

In Nomine Iesu

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity 2024 Dinner conversation with Jesus – Luke 14:1-11

“One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?’ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, ‘Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?’ And they could not reply to these things.

“Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, “Give your place to this person,” and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in 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 table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the host who stands in our midst to bless us. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

Dropsy is an old-fashioned word. Today we call it edema. It’s a medical condition where the body or part of the body fills with fluids in reaction to some infection, irritant or failure in one of its organs, like the heart, lung or kidney. If the cause is not treated, dropsy can become very painful and obvious as the sufferer’s body and limbs swell from the internal pressure of the fluid. Untreated, it can lead to death from congestive heart failure.

Today, dropsy or edema usually is not the life threatening condition as it used to be. But in Jesus’ day it was, because it was an indicator of a serious internal condition. It was visible, unpleasant to look at, and, if not relieved, could lead to death. The man with dropsy surely didn’t come to the Pharisee’s house to be seen. In his discomfort he probably didn’t even want to be there. So, why was he? Looking at the text, Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of one of the rulers of the Pharisees, one of the seventy members of the Jewish high council who belonged to the faction of the Pharisees, who thought that Jesus was a threat. Perhaps the man was planted there to trap Jesus since it says those who were invited watched Him closely, to see what He would do. On the other hand he could have been just a relative of the one who had invited Jesus, perhaps a grandfather or uncle who lived in the household. Whatever the case, his presence made the guests feel uncomfortable. He was all too clearly an example of the frailty of life itself. As it turned out, he truly was in the right place at the right time, just as Jesus was in the right place at the right time. Jesus is never out of place in any home or at any time.

I

Each of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is different, different in the way they are structured, different in their choices of words. One of the unique ways Luke presents Jesus to his hearers is by noting the many times He sat at table with people: with Pharisees and Sadducees, with tax collectors and sinners, with men and women, and, of course, with His chosen disciples.

In the text before us, the dinner setting was that of the Sabbath, a sacred and intimate occasion in the life of a Jewish family. To be invited to a family Sabbath dinner was

normally a great honor, but not if you were invited in order to be watched closely, to be trapped. One can well imagine that the atmosphere that day was uncomfortable, even tense. Two men were being watched closely, One because many thought Him to be the promised Messiah, the other because of his painful and obvious physical condition.

At some point Jesus asked those present if it would be lawful to heal on the Sabbath. They were silent. They wouldn't answer the question even though the answer should have been obvious and simple from the Torah of Moses. The answer was yes, yes, it is lawful to help in an emergency on the Sabbath. They just didn't like the question, because it revealed their own inability to help. Their answer just might reveal something about Jesus that they didn't want to recognize or admit. So, they remained silent.

The man with dropsy was silent too. But his silence must have been for very different reasons. He was listening, intently. The word "heal" had been spoken by Jesus who as He spoke it looked at him. So, the man waited. Jesus took him in hand, even as the others looked on with skepticism and anger. Jesus healed him, and then let him go, let him escape the unease he must have felt. He escaped whole and healthy. He had been like an ox fallen into a pit, an animal caught in a trap, neither of which can even begin to understand how to get free. The man's family and the Pharisees who had been invited to the house, even if they had known how to help, did nothing. But Jesus stepped up and, so to speak, pulled the fearful ox out of the pit, lifted the frightened animal out of the trap. The man with dropsy no longer had to live with his chronic discomfort, no longer had to be the object of others' morbid curiosity. He was set free, in an instant.

That, dear friends, is the state of fallen man: We go through the forest of life, walking along the path, and then fall into this pit or become trapped in that snare. We struggle and twist, searching for a way of escape, searching for sense and satisfaction in life, without realizing that it is our sin and God's unchanging law that have trapped us. The more we struggle the deeper the pit becomes, the more ensnared we become in the trap, until, like the man with dropsy, we give up. We sit quietly at the party of life with others whose lives we think are fuller and better than ours – but, looks can be deceiving!

II

Please understand, the law is not bad, even though it traps us. As it traps us, it also protects us from ourselves and others. It shows us what the problem is, even if we do not want to look at or listen to it. Yes, the law is good, it shows us what the problem is, but it can't free us. Many think that the law has the answer to the human condition. If we could learn to live by the law we could fix our lives and the lives of the hurting, broken people around us, and find favor with God. After all, the law seems to work when it is applied in our lives. It seems to make families work a little better together, to give a little order to lives. There are useful principles in the law that do indeed benefit us all: Treat others kindly, don't steal, don't cheat on your spouse, don't bad mouth other people, and your life will be smoother, and the lives of those around you better. You will even be respected, to some degree, by all the other trapped animals. So, you can come to church with the knowledge that most other people in town do not bother to do so. You can easily drive here, even through downtown, because there are so few cars on the roads on Sunday morning. You can come here, or any church for that matter, and be seen as one who thinks the law is good and is a benefit to you as you make use of its enduring principles. You can come here and be seen.

But you won't be free. Your conscience will still accuse you of many things done and undone. Your guilt will still be with you. You will still be the ox in the pit, helpless to get out, still the trapped animal, unable to disentangle yourself, in fact, unable even to begin to know how to disentangle yourself. Because you will still know, even if all around you do

not, that you haven't kept the whole law. You haven't loved God with all your heart, mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (v. 11) By that Jesus didn't mean: Be more humble than the next guy, have more virtuous humility so that God can see you in the crowd of otherwise prideful, self-absorbed oxen, and reward you for being the best ox on the block. Unfortunately, that is what many people think Christianity is, both those who go to church to hear the law and imagine they are becoming better and those who only watch others go to church.

That is not the teaching of Christ. No, it is the attitude, the very teaching of the Pharisees, who invited Jesus to this Sabbath meal to watch Him, to prove Him wrong. The truth is whoever tries to free himself, climb out of the pit on your own, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, simply does not know who he or she is, does not know who God is, and, most critically, does not understand the nature of the human condition. The Bible clearly proclaims that God so loved the world, the fallen, stuck-in-a-pit, tangled-in-a-trap world, that He gave His only-begotten Son. He sent His Son into the world to do what we cannot ... to set us free.

Why did you come to church today? To be a friend of the law, who thinks it is good and helpful. Or did you come to hear Him who kept the law for you, walking before God with true righteousness, and then paid the penalty for all the times you broke God's law? Did you come to hear the Lord of the Sabbath who came to set us free?

Jesus changed the direction of the conversation. He healed a man at a Sabbath dinner He had been invited to, and then, noting the judgmental silence of the others, began to speak about a wedding feast. What is such a feast? It is an elaborate dinner filled with joy and light, with deep, abiding satisfaction. It is a feast where the host has paid for everything, and you the guest nothing. It is a true picture of what God intended when He commanded Israel, through Moses, to keep the Sabbath Day holy. You see, what Jesus was teaching us that day long ago is that when we gather in His name, we don't do so because we are good. **We do so because He is good.**

We don't gather to do something for God so that He might reward us. We do so that He, the master of the wedding feast might shower us with His forgiveness, life, and salvation, so that He might show us that in Himself, the Christ, the crucified and risen, all sin has been paid for and we are now free, lifted out of the pit our sins dug for us, no longer trapped oxen, but free sheep of His pasture, free to love as we've been loved, to give as we have been given.

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As we begin this new school year of teaching and preaching, we will have much to say about these things. For now know this, to come to church, to come to hear Jesus, to receive what He came to give, is true humility before God. For here Jesus comes to converse with us about our condition and His cure, to feed us with word and sacrament so that we might be healed and strengthened. Every Sunday is dinner and conversation with Jesus. He speaks and we answer with hymns and prayers of thanks. Every Sunday is a wedding feast that anticipates the one that is to come, the one that has no end. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria