As many of you know, I am an avid baseball fan. Usually I go to about 7-8 games during the season. My seats are usually in the Upper Deck but behind the home plate area, so this way I get the full view of the entire stadium. This is the typical panoramic view from my seat. I also like the Upper Deck because it’s underneath the canopy so it’s shady and if it rains, I’m still covered as well. This may not be the best seat in the house, but it’s certainly not the worst either.

 A couple of years ago, I received a pair of complimentary tickets to be seated in the area directly beyond the center field wall, in the 1st row. I could literally talk to the pitchers who were warming up in the bullpen. I never thought that I would have the opportunity to sit in those seats because those seats would cost about $100 each. It was a chance of a lifetime to be seated there. Wait, but there is more….on top of the great seat with the great view, I even received a $100 gift card that I could use at the gift-shop, an autographed photograph, and the best deal of all, an All-You-Can-Eat buffet with unlimited food and drinks before the game. This was all FREE as part of a special promotion.

For one night, I feel like I was treated like a famous celebrity or a special VIP. It felt good to be treated like a royalty. Some of you might have similar experience as well when you let’s say got upgraded to 1st class when flying or moving into an office with window view from a cubicle desk. Where you sit matters because it symbolizes one’s personal status. It might be gratifying and build up your self-esteem feeling proud of yourself, but unfortunately that’s not the most important thing we should focus on in real life.

In the passage that Patricia read for us earlier from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus used the parable of a wedding banquet to teach us about one’s placement the Kingdom of God, but more importantly how we should relate or treat one another, especially those who are different or strangers among us. Who gets to be invited and where will they be seated? Do we put them on the side and reserve the best seats for other more important guests who may show up later on?

When we’re invited to the wedding banquet, don’t assume that you’ll be seated in the honored guests’ table, but instead, sit in the “lower” and less honorable tables and let the host come to “upgrade” you, so this way you won’t feel embarrassed when you’re being asked to sit in the lower seats.

How often do we feel that sense of entitlement to be seated in the honored seating? We feel that we’re the most important guest in the whole room, sometimes more important than the host, but instead Jesus was telling us that we should simply be content with what we have in life and yield the better seats to somebody else. Likewise, we shouldn’t elevate ourselves at the expense of putting down the others. That’s not how we’re supposed to treat one another either.

Jesus juxtaposed the wedding banquet with the Heavenly feast that He was hosting. In this feast, everyone is invited, even those who are on the “B” list or even the “C” list. They’re the ones who are the least deserved to be invited but nevertheless they were there because the host had invited them. They too received the same invitation, just like everyone else. Many of them may be marginalized people who are looking in from the outside, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, definitely not your typical guests on your “A” list.

Just like at the baseball game, regardless of how much one pays for their seats, some may pay a few hundred dollars, some may pay $20 or some may even be FREE, they all watch the same game that is being played, eat the same hot-dogs that are being sold. They would experience the same level of excitement and enjoyment out of the same game.

When it comes to one’s own salvation, Jesus made it clear that **God does not show partiality**. Everyone shall be given the same opportunity to receive the same Gospel. The Gospel has the same impact in our lives regardless of what one’s social standing or background may be. All of us deserved to be there and all of us are treated the same in the eyes of God.

The Gospel of Luke, was written by Luke the physician with the Gentiles in mind. Many of them were considered “outsiders” by the Jews because they were treated as someone who arrived late to the game. They didn’t deserve to be there. They’ve missed out. The only reason they go tin was because they received the complimentary tickets. They were on the “B” list because they were not part of the original covenant. Then Christ came and changed all of that.

Christ opened this gate of the Kingdom of God to ALL those who believe in Him. It was not about who was here first or who has the best credentials or the most qualified. **The best and only valid credential that matters is what one believes in his or her own heart, through one’s faith and conviction in Jesus Christ. That’s the only ticket to get in! It’s FREEly given to us all but unfortunately not everyone is taking advantage of the FREE offer.**

 The invitation has been sent out to everyone and was imprinted in our hearts. The banquet table is wide enough where everyone has a place around the table. This invitation was delivered personally with opened and outstretched arms. All the guests would have to do is to simply show up and celebrate the moment. Just being there was definitely a dream comes true.

 Today, August 28th, marks a historically significant day in American history. Does anybody know? 53 years ago today, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King delivered that dream and hope to the hearts of millions on the footsteps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. For some, this dream was nothing but a life-long, sleepless nightmare and a perpetual uphill battle. But for some, this was a seed of hope for the future of the dream that many are still striving to keep alive.

What was that dream? The dream that *“one day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning. A dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Many may not come to realize that dream within their lifetime, but they remain hopeful that their children or perhaps their children’s children may someday see that dream becomes reality, just like the Israelites who were given a promise from slavery to freedom. They wandered in the desert for those 40 long years, waiting to get into their Promised Land. Those years were not wasted because God was using those wandering years as period of preparation and training for the people’s spiritual disciplines.

This very same dream also invites us to dine at the same table with one another, where the exalted shall be humbled, and the humbled exalted, strangers become friends, and enemies become allies, as we drink from the same cup and eat from the same bread for the reconciliation and the healing of all humanity.

 Every time we are gathered around the table of the heavenly feast, we profess our faith in Christ that there shall NEVER be any empty seats around the table. We shall fill those empty seats with strangers who we may not have much in common. But they have come because the host has invited them as well. This is the place where everyone discovers his or her spiritual belonging. It is not about who was here first or who was more entitled or deserving than the others**. It is not about who can be the first one to get the biggest slice of the pie, while there are others who are scouring and scavenging the crumbs that are being thrown to the dogs at the Master’s Table.** It is about making sure that everyone gets to be fed and that they too would receive a fair share like everyone else.

Many of us have watched the recently concluded Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We’ve seen the best athletes from around the world competing in the spirit of good sportsmanship. The host city of Rio has done a phenomenal job in showcasing what the best Rio has to offer before the worldwide audience. However, in spite of that, many have only seen one side of what the true Rio is.

The city of Rio is a microcosm of the world that we live in today. By that I mean there are the very rich and the very famous, and then there are the very poor who live in the outskirt of the same city. What the TV camera only showed was a glimpse of how glamorous the city may look on one hand but there is also another side of the city that the city may not want us to know or to see.

Not everyone lives in the waterfront property with a panoramic vista of the famous Brazilian beaches, but instead more than 1 out of 4 people in Rio (of a population of 7 million) live in the mountainous communities called “favelas”, which was named after the trees that they were grown there. The only way to get to their homes om the favelas was by foot up these hills and through the many narrow passageways. Poor standard of living, sanitation condition and health concerns, street crimes and gun violence are daily routines in the life within these favelas.

Unfortunately, this is not just in Rio, but in many parts of the world as well, even right here in our own backyard, where the economic and social disparity continues to widen. We have multi-million dollars apartments overlooking the same Central Park as there are neighborhoods with individuals living on the edge while looking at the same park to the north. When we see injustice in this world, how often do we look the other way or walk on the other side and pretend it does not concern us, but yet we still pray to God daily that “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven…*”?

While under the shadow of the “*Christ the Redeemer*” statue in Rio, we ask ourselves, “***when might those folks who live in the favelas or the slums get their seats upgraded? Who will be the one to upgrade their seats at the banquet table? When might they get to sit at the same table that Jesus invited us ALL to be a part of, just like everyone else?”***

In the same way, as we read earlier from the letter to the Hebrews, it reminded us that there are many who are different or “strangers” from us, those whom we agree to disagree with, those who have hurt us in the past or have called us names, or those who have betrayed us by their actions. Then there are also those that don’t look like us, talk like us, act like us. They may not know our stories, not know our songs, or our language of being a part of the church. What about them as well? These are the communities where God has invited us to be a part of as well. They are no longer strangers but our friends. Christ the Redeemer has extended his outstretched arms and embraced them and us as well.

Children of God, let us put aside our personal prides and privileges and check them at the door outside. By Christ’s invitation, we too were once strangers but have been made friends by God’s grace and mercy. Christ has called us as brothers and as sisters. Christ has welcomed us in and embraced us in spite of who we are and what sins we have done.

Let us look for the strangers among us who needed that extra attention, that extra listening ear to hear his or her concerns and worries. Pray for them. Pray with them. Exercise God’s given gift called LOVE that is placed in our heart today. As scripture reminded us together **“*Let mutual love continue.* *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.[[2]](#footnote-2)***

**Friends, what sacrifices is God asking us to make today? Are we willing to rededicate our commitment to surrender and to share what God has already given us with others? The Gospel and salvation are not meant to be owned by an exclusive few and kept to ourselves. They are meant to be shared with others and those who have not yet known. For Christ has welcomed us all, so let us open our hearts and make room for others!**

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Martin Luther King’s *I have a Dream* speech, Washington, DC, 8/28/63 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hebrews 13:2* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)