

August 28, 2022
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Watching Closely

The Pharisees were watching Jesus closely. They had invited him over to dinner on the Sabbath. And in between mouthfuls of food and sips of wine, they were observing him. Watching him. Waiting. Hoping to catch him at something, a wrong word, a wrong action; breaking a Sabbath rule like healing the sick or making the blind see. The Pharisees were watching Jesus closely. And Jesus was watching them. He was watching them as they desperately tried to exalt themselves, to be the biggest and best and highest among the others. Jesus watched the Pharisees, and the Pharisees watched him.

Just like Jesus and the Pharisees, we watch each other. We watch and wait for others to make mistakes. We watch to see if they might do something wrong so then we can point and say “Ah HA! Look who isn’t as great as they thought they were!” We watch one another on social media, eager to take each other down a peg, to knock others off their high horse, and humble them like they deserve to be humbled. We watch celebrities, politicians, pastors, police officers, teachers, school board

members and mayors. We watch one another, holding our breath, waiting to elevate ourselves and exalted ourselves over them.

The Pharisees were watching Jesus. They were watching him closely and they were waiting. They had been waiting for a very long time to catch him at his game. They wanted to show everyone what he was doing was wrong. They wanted to embarrass Jesus. He acted like he had authority when it came to God. He didn't respect THEIR leadership and their rules. He didn't follow THEM. He healed people when he shouldn't be healing them. He forgave people when he had no business forgiving them. He gave people access to God when it wasn't his to give. And all the people loved him for it. They loved the Kingdom of God he was ushering in.

The Pharisees were annoyed with Jesus. They wanted to catch him breaking the rules. They wanted to show he was not God's chosen one and turn the people against him. So they watched him closely. Inviting him to a meal on the Sabbath. Surely, he would be up to his old tricks. Surely, he would show off and do some kind of miracle. Then they would humble him as he deserved to be humbled. So, they prepare their

trap. And sure enough, at the meal, there is a man with a condition called dropsy. (This happens in the gap in our scripture reading) Dropsy is what we call edema, the swelling of your legs and arms caused by poor circulation. It's what you get when you have heart failure or liver failure. Without the medicines we have today, it can cause your skin to stretch and split which can lead to infection. Jesus saw the man with this condition, and Jesus' compassion gets the better of him. It always does. Jesus knew that the Sabbath was meant for freedom. It was meant for release and rest. So he quietly heals the man of his ailment. It was exactly what the Pharisees had been waiting for. They had been watching him. Jesus knew it, so he asks them, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they don't say anything. So Jesus is Jesus and he heals the man and says, "Listen. If your child was stuck in a well on the Sabbath, you'd rescue them wouldn't you? You wouldn't wait a day to do it. You'd rescue them right away." But this man is not their child. He isn't their concern. But they don't want to say that out loud. And they concede this round to Jesus.

The Pharisees wanted to put Jesus in his place. He had just shamed them with his questions. He had dishonored them. And honor was a very important in that time and place. Honor and prestige and respect, it was what life was all about. Honor was earned by fitting in with those around you. Serving those who were higher up. Climbing the social ladder up and up and up by honoring those above you. Their honor and respect for you would boost your family and get you access to better things. At dinner parties, the seating arrangement revealed your status. And everyone else would see it. The top people would be at the top. The bottom people would be at the bottom. The first were first, and the last were last. Jesus watched the Pharisees fret and fuss over where they were being seated even as they were watching him.

The Pharisees exalted some and humbled others. And we can be like that too. We put people in their place. We sort out the first people and the last people. There are the school principals and then there are the school custodians. There are the horse owners and then there are the horse stall muckers. There are the stockholders, then the store managers, then the store clerks. There are the team owners, then the players, then the fans,

then the people working in the concession stand. There are those more worthy of honor, and those less worthy. And the more worthy get the good seats, the good tables, the good classes, the good appointments, the good jobs. And the world tells us that that's the way it should be. That we should look out for ourselves and build our own reputation. And put ourselves first, even if it means being callous to others. "I deserve what I have. I've worked hard to get what I have. Those people at the bottom haven't and they deserve to be where they are." You know how it goes. Jesus watched the Pharisees closely. He watched them desperately working for the best seats in the house. Trying to outdo one another and outscore one another. And Jesus despised it. He hated the energy they spent on prestige. He hated that that's what their religion had become. Self-promoting. Self-honoring. Self-idolatry. He gives the Pharisees some advice. He speaks their language. "Listen. When you are invited to a banquet or a wedding feast, sit in the back. Assume everyone else is more important. Then when the host asks you move up, you will be honored. How embarrassing would it be to think the important seat is yours and to find it isn't!"

Wedding banquets are one of our only events that have seating arrangements. And I have learned that just because I am the officiant at the wedding, it doesn't mean I'm really that important. At one wedding reception, they forgot to give me seat at the reception. Wow, was THAT humbling. But really, it's not that big of a deal. I understand wedding receptions are complicated. And it's a pain to figure out who sits where. And who will be offended and who get their tail in a knot if they aren't close enough to the head table. Who seem to think the wedding is about them.

The Pharisees thought God's wedding feast was about them. And they fussed and fretted about their seating arrangement and which of them would be honored most. Jesus shook his head at all of this, and how it took the attention off of God and distracted everyone from what was important. "Listen," Jesus says, "if you want to know what the Kingdom of God is really like, invite the poor to your dinners. Invite the crippled and the blind and the lame. Invite the people who can't pay you back. And then you'll be honored by God. You'll be exalted in God's kingdom."

The Pharisees had their religious practice wrong. It was aimed at respect for them, and honor for them; not anyone else. Someone had to work to prepare that Sabbath dinner. Someone who was not them, because they couldn't work on the Sabbath, had to cook it and serve it. Someone who was not them had to take people's cloaks and wash people's feet and bring them drinks and serve them food. Someone less important.

Someone below. Their servants; they had to attend the guests and bring their meals and clear the dishes and mop up the floors and take out the trash. And the Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest for everyone, for servants and masters. It says so in the Ten Commandments. But the Pharisees skipped that part.

Jesus says that in the Kingdom of God the humbled will be exalted. And the exalted will be humbled. The last will be first and the first will be last. The hierarchy of honor and prestige will be turned on its head. And there won't be a social ladder that everyone must respect. There will be no more competition to matter. No contest to win God's attention. No struggle to elevate yourself by putting others down. God's love will be a gift, freely given. And everyone at God's party will remember that. Our

status and privilege won't matter. Only God will matter. Only compassion and mercy will matter.

Jesus says that in God's kingdom, the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled. He teaches us not to lift up ourselves, but to lift up God. He teaches us not to idolize popularity and prestige, but to idolize Jesus, who was servant to all. Who was exalted and decided to be humble. Who gave up his seat in the heavenly places, next to God, so that we could have a seat at the table. Who became part of our life and our struggle and our hardship. Who sided with the least and last, and offered freedom to the sick and demon-possessed. Who was rejected by the high and mighty, and put down, down as low as a human can go; humbled even to the point of death, even death on a cross. Jesus became the servant, so that all those who were forced to labor, forced to work for their own value, forced to be slaves at the banquets of others, could rest. He took the lowest seat, so that the dishonored and disgraced could have a seat higher up, a place closer to God, closer to the mercy and grace God offers. And then he calls us to get up and give those seats to others. To give up the pursuit of our own greatness and honor, to become servants

like him. Making more room at the table. Inviting in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. Welcoming them in. Washing their feet. Blessing their meal. Celebrating the day of rest for everyone.

Let the humble be exalted. And the exalted humbled. Let us remember what the feast is for. Our religion is not about chasing our own honor and prestige and putting ourselves first. It is not about putting our desires first. It is not about putting our church first. Or our viability first. It's about putting compassion first. It's about putting God and God's kingdom first. Sitting at the table of the Servant, means being servants ourselves. So if we watch anyone closely, let us watch Jesus closely. Let us watch his mercy and observe his grace. As we watch and wait and look forward to the kingdom of God.