

10-9-11 As the Creeds Placed Him: "At the Right Hand of God"

Matthew 23: 1-12; Luke 14: 1, 7-11

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In the first verse of the 110th Psalm there is described a seating plan that left a huge impression upon the early Christian Church:

The Lord says to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand."

"Of course," they thought, "God is inviting Jesus to sit beside him in the heavens," and they wrote the arrangement into their creed.

He was seated on the right hand of God....

The meaning of the seating pattern was – to them –obvious, and after 1922 those who were oblivious to the obvious had Emily Post to set them straight. She wrote in her book on etiquette:

The order of seating is rigid and unbreakable.... the lady of the highest rank is on the right of the host. On the right of the hostess is the gentleman of honor.

Jesus was given the position of honor. "He was seated on the right hand of God the Father."

All glory laud and honor, to thee redeemer King.

But what I have been pondering this week is why Jesus would have gone along with such a seating plan. It would have been out of character. In the parables he told, in the advice he gave to his disciples, in the way he conducted his life, Jesus was consistent in wanting to give honor a wide berth:

He said: "The last shall be first....", and "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted.

It was said about him...: He humbled himself and took the form of a servant."

If anything, I can imagine God patting the seat next to the throne saying: "Jesus, come up here and sit right beside me." Only to hear as an answer, "No thank you. I'm just fine in the back row."

Which makes me think of John Kendrick. I've mentioned him once before but just in passing. He deserves a closer look. John Kendrick was born on Cape Cod, in Harwich, MA, in 1740. While many of his countrymen, fellow sailors, were engaging the British in the Revolutionary War, John Kendrick was off trying to establish a lucrative trade route between the Pacific Northwest and China. He began leaving members of his crew in every Chinese port they visited – to serve as his purchasing agents until he should return. In every instance these supposed

agents either absconded with the funds left with them or sank out of sight in opium dens. Thus began a string of failures that defined John Kendrick's life. Next he turned to Japan. His ship, the *Washington*, was the first to fly the stars and stripes in a Japanese harbor but the people there would have nothing to do with him. Returning to the Pacific Northwest Kendrick bartered with a group of Indians to buy a large portion of Vancouver Island. He imagined it to be a perfect place for settlement. But settlers did not come. But then in 1794 John Kendrick sailed to Hawaii and arrived just in time to find himself in the middle of a tribal war. Happily, he threw his resources into the fray in support of the eventual winner, which made him a local hero – at least to one half of the folk. John Kendrick decided he liked the feeling of being honored and sent a message to Capt. Brown of HMS *Jackal* – also in the harbor - suggesting that the Captain fire a salute in his, Kendrick's, honor. Capt Brown was happy to comply but his sailors were less than careful in checking the cannons. One of them had a cannonball within it which pierced the side of the *Washington* and killed John Kendrick as he sat at his breakfast table.

It was Jesus' view that honor could have disastrous consequences. He offered an image most of us can "feel;" a haughty fellow elbows his way to the head table only to suffer a colossal come-down when he is told to find a seat out with the common folk. The seat he has taken is already promised to another; probably someone he considers his inferior? Jesus did not esteem honor. Why then did he allow himself to take up the position of greatest honor, sitting at the right hand of God?

One of the things I've thought of as a potential reason is that sitting beside God would allow him to see things from God's perspective. We know the adage about walking in another person's shoes; perhaps there's virtue in sitting beside another person's seat. Jesus would be able to see the pain in God's eyes when one of God's creatures kills another. Sitting right beside God, Jesus could observe God trembling just as an outcast might begin to tremble when someone offers a hug.

The honor is not in the seating arrangements but in being able to share God's perspective; to see the love and the pain.

The story is told of angels rejoicing and cavorting in the heavens as the Red Sea waters come cascading down upon Pharaoh's army drowning them all. The Israelites have escaped! Moses, Aaron and Miriam are safe! But then the angels note that God is not rejoicing with them. Rather God is sitting stricken; tears are running down the almighty cheeks, "My people the Egyptians are drowning! How can I rejoice while some of my people are dying?"

The honor is not in the seating arrangement but in the opportunity to see things as if through the eyes of God. Perhaps this is why Jesus accepted the seat on the right hand of God.

Honor doesn't have to make us pompous. This week I watched a re-run of an interview from a few years back in which Brian Williams spoke with Steve Jobs. Brian Williams asked the founder of Apple if he ever compared himself with other mechanical wizards of the past. "Do you feel a bit like Alexander Graham Bell? Or Marconi?" Jobs answered: "I don't think I've ever thought about it. Whenever a product proves to be useful – well received by the public, my thoughts immediately turn to what else might be invented. I get excited about the future." For Steve Jobs, at least, success did not lead to an expectation of honor but right back to what he loved to do.

In this I found another reason why Jesus might be willing to accept the position of honor and that is that it would put him in the position of doing even more of what he most liked to do.

He was seated at the right hand of God from where he began to judge the quick and the dead.

This past week, at the clergy retreat, a group of us began to talk about judgment; I was surprised to discover that for many of my colleagues, "judgment" was a totally negative word. Certainly it can be that but they seem not to have considered the possibility that judgment could be totally positive giving everyone a five-star rating.

One of the geniuses of Jesus was that he managed to come up with so many different ways of judging people highly:

Zaccheus, come down from that tree. I want to go to your house for lunch.
Matthew, come out from behind that tax table – you're just the man I want following me.

Michael – you may stand. It is your faith that has made you well.

Mabel – can't you see that you're a perfect creature fashioned from God's love?

When Jesus was offered the position of honor he didn't suddenly get uppity, rather he continued on doing the things he loved to do...

He sat on the right hand of the Father and from that favored position went on to judge the quick and the dead...

There is nothing in all of Jesus' ministry to suggest that his judgment would be anything other than a welcoming hug, a word about God's love for all creation, a smile to reassure.

That stuff about sheep to the right and goats to the left is a figment of the early church's imagination, an inability to grasp the reality of grace, an effort to control through fear. Believe in none of it.

Jesus sat on the right hand of God so as to more effectively do that which he had always loved to do ... Share God's love with everyone. And that was honor indeed. Amen.