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 Luke 14:1-11
 Hudson
 9-2-07

INTRODUCTION: As a prelude to our reading this morning it helps to consider how we place ourselves in scripture. Much of the time we tend to place ourselves in the role of those who stand with Jesus, as those who get it, understand it, and live faithfully. Problem is, that's not always the most faithful reading of the gospel. More often we'd do better to put ourselves in with the ones who get it all messed up, who are self-righteous, think we've got it all figured out when we don't, are in need of rethinking and especially in need of being rescued. In our reading this morning, we'd probably do well to read it through the eyes of our being the lawyers and Pharisees.

SCRIPTURE: *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this.*

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "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 has 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. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

SERMON: *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.*

Sometimes you have to watch very closely to see what's going on . . .

There's a story about a young marine traveling with his commanding officer. They board a train headed through the mountains of Switzerland. They can't find anyplace to sit except for two seats right across the aisle from a young woman with her grandmother. After a while, it is obvious that the young woman and the young soldier are interested in each other because they're giving each other "looks." Then the train passes through a tunnel leaving them in total darkness. There is the sound of a kiss followed by the sound of a slap. When the train emerges from the tunnel, the four sit there without saying a word.

- The grandmother is thinking to herself: *It was very brash of the young soldier to kiss my granddaughter, but I'm glad she slapped him.*

- The commanding officer is sitting thinking: *I didn't think the young marine was brave enough to kiss the girl, but I sure wish she hadn't missed him when she tried to slap him and hit me!*
- The young woman is thinking: *I'm glad the soldier kissed me, but I wish my grandmother hadn't slapped him.*
- The young marine sat there with a satisfied smile on his face, thinking to himself: *Life is good. How often does a fellow have the chance to kiss a beautiful girl and slap his commanding officer all at the same time?*

Sometimes you have to watch very closely to see what's going on . . .

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

I can relate to that. I know what it feels like to watch. I wish I didn't . . . but I do. I wish I didn't know what it's like to jealously look for the cracks in another person's veneer. What it's like to watch to see others fall so that I can feel a little better about myself and hide from my own failings. But I do know. It doesn't happen that often. Most of the time I feel the pain of the hurting . . . but there are those moments. And unless you're different than most of the rest of humanity . . . you know what it's like to watch too. Most of us don't even realize it when we do it. But there are those times . . .

Last fall I was walking from the church down Aurora Street with a friend to get lunch. I was engrossed in the conversation as we neared the corner of 91. I was talking (I guess somewhat animatedly) . . . when out of nowhere a street sign popped up in front of me. I smacked into it, face first, dead on. Hit it so hard my glasses fell off and broke the face of my watch. (It's a little like falling down the steps in worship). Nobody later told me they saw the incident driving by – but it felt like the whole world was watching.

About a month ago (walking with that same friend – who got a good laugh out of my accident), I've got to admit a bit of relief to watch her, as she stepped off the curb, stumbling as if she were going to take flight. Never falling on her face or getting hurt . . . but traveling the whole way across the street half standing, half falling. It's good to know you're not the only one . . .

I know they're on the same team and both want to win . . . but don't you think Charlie Frye felt a little relief when Brady Quinn threw his first interception on Thursday night?

And it's not just about little stumbles and gaffes. Think of all the people who fell from grace in just the last seven days – from politicians to athletes, teachers to the Miss Teen pageant. Think of all the people in power and prestige who've gotten caught in their own nerves, fears, webs of deceit, lying, abuse and corruption. We say it saddens us (that it's hard to watch) . . . but most of us peek to see it.

Those who stand on the political left tend to get a bit of self-righteous pleasure when a politician on the right falls from grace . . . and those on the political right do the same to those on the left. Saying: *See . . . I told you that's what they're like*. All to say, *See, I got it right*.

Maybe we don't do it most of the time. It usually hurts to see other people's pain. We feel it with them. But what about those people who have caused us pain? Let's be honest for a moment: it's a part of human nature. It's a part of being fallen ourselves.

And . . . it's the basis for most prejudice. Because the lower they fall, the higher we rise . . . at least in our heads.

According to Luke, they were all watching Jesus very closely. They were waiting to catch him in a compromising situation. It's like that alligator I told you about last summer that I spent far too much time watching as it stalked its prey. The alligator would see a bird from across the lagoon and without any perceptible movement . . . he would ease his way across the placid water . . . stopping barely two feet from where the bird stood on the bank. Just his eyes and his snout above the water, he would wait and watch. He'd wait for the bird to make a mistake. To lower its guard, to leave itself vulnerable just for a split second. And then the alligator would pounce, snatching the bird before it knew what hit it.

That's exactly what they were doing at that dinner party with Jesus. They were watching and waiting for him to stumble . . . *and stumble he would!* Everybody does . . . sooner than later. Everyone makes a misstep, gets caught in his own words, a faux pas, social miscue.

Well those people gathered at that dinner party had earned their place at the table. They'd gone through the right channels, attended the right schools, had the right credentials and connections. They weren't going to let this Jesus just slip in. They'd watch and wait for him to mess up. And then they'd pounce at just the right moment.

Luke says that Jesus looked and saw everyone watching. And then he looked and saw the man with his face all puffed up and his ankles huge and swollen. So Jesus challenged his onlookers' judgmental eyes. He said: *So you tell me . . . is it lawful to cure somebody on the Sabbath?*

Do you see what Jesus was doing? He was twisting them all around . . . and he twists us around in the process as well. They all wanted to catch him. But now they were in danger of being caught in the trap themselves. The hunter was becoming the hunted. So what did they do? They kept their mouths shut. And Jesus went and healed the man. And he went on to say that thing about not taking the seat at the head of the table . . . but sitting out in the kitchen with the help. He told them (and presumably us as well) to stop watching and seeing the faults, failures and weakness of each other. And to look at ourselves instead.

What was it he said about seeing the speck in your neighbor's eye and not even seeing the log in your own eye? Could that be what's going on in this passage? Think of it. Jesus saw all those people watching him like vultures waiting for the kill . . . looking for some way to condemn him – for some way to make them feel better about themselves.

So, what's Jesus say? –

- Take the lower seat, not because it will reflect well on you to *appear* humble (although that may be the case).
- Give up the good seat, not because it's the caring generous thing to do (even though it is).

No, I think Jesus tells them and us to take the seat out back – the one behind the pillar blocking the view of the podium – because of the good it would do them and us. Then, Jesus says, when you're brought up to a higher seat you'll know that it's only through the generous gift of the host that you are at the party in the first place.

Like so much of the gospel, Jesus is talking about a matter of perspective. He's talking about how we view ourselves and the world. I see it all the time in family counseling. Both sides in any dispute almost invariably feel cheated – feel like they give more effort, bend more often, try harder than the other. They both feel they deserve more.

It doesn't really matter, does it? Be it family and friends or international treaties, trade agreements and especially military conflict. Both sides *always* feel they've been dealt the unfair hand.

Why all the jealousy? Jesus says it comes from watching others instead of watching ourselves. He says that when we become obsessed with watching for each others flaws, finding faults – destroying friend and foe alike – he says we become perpetual victims. And we start to think the world is against us and we've been cheated. Luke has Jesus telling us to take ourselves down a rung or two so that we can see just how many more gifts we receive than we necessarily deserve. Jesus says, look at who you are and take that seat in the back . . . or in the case of church, the pew up front. Then we're left in awe when we're called out of the kitchen and asked to sit at the table at all.