

11-06- 11 **Empty Places**

Isaiah 65:1; Luke 14: 16-23

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A construction worker was applying for a new job. The firm was larger than any he had ever worked for before and the application form more complicated. Name, of course, and next of kin, all sorts of questions about education, apprenticeships, he was to put down his work experience beginning with the most recent job and working backwards....He answered everything but then he came to a question that left him baffled: "Who should be notified in case of accident?" He scratched his head. He shook the pen. Finally he wrote, "Anyone in sight."

There are times when we want to be surrounded by others; when empty spaces are not good.

Years ago, visiting with members of the parish who lived in high-rise, low income housing for the elderly, I met a woman who had been a widow for five years. She told me that in the days after her husband's death she began eating all her meals in front of the television set, using one of those small collapsible tables called TV trays. Five years later that still was the only way she could get the food down.

Empty places, especially at the table, can be upsetting. There are times we want to have every chair filled.

Jesus told a story about empty places. We heard Luke's version read this morning. Matthew also told it in a little different form. A great man decides to host a banquet and he invites his friends, the finest sort of people, but these privileged people do not value the invitation; they let almost everything take precedence, "I've bought a piece of land and must go look at it, please excuse me. I have 5 new yoke of oxen and have to try them out, perhaps another time. You know I am recently married and you must also know that newlyweds like to spend their time with each other, at home, alone." What the great man got from all of this was the message that his friends weren't the least bit hungry, so he sent out his servants to find those who were, those who were living in their cars or under bushes; those who were eating TV dinners. "Invite these people to come and fill the chairs." And they came, and they tucked their napkins into their shirts yet, still, there were empty places. The great man sent out his servants a second time with the instruction that they were to empty the half-way houses, check the armories and day-worker stations outside of Home Depot...Compel them to come in so that my table will be full. From which I receive the message that God hates empty spaces too:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, ready to be found by those who did not seek. I said, "Here I am, here I am." to a people that did not call on my name. – Isaiah 65:1

Saul Bellow once said of John Berryman ... "his human setting was oddly thin." There are some people for whom solitude is a virtue; they can be alone and not lonely, their human setting is happily thin but in his story Jesus reveals that God is not one of these. The Great Master wants lots of company. "I'll throw a party! No matter who you are, no matter where you are on your faith journey, you are invited! Welcome to the house to which all can come."

I'm reminded of the vicar of Warleggan, in Cornwall, England. Frederick William Densem served from 1931 until he retired in 1953. During those 22 years the congregation diminished and when it got down to 5 or 6 he started making cardboard and wooden images of people that he propped up in the pews. Rev. Densem was a man of God who shared the trait with God of hating empty spaces –cf. Thomas Hinde, *A Field Guide to the English Country Parson*, pg 33.

Which offers just one more example of how people are different....

Empty places don't bother me. I figure people are where they want to be. Compelling anyone to be someplace else is counterproductive. It creates unnecessary friction; complicates things. We have empty seats in the chapel almost all the time and some of you are bothered enough to apologize to me for there not being a larger congregation. If you could stand where I stand and have the option of either looking at an empty seat or a seat filled with someone who doesn't want to be here and is slouching or sneering or holding the hymn as if it were an infectious disease, which would you rather look at?

But my preferences are beside the point. It seems, according to Jesus' story, that God is bothered by empty seats.

The word "empty" in its old English root means, literally, "not meeting." It describes the state of missing one another, like ships passing in the night. In decrying empty places God is praising church meetings, probably not late night board meetings, but meetings for worship, meetings of people lifting up their voices in song and prayer. One person off by themselves adoring nature doesn't cut it. God likes a crowd.

A number of you must worry about the impact of empty spaces for you let me know when you are not going to be here. I know that Carole Keim has the flu; that Jim and Diane Morrison will not be here for both Thanksgiving and Christmas Sundays; that Paul and Alice Arthur will be away on November 27 but back again for December 4. You drop these messages so that we will not look for you, and perhaps, pass them on , so God will not be looking for you too.

I wonder about people who sit in the same seat every Sunday. They must expect to attend with great frequency for sitting in the same seat each week allows God to take attendance very quickly - but enough of this tom foolery.... working from the faith that what God wishes for us is the best for us, I believe that filling the chairs will prove beneficial for everyone.

I had a parishioner once – an usher -who was offended by something I said. He marched out of church vowing never to return. A week or so later, Gordon was back at his position handing out bulletins at the door. I chose not to refer to his exit. I merely said, "Gordon it's good to see you today!" All on his own he told me that when he went home and told his wife that he was done with "that church down the street," she – a good Catholic who attend St. Lucy's - asked him, "Where then will we hold your funeral? Who will come?" Gordon thought about it, about those potential empty seats in an indistinct funeral parlor with indirect lighting and he reassessed what was important, put on his Sunday suit and returned to church. This is not an idle business we are conducting on a Sunday morning. It is God's table where we are regularly fed. Empty seats – at least those created by our own negligence – are an affront.

It is terrifying to be one of those who caters the banquet – how can it ever and always be worthy of God? But its God who throws the party and God who wants a seat filled with us.

Perhaps you've never heard the church compared to Saks Fifth Avenue before. I got the idea from a story Herb Cain told when he was writing a regular column for the San Francisco Chronicle. It was a little before Christmas that the manager of the Saks Fifth Avenue store in San Francisco got a letter from a woman in Massachusetts. She described herself as an elderly widow who was expecting to receive no presents that year. Enclosed the manager would find a cashier's check for \$10. Would he or she please have a staff member choose a gift at that price and send it to her? It didn't matter so much what it was. It would be wonderful to receive a present from San Francisco!" The manager did that and a whole lot more. With the support of the corporate president he got every branch of Saks Fifth Avenue to send the elderly woman a \$10 present. There were 19 stores at that time. She got gifts from San Francisco and from West Palm Beach, from New York City and Palm Springs.

I don't know what it is that draws you to worship, some sort of hunger – loneliness, restlessness, the need of a rudder – what I do know is that - by God – at this welcoming table –those who join the banquet will receive more than they ever could have hoped. Somehow, God takes over and everyone is fed.

I am ready to be sought out..., ready to be found.... Here I am; here I am...