

The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost
Job 38:1-7; Heb. 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Sitting at the Table^{*}

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Church of the Transfiguration
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Growing up in a Chinese American household, seating was always an important issue. Even though our formal dining room table was circular – so there was no “head” or “foot” of the table – my brother and I were trained from a young age to understand where exactly our family’s honored dinner guests should sit, as opposed to my parents, who were the hosts.

And if we had a lot of guests over, my brother and I would be unceremoniously booted over to the kitchen and seated at the dreaded children’s table.

Seating was also an important issue for Episcopal parishes in the nineteenth century. Before churches moved to an envelope pledging system, many parishes would charge annual pew rents to raise funds for operating expenses. The wealthier and more prestigious families would have the better seats, and they would also pay more in pew rentals than the less wealthy and less prestigious families.

Our first rector, George Houghton, had a dream of establishing a church with free pews so that it could truly minister to the poor and needy of New York City. Unfortunately, the financial realities of the 1850s won out, and the founding members of the Church of the Transfiguration persuaded Father Houghton to settle for only 10% of the pews to be free. The rector, however, continued to advocate for free pews for the remainder of his rectorship.

In fact, as you leave the church today and walk down the center aisle, take a look at the name plates that are still affixed to the top of the pews, a vestige of a bygone era.

Today’s gospel passage from Mark is about seating and the human tendency to want to sit in the best and highest places. James and John approach Jesus and ask him if they can sit at his right hand and at his left hand in glory. They also ask to share in his cup and baptism. Their request ends up angering the other ten apostles, who not only are offended by their ambition but also, quite frankly, hope to share in Jesus’ greatness and glory themselves.

As a result of this squabbling, Jesus calls the apostles over and reminds them that the gospel values of greatness and glory are not the same as the world’s values. To be a ruler in the topsy-turvy world of the gospel is not so much as to lord over others or to act as tyrants – as the Gentiles do – but to be a servant or slave to all.

Indeed, Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. As we heard in today’s epistle reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but instead offered up his cries and tears to God.

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As a result, to sit at Jesus' right hand and his left hand is not so much to sit next to a luxurious marble throne, but rather to be crucified – as the two thieves on Golgatha were – on a hard wooden cross. To share in Jesus' cup is to drink from a cup of bitterness. And to share in Jesus' baptism is to die a death to one's own past life. How challenging is it for us to understand this simple teaching, if James and John – two of Jesus' closest disciples – could not hear it themselves!

For 167 years, the Church of the Transfiguration has been committed to increasing the seats at the table, both literally and metaphorically.

As many of you know, our church got its nickname because it was the “Little Church Around the Corner” that agreed to hold the funeral of the actor George Holland when other more “dignified” churches refused to do so (since actors were considered such disreputable people).

Father Houghton was also a staunch abolitionist and founded the first black Sunday school in New York City as well as made our church basement a stop on the Underground Railroad.

In the 1930s, the parish established a breadline during the Great Depression under the Lychgate that extended over and up Madison Avenue, all the way across 30th street, and back down Fifth Avenue.

And in 2012, our parish held the first officially-sanctioned same-sex wedding in the Diocese of New York, continuing to model servant leadership and again expanding the number of seats around the table.

All this was not just a matter of social justice. It was also a matter of theology and liturgy. Our historical commitment to expanding the seats at the table is based upon the Anglo-Catholic sacramental belief in the goodness and beauty of matter, including our bodies, in a fallen world.

Keeping the doors open at Transfiguration doesn't just happen, however. It takes time, talent, and treasure. As we kick off the 2016 pledge campaign season, I invite you to exercise servant leadership in your pledging to the church.

The theme of this year's stewardship season is “All things come from thee, O Lord.” This is the blessing that we priests say over the money that is collected at the offertory. It is also a reminder, as Bishop Andrew notes in our stewardship brochure, that everything we have ultimately comes from God.

Not only do all of our earthly possessions come from God, but so do our seats around the table. Although we may, from time to time, succumb to the temptation of jockeying for the best seats – as did James, John, and the other disciples – ultimately our place at the table is a gift from God.

Seating in God's kingdom is not a matter of what we've done, and it's certainly not a matter of what we deserve. It's a matter of grace. And so each of us is called to give back what we've received from God.

So come to the Eucharistic table, not to be served but to serve. And give sacrificially so that we can continue to expand the seats around the table for everyone who passes through the doors of our beloved parish.