

Luke 14.1-11
17th Sunday after Trinity
4 October 2020
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.

Two separate things going on in the Gospel for today, and they almost seem to be unrelated, except by the occasion.

The first thing is that Jesus has come to have dinner on the Sabbath at the home of a Pharisee. The second thing is the story He told. Related to the former episode by a brief transition that seems almost like a throw-away: "Now, He told a parable to them, when He noticed how they chose places of honor." How do the two hang together?

First things first. There at the dinner party of one of the Pharisees, the lawyers and Pharisees were keeping an eye on Jesus, and there was a man lying there who had dropsy. We'd call it edema. Swollen everything. Hands, feet, fingers, toes, legs, arms. Today we have Lasik for that. They didn't in those days. And there was nothing to be done as the man's body swelled and swelled and swelled with water till finally the pressure of the water constricted his diaphragm and lungs. And snuffed out his life. A miserable man about to suffer a miserable death.

Now look. This is what Luke says. When Jesus *saw that man* He "responded to the lawyers and Pharisees." He responded. As in, He gave them answer. As in, their watching was more like a cross-examination.

Their looking wasn't neutral looking. They were intent on Him. Examining His every action. And so *anything—anything!*—that Jesus did, well, it was a response to their questioning eyes.

But ironically His response is less a response than it is a turning of the tables. Instead of giving them a statement, He gives them a question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

You can only imagine how that threw them back on their haunches. Here they are. All together in one small room. This isn't a private moment with Jesus. It's in the public's eye.

You know how that goes.

What do they call virtue? What you do when no one's looking?

And Jesus was asking about their virtue. Right there in the public's eye. Would they rescue their own child—on the Sabbath, the day of rest—from a flash flood? Would they break Sabbath to pump water from their own well and save their neighbor's house from the Glass Fire out in California? Stuff like that. In other words, Jesus is saying, what would you do when no one's looking: break the Sabbath, or let your own child die when you could've done something about it.

But here's why His question is such a humdinger: it drives right to the heart of human virtue, or rather, right to the heart of human vice. Jesus wasn't so much interested in what they'd actually do. It was a well-established fact—and the lawyers and Pharisees knew it well—that Jewish scholarship had for a long, long time recognized that God, who loves life, doesn't want His Law used an excuse *not* to preserve life. The Fifth Commandment must be upheld! So pull your child from a torrent on the day of

rest, on the Sabbath? Yes! That's the correct answer! You could almost say, "How could you help yourself from doing that?"

Seems straightforward enough, doesn't it?

But what Jesus was basically doing was going into a house of mirrors. One the lawyers and Pharisees had built for themselves. Imagine this thing with me. Every mirror there is an aspect of God's holy Law. And in this house of mirrors, they looked at themselves through God's Law alone and used that reflection to determine what God thinks of them.

And now Jesus brings them into a room in that house of mirrors. A room of crisis. It has only two mirrors. One that says, "There's a Sabbath to be observed today. Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." The other mirror says, "There's a man who's to be rescued from death today. Thou shalt not murder." And they freeze. They just can't say anything. Any word they utter, any move they make, they fear, will expose and admit and confess their lack of holiness before Holy God. If they say they'd pull their son out of the well, they expose themselves as Sabbath breakers. If they say they'd whistle past the well, they expose themselves as heartless murderers. You see: they relate to God only through His Law. Not through Christ and mercy. But through the Law only in its severity against sin and sinners.

You've heard the phrase before: *pecca fortiter*. "Sin boldly."

Luther wrote those words to his colleague Melanchthon in 1521. Luther was off in the Wartburg. Melanchthon was back at home in Wittenberg. And the issue was something like this. For centuries the papacy had forbidden the laity to receive the chalice in the Sacrament. But Jesus Christ had said to all, "Take eat." And to all, "Take drink." To withhold the chalice from the people was to break Christ's command. But in 1521, to offer the chalice to the people was to unleash unremitting persecution of the faithful in Wittenberg, who were forbidden by the pope to receive it.

And Melanchthon didn't know what to do.

So Luther's advice? *Pecca fortiter*. Sin boldly. Make whatever choice. Either is a sin. Why in the world would Luther say this? Why counsel sin? Why? Well, listen to what he goes on to say: "But believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for He is victorious over sin, death, and the world."

You see, the lawyers and Pharisees, either way they would turn in this house of mirrors, they'd sin. They'd either break Sabbath or passively murder their own child. And they feared what others would think of them. And what God would think of them. So instead of doing something virtuous and sinning at the same time, they fell totally silent.

But that was only part of the problem. The bigger one was this. It didn't matter what choice or non-choice they made. The sin still stood there. And there was no way they could deal with it on their own. Whatever the lawyers and Pharisees *did*, that wouldn't release them from their sins. They couldn't even say anything to get away from their sins. That's why they were silent. But there was Someone who could deal with their sin. There was Someone whose doing and speech could remit sins, Someone whose life and death was the very message of God to sinners. The answer to their ethical quandary. The answer to their fruitless attempts to relate to God through His Law.

And that's the lesson Jesus taught first. He took the man aside and, most likely as in so many of His miracles, He just spoke, and the man with dropsy was healed.

The whole point of this first episode is that: Jesus alone deals with, heals from, and remits sin.

Now, this leaves Jesus' story—the story about sitting in the high place. What does this story have to do with all of that?

The lawyers and Pharisees, as we've said, measured their standing before God by God's Law refracted through the lens of those around them. Imagine how impossible it was through all those lenses and reflections to get any true glimpse of God. As a matter of fact, they simply did not know God. All they saw, all they could see, was God's Law. But not God Himself. They didn't know God as the gracious God who in the death of His own Son forgives sins. And if you don't know *that* God, you don't know God at all. That goes for you, too.

And that's exactly what Jesus' little parable is about. Every lawyer, every Pharisee in the room, was jockeying for first position—jockeying to be recognized by their fellows as the most holy fellow. Why? Because if their friends thought them holy, then God would think them holy. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? The only one who didn't do that was the man with dropsy. He couldn't hide his hideous disease. He simply needed help. You don't want to be a lawyer or Pharisee. You want to be the man with dropsy.

Because it was the man with dropsy, with his hideous disease—not the Pharisees and lawyers who depended on their own doing—that Jesus healed.

You see, that's how faith works. Your standing before God doesn't depend on how you stand under God's Law. It depends on Jesus. What God thinks of you doesn't depend on what others think of you. It depends on what God thinks of you by virtue of a capital-A Another, Jesus. It doesn't depend on what you do or think or say, it depends on Jesus alone. On Jesus alone. Who says to your own hideous disease of sin, "Friend, be healed. Your sins are forgiven. Move up higher."

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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