

Grace to you and peace from God the Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning I'd like to share with you, the "10 Things You Never Hear in Church".

10. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like our annual stewardship campaign.
9. Pastor, we'd like to send you to this Bible seminar in the Bahamas.
8. Since we're all here, let's start the service early.
7. I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before.
6. Giving was so good last Sunday, we're not going to take a collection this week.
5. I volunteer to be a permanent teacher for the children's Sunday School class.
4. I've decided to give our church the \$500 a month I used to send to TV evangelists.
3. Personally, I find witnessing much more enjoyable than golf.
2. I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon went 25 minutes over time.
1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front pew!

In our Gospel lesson today Jesus was eating dinner on the Sabbath at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. This Pharisee had invited a number of people, and they were jockeying for the best seats—the "places of honor"—the seats nearest the host. That's where everyone wanted to sit.

A savvy person can walk into the room and determine rank simply by observing where people sit. We see the same phenomenon at sporting events where the best seats are closest to the action – or, better yet, in comfortable boxes elevated above and separated from the crowd. A person with the right connections can always get a good ticket. A person without connections might not be able to purchase a ticket at any price. We like the best seats. The view is better, of course, but the appeal goes beyond the view. Sitting in the best seats makes us feel superior and special, and fine seats trumpet our superior status to ordinary folk. At church, strangely enough, it's who gets the back seats. In my last congregation, if you wanted a seat in back, you had to be at least 15 minutes early to church.

Well, Jesus had been invited to this supper, and he saw what was happening, and gives them some advice. He said: "When you are invited by someone to a wedding." banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you."

We could explain Jesus' advice about sitting in a low place as "this-world" advice – "How to Use Humility to Make it Big". But Jesus wasn't telling us how to

get ahead socially or professionally. He was pulling back the lid on the kingdom of God to let us see how things work there.

Then Jesus turned to the host and offered him a bit of advice. The people at that dinner were movers and shakers. That's why the Pharisee invited them. This was a gathering of the elite. They ate together often –had much in common -owned much of the town's property –made the town's rules. And they were in a position to help each other. "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours."

You don't break into a group like that easily. These men were lucky to be there, and they enjoyed their privileged status. But Jesus advised his host; he also gave this instruction: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brother or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Jesus didn't come to earth to teach us how to get rich as this world counts riches. He came to teach us how to be rich in the kingdom of God. That might not sound very interesting, because most of us would be thrilled to be rich as this world counts riches. Being rich in the kingdom of God sounds pretty remote.

But this world's riches go by fast – and aren't very satisfying for people who lack spiritual values. The kingdom of God riches start now and last forever. Note that the kingdom riches start now. On several occasions, Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as having come near or as being among us. The kingdom of God is near when we invite the poor and the crippled and the lame and the blind to sit at our table. The kingdom of God is among us when we extend Christ's blessing to those who cannot repay us.

Jesus turns his attention to the host. People are inclined to invite those who can return the favor -those who have something to offer in return. Jesus warns the host (and us) not to invite the four groups of people (friends, brother, relatives, and rich neighbors) that he would enjoy the most, and tells him to invite the four groups of people (the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind) that he would enjoy the least. Note that the crippled, lame and blind also constitute a groups of outsiders who are forbidden to serve as priest because of their physical imperfections.

When we take care of people in need, God's kingdom comes in our lives.

Jesus promises that God will repay us "at the resurrection of the righteous". But I have noticed that kingdom of God people don't have to wait that long. Kingdom of God people live blessed lives here and now. And kingdom of God people help to bring about the answer to the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. He said, "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

We live in a society obsessed with being number one, while following Jesus who calls us to humble, faithful service. Our identity, personal worth and self-esteem appear to be tied up with our struggle to be number 1. When we win we feel good about ourselves. When we lose we don't. The people Jesus observed grabbing places of honor did so not because they were the most comfortable seats, but because they would receive the honor and respect of others by sitting there.

Jesus never calls us to be first. At the same time, Jesus doesn't call us to be losers, either. Jesus does call us to humble, faithful service. With society screaming for us to be number 1 and Jesus whispering in our ears to be humble, faithful servants, we find ourselves struggling to obey Jesus' call. But knowing who we are, we can strive to be excellent, and forget about being perfect. Knowing that we are loved and forgiven we can concentrate on humble, faithful service that will touch lives and transform the world in which we live.

We meet Christ in the presence of people who are very ordinary by the world's standards—but they are part of the kingdom of God. Their kingdom of God values, bless others. Jesus promised that such people will be repaid “at the resurrection of the righteous”, but I believe that God starts blessing the kingdom of God here and now. We have many such people present in this congregation today—kingdom of people. They bless us all. Let us thank God for them, and let us all become kingdom of God people.

The good news is that it's not always about where you sit or who you know. It's about coming to the banquet.

It's about inviting, and sharing, and caring for others,

It's about proclaiming and living the good news about Christ.

But, just so you know, you are all invited to sit up front! Amen!