

A new school year begins this week for most, but some students started back this past week. This is always an exciting, yet anxious time for students, no matter what age! I have some friends who are teachers, and more than one have said that there seem to be two things that students want to know that first day; **“Am I in the right room?”** and **“Where do I sit?”**

And isn't this what we all want to know: **“Am I in the right place?”** **“Is there a special place for me?”**

The first question, **“Am I in the right place?”** is a question about belonging. **Is this where I belong?**

The second question, **“Is there a special place for me?”** is a question about our worth. **Am I important enough to have a special place?**

In today's gospel, Jesus addresses both of those questions, beginning with the second question about worth.

He notices how people are choosing places of honor at the table. Like students on the first day of school, they're concerned about having a special place to sit.

Their seat at the table says something about their social standing. The highest places are for the most honored guests, and you don't want to embarrass yourself by selecting an honored seat, only to be told to make way for someone more important. By then all the middle seats would be taken, and you'd end up way down at the end. There's a special place for everybody, and the host knows who goes where.

It reminds me of the seating chart we had in Mrs. Mueller's Algebra class in high school. In her class we changed seats after every test. Mrs. Mueller would come into the classroom with the stack of graded tests, and begin reading names to place us in our seats. She would start in the front row on her right—the seat closest to her desk, and read the name of the person with the lowest score on the test. The lowest score had to sit under her watchful eye in the front of the classroom. As she continued reading the names, lowest scores to

highest scores, we took our seats, praying we had scored high enough to land in the back row. The person who had scored the highest would get the coveted seat in the far left corner of the room, way in the back. It was usually occupied by Beth or Lori–Beth grew up to become a math teacher, and Lori’s now a physician.

It wasn’t very fun to have everyone know how you did on the test, and it was especially difficult for the students who sat in the front of the room.

It’s never easy to be confronted with our limitations. It’s never pleasant to be reminded that we’re not perfect, that we’re not the best student in the class or the most important person at the banquet.

We get reminded of our place often: when we get passed over for a promotion, or when we don’t make the volleyball, or soccer team we tried out for; when we can’t afford the new clothes our kids want; when we can’t get dressed or take a shower without help because of arthritis or some other physical condition.

Sometimes it motivates us to work harder and improve our condition. Sometimes it makes us feel angry and unjustly treated. And sometimes it just hurts.

And it hurts even worse when it’s public, like the seating chart in Mrs. Mueller’s Algebra class.

But no matter where we sat in her class, Mrs. Mueller knew the truth about our math abilities and she worked with all of us. She helped the struggling students to get better. She challenged the advanced students to take it one step further.

God knows the truth about each of us. It doesn’t do us any good to try and exalt ourselves into thinking we’re more than we are.

We often fall into the trap of puffing ourselves up in front of our friends and relatives, desiring to sit at a place that isn't for us.

We mistakenly think that our worth comes from how talented we are, and so we set about trying to convince ourselves and others that we're something we're not.

We try to get the best seat in the house.

In fact, we don't just want to have the best seat in the house; we want to be the host.

But there's only one true host—the host of this banquet table where we're gathered today. The host that offers himself, the host that we consume as Eucharist.

And that host already lives out what he was saying to the Pharisee who had invited him to dinner. He told the Pharisee to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

And here we are.

We are poor financially or spiritually. We are crippled in our ability or desire to help others. We are blind to those in need around us.

But, like Mrs. Mueller, God takes us where we are and works with each of us.

God is our teacher, and we are his students. God is our host, and we are his guests.

We can't repay God for inviting us to this banquet, or to the banquet of eternal life, and yet we're invited anyway. God didn't invite us here because of any special ability we have in algebra, or science, or reading. We're not here because we're great parents, or high achieving workers, or understanding spouses.

We're sinners. We're the poor, the lame, and the blind. And yet here we are.

And that's the answer to the other question we need to know: **Am I in the right place?**

The answer is **yes**. When it comes to the Kingdom of God, we're always in the right place. We don't need to look at any class list to see if our name is on it. There is no list. Everyone is welcome.

And Jesus sends us to act as His host to the world. We're called to invite the spiritually and physically poor, lame, and blind to this banquet.

And not just to come to this Eucharistic feast here in the church, but to be a part of our community in daily relationship. We all know people who are on the edges of society, who have few friends, or who are isolated in other ways.

Maybe it's our next door neighbor who's unable to take care of his yard because of a disability. Maybe it's the homeless person we see at the bottom of the hill as we drive to work in the morning. Maybe it's the coworker who's so weighed down by finances that he can't take his family on vacation. Maybe it's the new student sitting near us in class who's hoping to find a friend. Maybe it's the relative who's struggling with alcoholism, or the best friend who's fighting depression.

They, too, are on the invitation list.

God calls all of us to this banquet so we can get a taste of what the eternal banquet will be like. Our confident hope is that one day we will approach the door of heaven wondering, "Am I in the right place?" "Is there a special place for me?"

And the master teacher will say, "Come on in, your place is right here."