

Luke 14.1-11  
17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
23 September 2018  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

The Guest-Rabbi is done with His sermon. Synagogue is over. Time for lunch. One of the board of elders is having the party today. All the right people are coming. The experts in the Law. Other leading Pharisees. Everything for the meal had been prepared before sundown on Friday. In the presence of his fellow Pharisees and the gathered Law experts, he can not only put on his lunch; he can do it while following the Law of Moses to a "T". Neither he nor his wife nor his children nor his servants will transgress the Sabbath Law. The perfect occasion. Nothing but impressive. And nothing but meant to impress.

And so he invites the Guest-Rabbi over. For He, too, must be impressed.

Why did you come to church today?

The invited crowd of cronies assemble. They take their seats. And then, in proper pharisaic fashion the doors are flung wide open. For the meal mustn't be just for in-group. That would ruin its impressiveness. It would betray an unacceptable meanness and cheapness and pettiness. Like when you grit your teeth and invite your ne'er-do-well best friend from high school to your own kid's wedding reception. The joy in doing it is what everyone will say—perhaps in a whisper to others—about your magnanimity. Maybe even the Guest-Rabbi will say something about it.

Oh, and then it starts off just perfect. Well, almost perfect. Because the Guest-Rabbi—strange things He said today about Himself. About how God wishes to serve and not be served. About how *He* wishes to serve and not be served. And now He's got an object-lesson up His sleeve, apparently. For He doesn't sit where He's supposed to. He takes the lowest seat. The Guest of honor. In the worst seat in the house! The one reserved for the indigent when the doors are opened to the beggars outside. The Guest-Rabbi's ruining his party!

And then, as if to destroy all the impressive charm of the lunch, the most grotesque thing you've ever seen struggles in. He's bloated. Skin stretched to bursting. And don't touch him. Because he'll shout out in pain. Touch him, and your finger will leave indentation in his skin that'll last for an hour. He can't work. He can't be a dad. He can't be a husband. Much less a good one. All he can do is lie around. In pain. He's good for nothing. And he knows it. He's reduced to waiting on the once-weekly generosity of the Pharisees when they open their door to him on the Sabbath. So in he struggles through the door. He maneuvers himself around the Guest-Rabbi who's in the last seat. Eases himself down in the next-closest seat to the door. The host swallows hard. Things aren't going according to plan. For the Guest-Rabbi—turns out He's the most magnanimous.

The Pharisee's wife looks at him like, "What are you going to do now? How you are going to save this party now?" You know the look.

And just then, the Guest-Rabbi comes to the rescue. In the best tradition of rabbinic repartee He opens His mouth and drops a real head-scratcher: "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" He asks. And, everyone there? Why, "they went silent."

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You've gotta imagine it. Up to this point everyone had been carrying on their own little conversation. Maybe turning over and turning around this way and that to greet one another. But now the voice they heard in the synagogue this morning. The one with the strange teaching ... Well, they hear it again. And so everyone stops mid-sentence and mid-pose. This is the kind of stuff they love. Wisdom on keeping the Law. They crane their necks over their right shoulder to look at the lowest place. And they wait for an answer. Because this is how rabbinic repartee goes. "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" And then ... everyone waits.

But they weren't expecting this one. For straightway the Guest-Rabbi does the unthinkable. He grabs the swollen, painful leg of the man sitting next to him—the one who could barely get all the way to his seat. Maybe the struggling man let out a little yelp. We don't know. Certainly a grimace of pain. Because it hurt.

And then ... He healed him. And sent him away. "Back to your vocation!" He said. "Go! Be a good dad! Go! Put in an honest day's work tomorrow! Go! Serve your wife and family!"

*Is that you why came to church today?*

You might imagine the looks exchanged between the Pharisee and his wife. For now the party was a shambles. There's utter confusion around the table. The querying eyes of the "average Pharisees" around the table searching for something, just a little something, in the expression of the experts of the Law.

But the man who in pain had laid down his sore body leaps to his feet. He bounds out of the door he had only now barely shuffled through. He's at gallop speed by the time he's on the front stoop. Running back home. Running back to the embrace of wife and children. Running back to his vocation. Happier than anyone you've ever seen. It all happened in a flash. And into the stunned silence comes the voice of the Guest-Rabbi again. "You'd pull your child or your cow out of the well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you? If you were on your way to church and witnessed a horrific accident, wouldn't *you* stop and help?"

Wouldn't you do that? Wouldn't you stop at 10<sup>th</sup> and Topeka and help out at a crash on your way to church? Wouldn't you be late for church—just a little late—to help a blind man stranded in the middle of 21<sup>st</sup>?

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Then why do you think that God wouldn't do the same? Even for you? What do you think church is about? Your magnanimity? Or His?

It can't possibly be about yours. Because it can't possibly be that you can do for God what He can do for you. Not even close.

But if you show up to church with a bag so stuffed full of your own goodness, what are you leaving for Him to do?

That's what the problem was back there at the Pharisee's party. Everyone had shown up. That was a good thing. But everyone had shown up stuffed full of his own goodness.

And so stuffed full that when Jesus does them the great good favor of leaving the best seats for them and takes the worst, they can't take it. They can't accept it. They can't take it that God would do for them what they would do for Him.

It's a challenge to their self-conception. To their self-conception as being good and upright. To their self-conception that though they are deserving of the higher seat, they move down one—just one—and yield it to another. As if God needed their high-minded charity.

And here God Himself leap-frogs them all. And takes the lowest seat. In short, they can't take it that the Sabbath isn't for God, but for them.

What about you? How full did you stuff your bag with your own goodness before you came to church? Could you even drag it through the double doors back there?

Fellow-redeemed: if you had trouble pulling your bag of goodness out of the backseat today. If you had to put it down a couple times between your car and the church door. If it knocked people over as you swung around as you greeted folks on your way into the nave. Then you have no part in Christ. Worse, it's impossible for you to have any part in Christ. Because if you've filled your bag like that you don't have the faintest clue what kind of God God is.

Because the bag He gave you? He didn't give it to you to fill on your own. He gave it to you so He could fill it.

And the goodness He wants to fill it with? He doesn't want you stick a bunch of rotten apples in there, to fill it up with your herky-jerky "doing what's good."

He wants to fill it with something far more precious. With the fruit of the tree of life—His holy cross. With *His* works of love done in perfect love. With His loving healing of the man with dropsy. He wants to fill it not with your holy life, but with His. Because He's redeemed you from all that. He's bought you back from the curse of the Law which can only bring rotten death and condemnation. That's how He is and wants to be your God. By redeeming you. By filling your bag with His goodness. By giving you what you don't have and can never get on your own—righteousness and innocence and an eternal and blessed life. His. Given to you. Out of pure and grace and mercy.

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And this little episode in the Gospel couldn't illustrate that any better!

Who goes away healed? The one who showed up sick.

Who goes away with a God who's his friend and kind neighbor? The one who didn't patronizingly befriend Jesus with a display of all the good he had done, but the one who showed up with his sack of goodness completely empty.

Meantime, the Pharisees and lawyers leave lunch no better than they were when they showed up; and God remains their competitor and a stranger. Not because He would not befriend them. But because they won't have Him as the God He is and wishes to be. As the God Jesus shows Himself to be.

Don't be like them. Dump your bag out right now. And repent.

For the Divine Guest who takes the lowest seat has come. Here. Today. And He comes not to be served, but to serve. This isn't a party you're throwing for Him; it's His party, thrown for you. You're not putting on a meal for Him; it's His meal.

And it's for you—His holy, precious blood; His body riven for you. The payment for your sin and your sins' forgiveness. And your bag filled with His perfect goodness and righteousness. Only come; and receive.

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

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