

Luke 14.1-11
Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
26 September 2021
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.

Jesus sounds a little bit like a scold today and His advice a little bit like what Miss Manners would write about in her Saturday column.

But before we let our minds wander off in that direction and turn Jesus into nothing more than a well-mannered, kindly man, let's pause for a second and see if there mightn't be something else going on. Which isn't to say that His advice isn't good advice and won't save you from some embarrassment in life. But it's not in that way that the Son of Man came not to be served, but serve. It was to give His life, a ransom for many.

First of all, let's set the scene.

It's a Sabbath day. That means the day of rest for the Jews. Nothing to be done. You don't fold your clothes on the Sabbath. You don't water the animals. You don't cook. Now hold on to that, because that's going to become a big issue later on.

On this particular Sabbath Jesus seems to have been invited over for dinner. Since there's no cooking, it's going to be a cold meal, and quite simple. But we don't even know if He's actually been invited. That's maybe unimportant.

And this Sabbath gathering is going to be like so many other Sabbath gatherings. The rabbis are gathered around—Jesus included. And it turns into a sort of competition in pithy wisdom. We know of just these kinds of exchanges from the Jewish literature that's come down to us. The way you win in a competition like this is either by asking a question that the rabbi you're talking to can't answer or by the rabbi coming up with just the right answer—one whose wisdom everyone recognizes. You even see this in the Scriptures themselves—like the time the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, posed Jesus the question about a woman who was married serially by seven brothers, each of whom died. "Whose wife would she be in the resurrection?" they asked Jesus. Since He couldn't well say that she'd be the wife of seven husbands, they thought, which is contrary to Jewish law, He'd be forced to say that there wasn't really a resurrection. But Rabbi Jesus responded with a word that put them to silence telling them that they didn't know the power of God. Or like when the young man asked Jesus what he needed to do in order to be saved. You can think of many more.

Well, much the same thing is going to happen on *this* Sabbath. It's all "God-stuff." And that makes the banter as pious as it is competitive and enjoyable. This time around, of course, it's Jesus asking the questions. But we'll come back to that later on, too.

So we have a general sense of what's happening.

But now when we get down to further details things get interesting.

You know the ancient manner of eating in Israel. Today we sit around the dining room table. There's a head of the table (maybe for the oldest male there or the master of the house) and at the other end of the long table there's something like a second head of the table (maybe for the oldest female or the

house mistress) and everyone else lines up between the head and the second head on the sides. They face each other. So when I was growing up that would have meant that I was facing across the table at my sister Laura Grace. She was in front of me. She was “before” me.

But not so in ancient Israel. The table was probably not even as high as your coffee table. When they ate they reclined at the table. They leaned with their left arm on the ground or on a pillow or maybe on the table and kicked their legs and feet. Everyone would have been facing the same direction—and everyone was looking at the back of the person in front of him. Without putting too fine a point on it, the more backs you could see, the lower you were seated.

So when Luke tells us that the man with dropsy was “before” Jesus he means that Jesus “after” the man with dropsy—not just physically. That too, but even more importantly, socially.

Now, look, the Jews were no different from us. Certain physical conditions they found, well, uncomfortable to be around. Not only that, but the Old Testament prohibited deformed Levites from serving as priests. You know all about leprosy, too, how seriously that was taken and avoided. Edema, dropsy, this swelling, was often an early warning of leprosy (Leviticus 13.2) and people that had it were to be avoided!

This kind of revulsion over deformity you can see all the more clearly in the life of King David. There was a surviving descendant of King Saul left after Saul’s rejection by the Lord and demise and assisted suicide. His name was Mephibosheth, a grandson of Saul. But Mephibosheth was lame in both his legs. Deformed. When we read about what David did to and for Mephibosheth we’re supposed to find it touching: instead of killing him or consigning him to the slave quarters or banishing him from Israel or shooing him out the door to go and beg on the streets of Jerusalem, King David actually searched for and brought Mephibosheth into his house and Mephibosheth ate at the king’s table all the days of his life (2 Samuel 9). The only reason that’s worth mentioning is because it was so odd—not to mention that that’s a beautiful picture of Christ and His compassion toward sinners whose bodily ailments and deformities are the curse of sin.

But let’s get back to the scene. You don’t need to be a brain surgeon to figure out where the man with dropsy has been physically placed. He’s behind as many backs as the host could arrange it—at the far end of the table. Like table 42 at the wedding reception. Out of sight, out of mind.

But even further down the pecking order is Jesus Himself, for “He grew up like a shoot before Him, like a root out of dry ground; and He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him” (Isaiah 53.2).

And then from the end of the table, like someone at table 42 starting to clank their spoon against their glass, comes a question.

You can only imagine how it must have gone. Right hand extended before Himself pointing to the man with dropsy: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?”

Now look, there were treatments for dropsy in the ancient world. Most often it involved bleeding. Which meant it involved surgical cutting or leeches. Jesus’ question is this: “Here’s a man who’s clearly suffering. He’s swollen all over. You can see it. According to the way you think, my Pharisee friends, is it okay to relieve him of his suffering ... today? To run and fetch the doctor? To ask the doctor to apply a natural topical anaesthetic and then get to his cutting, or apply the leeches? Is that okay fellas?”

Of course, that question is much more loaded than first appears. You could rephrase it in a bunch of different ways that would make more sense today. Jesus could have asked, “Was man made for the

Sabbath, or the Sabbath for man? Is the Sabbath supposed to be a burdensome law that *you* must keep, or was it established by God for another reason—for your enjoyment? In other words, how do you relate to God? And what do you think of Him? Is He kind, merciful, abounding in steadfast love, or is He a cruel taskmaster? Do you look at the Sabbath as God's gift to you, to receive even more of His gifts to you—His Word and His Sacrament—or do you look at the Sabbath as just one more occasion in which you prove to yourself, everyone who sees you, and God Himself how pious you are for going to synagogue? And how about this meal—what are you up to here? Is all your pious God-talk a show—for yourself, your guests and God, or are do you genuinely care through it to come to know God better and to teach others of His great grace and mercy?"

That's what was packed into that simple question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?"

And you can tell by how dumbfounded everyone was that they got what Jesus was asking. Because, of course, they knew it, the Sabbath law could be broken for all sorts of reasons, for the Lord desires mercy and not sacrifice. Cow fallen into a well? Pull her out! Son injured? Get him to the doctor! Mom's in labor? Call the midwife! The kindness the Lord commanded to be shown toward the downcast and the outcast and the sojourner and the slave and the poor—they knew that that's exactly what underlies God's Law. God's Law is *for the neighbor, not for me*. I don't obey the 7th Commandment for me, but for my neighbor. That goes for every other commandment. And I dare not trump love for neighbor, my care for his physical needs, by wrapping myself up in my pieties over the Sabbath law. God forbid. Mercy, not sacrifice. Love for neighbor, not love for self. The Sabbath not the platform provided by God so you can CYA, but part of the web and woof of God's great love toward His creation.

So they didn't answer. In fact, they didn't do a thing. No one sent out the door and down the street to fetch the doctor. They just sat there.

But now the tables turned. Almost literally. Jesus took this swollen, deformed man that they could hardly stand to look at and healed him. He who found no acceptance in the eyes of men found acceptance in God's through the merits of Jesus Christ. He who was despised of men was beloved of God in Christ.

It doesn't say how Jesus did it. How He healed him. Maybe a word. Maybe a touch. It doesn't matter. Whether the Lord's words strike your ear or His body and blood your mouth, they're doing the same thing. Healing you of your sin and death. All that's important is that He healed the man. The horror of his deformity gone, he was restored to his natural good looks and healthy, muscular frame. And then—then, Luke says, Jesus "loosed him." He forgave his sins. This is just what Jesus did, except reverse order, with the paralytic. There He forgave his sins and then healed his paralysis. Here Jesus healed his dropsy and then forgave his sins.

The crowd reaction doesn't get registered. But I'm sure you could hear a pin drop. Jesus broke the silence next: "Which one of you whose son or ox has fallen into a well on the Sabbath wouldn't pull him out right away?" He asked. The greater stooping to help the lesser. The capable of delivering help helping the incapable of helping himself. The hope-provider rescuing the hopeless.

Again, no reply. They, puffed up in their capabilities according to the Law, were powerless to help. But not Jesus and the Gospel. They, great in their own esteem according to the Law could find no power in the Law to stoop and help. They, who staked all their hope in the Law, were put to shame by Him who is the hope of all mankind, Jesus Christ.

It turns out they weren't everything they thought they were. And that provided Jesus the platform for the parable. They had exalted themselves and now they were eating humble pie. And the man with dropsy, this grotesquely swollen specimen of humanity? He had come in all humility and been exalted.

But you notice who's doing the humbling and exalting. Not the Pharisees. Not the man with dropsy.

It's Jesus.

For it was upon the man with dropsy that Jesus had lavished His healing grace. It was upon the man with dropsy that Jesus had shown mercy. It was the man with dropsy whose sins Jesus forgave.

And now the table's entirely re-oriented. At the head of the table, in the seat of honor, Jesus, and next to Him, the man with dropsy, now healed, the sinner, now forgiven.

So it is in the kingdom of God. To be healed you must be sick. To be forgiven you must be a sinner. To be counted an heir of heaven, it must come to you as gift. To be counted a holy child of God, you must first be a sinful child of Adam.

And this isn't some karmic thing. Some lesson about how things work. It's a theological thing. It's a lesson about how God works and about how God is and about who God is. He's a God who gives. If you would earn what He would give—what an affront! Imagine a young woman getting engaged. Her boyfriend gives her a 4-karat diamond ring. That's how precious she is to him. 4 karats. But then, before she slips it on her finger, she says to him, "I'll pay you back later."

That's exactly what Jesus was sussing out in the Pharisees. They would pay by their good deeds for what God in Christ wished to give them as gift. They would go after and try to achieve a righteousness that God in Christ gives only as gift.

Don't be like them.

Instead, humble yourself. See your sin. And your sinfulness. The evil things you do—that does not emerge from neutral ground. It emerges from a heart desperately stuck in a playback loop you can't stop. And there is no way—none whatsoever—for you to come right with God unless God kills your sin and your sinfulness. And you can't do it. Only Christ can. He nails it to His cross. Leaves it in His grave. Rises triumphant over it. Not for Himself. But for you. So that baptized into His death and resurrection, His death to sin is counted as yours. And His resurrection in holiness of life is counted as yours.

God grant it to you for Christ's sake.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

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