

Luke 14.1-11
17th Sunday after the Feast of the Trinity
8 October 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Oremus: sint placentes sermones oris mei, meditatio cordis nostri in conspectu tuo, Domine fortitudo mea et redemptor meus. Ps. 19.14 [19.15 ~~¶~~ iuxta hebr. alt.]

Today Jesus brings us face to face with something that's really quite real, even if it's not entirely physical. And it's what I'll call a "spiritual geography."

Now, here's what I mean by this. Imagine a map of the U.S. Right in the middle of it all is the State of Kansas. Just to the north is our neighbor Nebraska; to the east, Missouri; to the south, Oklahoma; to the west, Colorado. Way up in the northwest is Washington State, with the Puget Sound; down in the southeast the peninsula of Florida with its panhandle. Everything has its place. In the unchangeable geography of the U.S. Maryland is always going to be closer to Washington, DC, than Kansas is. And Colorado could never be Colorado without the Rockies running down it like a spine.

Here's the deal, though. We all have a "spiritual geography." Or at least that's what Jesus is saying. But instead of having states and cities and mountains and rivers and lakes and oceans and coasts, with Kansas right in the center of it all, a "spiritual geography" puts God in the center and arranges *people* around Him. And just like Nebraska is closer to Kansas than Maine is, a spiritual geography locates people closer and further away from God. Rank unbelievers might be entirely off the map. But when we start talking about Christendom and Christians, we arrange them all neatly in order.

That's what Jesus is getting at with his parable of the wedding. Everyone knows what a wedding reception is like. The more formal and fancy they are, the more likely they are to have a seating plan. Distinguished guests at the head table with the bride and groom. And the less important you are to the bride and groom? Why, the further away you're seated.

That's just the way it was in the time of Jesus, too. The most important people sat—really, reclined—in front with the bride and groom. The less important got tucked off in a corner in the back of the room. The rich and pretty and powerful got to be on display. But poor Uncle Solomon got shoved off in the back of the room in the corner with cousin Ruth who'd had a stroke and couldn't stop drooling—awkward!—and the neighbor who'd just lost his job.

But now Jesus does the unthinkable.

Now, you've gotta understand a little bit here. As was His custom, Jesus had just preached and taught in the synagogue. That's what got Him the invite to this Pharisee's house. It'd be like you inviting the pastor over for Sunday dinner after church. But instead of sitting at the head table, He's gone off to the back corner. That's what it means that this man with dropsy was sitting before Him. Jesus had taken the last place.

But it's just there that the "spiritual geography" of the Pharisees and lawyers kicked in. They were watching Him. Intently. And quizzically. Because He had done the unthinkable. He was supposed to be reclining at the head table. He's the preacher, after all! But He's chosen the lowest spot. And they want to know why.

They want to know why, because He's earned, as it were, the higher spot. He's the man of the hour. The honored guest. The guy who gets to talk in the synagogue while everyone listens. Who leads the chanting of the psalms. Who intones the synagogue prayers while they in silence hold up their hands in prayer. Who gets a chair when everyone else has to stand. And after all that, He's not supposed to be reclining *behind* this grotesquely disfigured man with dropsy—with a disease that makes you like you have elephantiasis. He's supposed to be reclining next to the host!

Now, look at. There's no doubt that in His sermon in the synagogue He read from the scroll and interpreted what He had read as applying to Himself. He did the same thing back in His hometown, at Nazareth (Luke 4). He read the passage from Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news." And then He said to them: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In other words, there's no doubt that the thrust and gist of His entire sermon was that *He* was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. That *He* was the promised Messiah and Son of David and Seed of Abraham in whom the whole world is blessed. That from Him and His holy life and innocent suffering and death comes the forgiveness of sins in His name. Luke doesn't mention that here. But he doesn't need to. Because he knows we know what Jesus says.

But now, against the backdrop of all of that, the Preacher, the very Messiah Himself, takes the lowest spot at the meal. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life, a ransom for many. The Lord Jesus wanted to count Himself among those wounded by sin and its consequences. Among the lame and the blind and the deaf and the dumb and the outcasts and the diseased. And He wanted to do that precisely because He came to take on Himself all their sin, all their death, all their living hell, and put it to death in His own death.

And when He asked them whether it was allowable to heal on the Sabbath, they didn't say a word. It's not that He had stumped them. It's not that He had given them a question they'd be embarrassed to answer. For healing and helping on the Sabbath had a long and noble tradition among the Jews and their rabbis. It was not only allowable, but commendable. But if Jesus were to actually *heal* this man, as He did, then everything He had said about Himself in the synagogue had to be true. That was the loud and clear proclamation of Jesus on that Sabbath day without saying a single word.

But with that, He shook their spiritual geography to the core. Because, remember, just like you and I do, the Pharisees had everything neatly mapped out. And their lack of humility—their inability to see their own place in things—wasn't a matter of wedding etiquette. Well did they know that it was entirely gauche and haughty to take the high seat when your nametag's in the back corner. Their lack of humility had nothing to do with their etiquette in this world, but with their spiritual geography. For theirs was a spiritual geography that arranged people closer and further away from God based on favor earned. "If I'm thus and such a person, I'm that much closer to God. But since you're thus and such a person, you—well, you belong in the seat of shame."

And so the implications of what Jesus did were enormous. It wasn't the man with dropsy who had healed himself and made himself better. It was Jesus. It wasn't the man with dropsy who made himself presentable to sit at a higher table. It was Jesus who did that. And if that was so, then it wasn't being

“thus and such a person” that put you in God’s favor. It was Jesus. Just so, it’s not *you* who make yourself acceptable to God. It’s Jesus.

And that’s the entire teaching of the Gospel.

You know, every single person sitting in this nave today has an enormous, deep-felt need. And it’s to be accepted by God. It’s there all the time. There’s no such thing as a human being who doesn’t have this need. But it’s a need that’s often buried and hidden even from ourselves. How often do you need to hear praise from another person? How often do you want to be the first kid picked for a team in gym class? How often do you need to feel acknowledged and validated? That’s all driven by something far deeper. It’s driven by your need to be accepted by God. And sometimes you simply use those other things as a surrogate.

But other times you don’t. And then it’s just naked you and naked God. And what do we have to say then? Well, that’s when we construct our spiritual geography. I’m better than Frank because Frank always curses; but not quite as good as Mike, because I know how generous he is to the poor and what a good dad he is.

And while there seems to be certainty in that, with one big sin, with the nagging and recurring memory of things done and said that can never be recalled or revoked, with the inability to combat a sin that’s got ahold of you like a Humboldt squid in the Gulf of California—that certainty evaporates. So that you’re left with St. Paul crying out, “Who will save me from this body of death?”

Well, that’s what Jesus was talking about in the parable of the wedding feast. And His message was clear: if you feel as though you have no need to be specifically invited by the host to sit at the head table, then you are most unworthy to; but if you feel entirely unworthy to sit at the head table, what a blessing to you when the host invites you. That is, if you feel as though you have no need for Someone Else to make you holy and righteous and accepted by God, then you most certainly do *not* have God’s acceptance; but if you feel entirely unworthy of God’s grace and mercy, then the Lord Jesus gives and offers and delivers it to you in the forgiveness of all your sins.

Because He is, at the end of the day, the truly Unworthy One. The One who made Himself of no account. The one who knew no sin but was made to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The one who humbled Himself unto death, even the death of a cross. And the one who, for His humility and obedience, was exalted by the Father and given the name over every name and made Lord over sin and death and hell itself for no other reason than to free you from it all.

So let’s go back, just for a moment, to this idea of a spiritual geography. Listen to what Paul has to say about it—the words of today’s epistle: “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This is the humility and love Jesus had demanded of the Pharisees. And of you. But here’s the reason. The spiritual geography has been entirely leveled. No Rocky Mountains. And collapsed. No “I’m closer to God and you’re further away.”

Why? “For there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all.” My access to the one God and Father

of all is the same as yours. It can't be otherwise. It's through the one Lord. The one faith. The one Baptism. With you I confess I deserve the lowest seat. And with you I confess our one hope—our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, our one Redeemer from all sins, from death, and from the devil's power.

May the one Spirit keep you all in this one faith to life everlasting. Amen.

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