

“Somebody’s Sitting in My Pew!”

2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 Peter 3:18

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I remember the moment like it was yesterday. We were in New Jersey, some eighteen years ago, when Andrew was a wee little lad. We were attending the church where Katharine had grown up; we were in the habit of meeting her parents at church and sharing a pew with them. Left section, third row from the front, right along the center-left aisle. That was where we would always sit. It was *our* pew. It didn’t have our *names* on it, but still, it was *ours*. It was where Katharine and her parents and siblings had been sitting, Sunday after Sunday, for many years. Everybody *knew* it was *our* pew.

Well, apparently not *everybody*. We arrived at church that morning. We were running late, but Katharine’s folks were running even later. Katharine headed downstairs to get Andrew settled, and I headed into the sanctuary ... where I was horrified to discover: *somebody’s sitting in my pew!*

It was extremely disorienting. *Why are they sitting there? Don’t they know it’s our pew?* I looked at the villains who had the audacity to sit *there*. I didn’t recognize them. Then I looked around. All the pews in the immediate vicinity were taken. Except the front row. Reluctantly, and a little annoyed, I headed there. Katharine and her parents found me there. We made it through worship ... but what a different experience. It sure didn’t feel the same.

It’s all about *us*, isn’t it? We go to church for some extended period of time, we start to feel a bit territorial, we start to feel like we *own* the place, we get a little self-centered. Did I ever stop to consider the situation from the *other* person’s point of view? Were they members? Maybe; maybe not. The church was large enough, I didn’t know everybody. Or were they visitors? Maybe it was their first Sunday. Either way, since I didn’t recognize them *at all*, it’s very likely that *they had no idea* that there was a family that sat in that particular pew Sunday after Sunday. Many of the longtime regulars knew that’s where the Wise family sat – but newer people and visitors wouldn’t have had the foggiest clue.

We’ve been blessed here at Mason First Pres in that the sanctuary has been pretty full on many Sundays lately. Last week, for example – the first Sunday in June – we had a surprisingly full house. That means that sometimes it can be hard to find a place to sit, especially if there are more than just two of you. From my vantage point I often see people coming in just before 10:00, or just after 10:00, or sometimes *long* after 10:00, standing the doorway, peering around the pillars and people’s heads, trying to figure out where to sit. I’ll let you in on a little secret: there’s almost *always* room in the front row!

And every now and then, I'm sure it's the case that some of you who have favorite places to sit get here to discover that somebody's already sitting in your pew. Most of the time, people adapt to that reality with at least *some* degree of grace, like what I managed to do on that Sunday all those many years ago. But sometimes it's not as gracious as it could be. For example: about three or four months ago, somebody arrived here to discover that somebody was sitting in their pew, and they *said those words out loud*. "Somebody's sitting in my pew!" It was probably just an innocuous comment – they moved to another pew, somebody asked them why they were sitting *there*, and they responded with those words, or something like that. I don't know who said it, and I don't want to know. The fact that I don't know gives me an opportunity to talk about this to *all* of you. The problem is that the comment was overheard by other people. Two different people reported it to me, and both of them were pretty upset, that those words had been said *here*.

See, there's such a thing as *hospitality*. Welcoming strangers. Introducing yourself to people you don't know. I could have done that, on that Sunday somebody was sitting in *my* pew. I could have said, "Hi, my name's Bill; I don't think we've met before." But I didn't. I was more concerned about *my* needs, *my* wants, *my* desires, *my* pew, than I was about extending the love of Jesus Christ to a stranger. In the heat of the moment, it's hard to think straight, I get that. But we really do need to be careful what comes out of our mouths. Because new people who hear a comment like that might walk away thinking, "I guess we're really not welcome there after all." We claim to be a "warm and caring Christ-centered community of faith," but careless comments can come across as not very warm, not very caring, not very Christ-centered. A lot of Presbyterian churches have a reputation for being pretty *cold* to newcomers. Our church in New Jersey had that reputation. It was a *great* church, with a fabulous music program, an excellent education program, strong preaching, and everybody *loves* it there – that is, those people who have been there for a long time. But newcomers with no prior connection to the church often feel like complete outsiders. They feel like nobody talks to them, nobody introduces themselves; if they stay for coffee, they stand there awkwardly, wondering if anybody's going to talk to them. I'm really grateful for those of you who make a point of looking out for newcomers and doing your best to make them feel welcome.

So let's say you walk in here and somebody's sitting in your pew. Some things to think about:

First of all: remember it's not really "your" pew. You don't own it. Maybe you sit there week after week, but somebody else was probably sitting there long before *you* showed up. Your name's not on it, and we don't rent out any of our pews. (Some churches did, in ages past.) Those pews belong to *all* of us. You get to *share* them with each other – and with *anybody* who walks through our doors.

Secondly: if it's really important to you to sit in the same place week after week, *show up early*. Some of you are in the habit of getting here at 9:30 or even earlier. More of you could do that, if it's really *that* important to you. Go to bed earlier. Set the alarm earlier. Spend less time with the morning paper, or on Facebook. Get here and enjoy the fellowship that takes place *before* the service starts.

Third: even if you catch yourself thinking, "Somebody's sitting in my pew," whatever you do, try really hard *not to say it*. Try really hard to bite your tongue. I know that sometimes things slip out of

our mouths that shouldn't – we *all* have slip-ups from time to time – but *there are times and places when you need to be especially vigilant* not to say something carelessly. This is one of those places, especially on Sunday mornings, especially when you run the risk of making a newcomer feel unwelcome. The book of James in the New Testament talks about the tongue, how it's "a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body;" "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." "It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (James 3.6-8) James says that "no human being can tame the tongue," but then he goes on to say that "this should not be." He then talks about "the humility that comes from wisdom." That's what we need here – *humility* that comes from *wisdom*. You may need to work on humbling your tongue, with the wisdom that comes from Jesus Christ. You may seriously need to ask Jesus to help you with this. We all struggle with temptation, of various kinds; for some people, the strongest temptation is the temptation to say things carelessly. Fight the good fight; realize when you are being tempted and make every effort to say *no* to temptation's lure; and if something comes out of your mouth that shouldn't, a sincere apology can go a long way to right the wrong.

Fourth: bear in mind that the person sitting in "your" pew was created by God, in the image of God. You are no more special in God's eyes than that person is. Jesus died for *that* person just as much as he died for *you*. Remember Christ's words in the parable of the sheep and the goats. The righteous people ask "When did we see you a stranger and invite you in?" and the king replies, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters, you did for me." (Matthew 25.38, 40) When you welcome a stranger, *you're welcoming Jesus*. When you don't welcome a stranger, *you're not welcoming Jesus*. That's what that parable says, plain and simple. You know what Jesus says about people who don't welcome strangers? The answer's in Matthew 25. It's not pretty.

But more important than any of that, I want you to consider this: Jesus died *for you*. Jesus died so that *your sins could be forgiven*. Jesus suffered the penalty for sin that *you deserved*. Jesus *sat in your place*. You could say ... *he sat in your pew*. None of us *deserve* God's grace, God's love. What we deserve is judgment. But because Jesus took our place, we have been given a special place in God's eternal kingdom. Remember these verses? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5.21) "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'" (1 Peter 2.24) "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3.18) Do you get it? Do you see? *Jesus took our place. He sat in our seat. That's good news!* If he hadn't – we wouldn't even *be* here, worshipping God in this sanctuary. *The whole Christian faith is grounded in the reality that Jesus Christ did something that enabled us to receive grace from God that we didn't earn and don't deserve.* What did he do? *He took our place.* He paid the penalty that we deserved.

Somebody's sitting in your pew, all right. His name is Jesus Christ. And *because* he's sitting there, we've been given an incredible gift, the best gift *anyone* could ever receive: *amazing grace* and *eternal life*. Aren't you *glad* that somebody's sitting in your pew?

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