you come by it? At the banquet in today's lesson, Jesus isn't judging or condemning, but rather teaching and inviting us, a people of means, to recognize and strive for true blessings.

He does this by offering two kinds of advice. The first advice he gives is pretty straightforward. Jesus watches the people at the banquet, and he notices how they jockey for position. They're ever so sensitive to who deserves to be seated closer to the

host, as a sign of higher rank and honor. And so Jesus draws on some practical wisdom from the book of Proverbs. The first thing Jesus says to the guests is a pretty simple paraphrase of what we read there: “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble” (Proverbs 25:6-7). Everybody in that room knows the scriptures. And so once Jesus reminds them of this wisdom, you can imagine them all taking a breath, and saying to themselves, “Of course, of course. Start in the low seats, and then you can move up. Why do I always forget?”

It’s not completely obvious, though, is it? Because maybe you run the risk that the host doesn’t notice you. Maybe you end up stuck in a lower seat than you deserve. The way of humility has its practical benefits, but it also requires risk and trust. You put your fate in someone else’s hands, and you wait. Still, all else being equal, anybody can see that it’s better to be asked to move up than to move down.

We know what that feels like, right? If you’ve lived any length of time, you know what it is to be vulnerable. It’s the position you’re in when you apply for a new job. It’s that flutter in your stomach when you ask someone on a date. It’s the place you stand when you offer an apology and ask for forgiveness. It’s a hard place to be. You’re not in control. You don’t know what’s going to happen. You present yourself, hat in hand, and you wait. And sometimes—not always, but sometimes—you get asked to move up: a new opportunity, a new relationship, or a new beginning in an old one. Humility combined with trust is what we call faith, and it opens the way to new beginnings.

That’s good advice, and it’s practical. But if all Jesus did was go around offering good, practical advice, it’s hard to see why anyone would crucify him. It’s what Jesus says next that takes this message about faith as vulnerability and trust and yielding control in a new, radical direction. And it’s this kind of thing that *can* get you crucified, both two thousand years ago and today.

Having offered his advice to the guests, Jesus now turns to the host. “You probably invited all these people here,” he says, “for the sake of mutual benefits. You scratch their back, they scratch yours, and it’s all even Steven. They’ll repay your invitation with an invitation of their own. They’ll repay your gift with something of equivalent value.”

This is a pretty crass way of putting it, but he’s not wrong. Throughout the ancient world, sages and philosophers described the ideal friendship like this. You do for them, and they do for you, and the cycle of blessing goes round and round. If you had friends like this, you could count yourself fortunate, happy, blessed.

But Jesus says, “No, don’t do this. Don’t invite the people who can invite you back. Don’t invite the people who can introduce you to a business contact or a marriage prospect for your child. Don’t reserve your hospitality for those who can help you get ahead. Instead, you should invite the people who can never dream of paying you back. Invite the poor, the beggars, the crippled and blind and outcast—the people who have nothing to offer. That’s the real way to be fortunate, happy, blessed. Because your reward will be paid out on the day of resurrection, when God settles everyone’s account.”

This is not practical advice. By Jesus’ own admission, it holds out no immediate advantages for those who practice it. Notice that this isn’t about charity. Jesus isn’t telling the host just to make room, to set a table in the corner for the poor, so that the other guests can fawn over them and feign sympathy. Jesus is saying that the other guests should be excluded, and the banquet should be given over to the oppressed, to the people no one would think to invite: the panhandlers who talk to themselves, the undocumented, the kids who live on the streets because the homes they come from are

even more dangerous. Invite them, feed them, honor them, Jesus says, and not your friends, not your relatives, not those in your social circle.

The host decides who comes. The host decides who sits where. And at the great banquet to come, the host is God. God, who rescued a ragtag nation of slaves from the great Egyptian empire. God, who takes up the cause of widows and orphans, those without protection or income, against those who would exploit or ignore them. God, who comes to live with us not as a powerful ruler, but as a peasant carpenter on the edge of a mighty empire. You start to get the idea who gets invited to God's parties, who God puts in the place of honor. The Pharisees thought they had an in with God. What with their mastery of the scriptures and their tireless efforts to put them into practice, they were pretty sure they were on God's A-list. But Jesus takes the wind out of their sails, telling them that their mutual appreciation society is worthless unless it benefits the poor, the sick, and the outcast.

For those of us gathered here today, just as those religious folks were gathered at the banquet with Jesus, the point is the same. The church that Jesus is gathering, the community Jesus is forming, does not exist for its own benefit, but for the benefit of everyone who's not yet there. There are a lot of ways to measure the health and strength of a church, but the measure Jesus gives us is this one: what are our gatherings, our learning, and our service doing for the least and the lost? As you think about how you'd like to live out your faith within your church and elsewhere in the weeks and months to come, think about this. The church doesn't exist to benefit its members. It doesn't exist to benefit you. It exists to embody Jesus Christ for the world, the one who came not to be served but to serve.

And yet, I can also testify that there is joy and blessing that come from taking the lowest seat. I've witnessed what it looks like to move up... One night, when another church in town was hosting the homeless shelter, there were two recovering alcoholics talking at a table. One of them was farther along in his recovery, and he was offering encouragement and support to the other. As it turns out, the one giving this encouragement was homeless, and the other recovering alcoholic was one of the shelter hosts. She came to offer hospitality that night, but she also received it. Somehow those who sit down in the lowest places always seem to get called to move up to a place of greater joy. Somehow those who open their doors to neighbors who seemingly have nothing to offer find themselves enriched in surprising ways. The best seats weren't where we thought. It's no accident, though. We are all the guests of a Host who spends his time among the lower seats, a Host who delights in calling us to move up to the place we don't deserve and could never afford. And in the end, it's this Host who decides who gets the best seats. Thanks be to God. Amen.