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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17C)

August 28, 2016

Text: Luke 14:1–14

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus has accepted a dinner invitation with a ruling Pharisee and his esteemed guests. Our Lord is on the hot seat. The ruling Pharisee and his guests were watching Jesus carefully, says Luke in vs. 1. His every action was scrutinized. Every word was criticized and evaluated for its truthfulness. Jesus and the Pharisees have had a number of public encounters including two other dinner meals. On every occasion, the Pharisees and the legal experts of Jewish religious law came off looking rather silly and foolish. They are still smarting from the public humiliation. Maybe this time they'll trap Jesus in some misstep or ill-spoken word.

Then suddenly, a man with dropsy shows up. It's possible that this is a set-up. According to OT law (don't forget Jesus is surrounded by OT scholars and legal experts), a man with dropsy was unclean, an outcast in Jewish society. What will the famous traveling Rabbi from Nazareth do? If Jesus doesn't offer to help this poor soul, the Pharisees could accuse our Lord of being calloused and merciless to the poor and needy. If Jesus heals the afflicted man, the Pharisees could accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath. If Jesus touches the man, Jesus could be declared unclean. It seems like a perfect trap.

By the way, this is how the way of self-justification works. Our sinful nature like to manipulate a situation so that no matter what happens, we come off looking good while providing an opportunity to criticize others. This whole scene in Luke 14 reeks with pride and arrogance. In all their smugness, the Pharisees want to come off looking good and righteous while disgracing Jesus. And who gets lost in the power play? The man with dropsy, that poor soul who suffered physically from his affliction. That real, flesh and blood man who was suffering spiritually because he was unclean, unable to participate in the religious, communal life of God's people. The way of arrogance and self-justification doesn't consider that least and lowest member of society to be important, to be worth the bother of love and concern. He's merely a means to accomplish their selfish ambitions.

And just so you know, dropsy, the disease afflicting the man in today's reading, is most likely what we today call edema, an unusual and abnormal swelling in the joints and body tissue. Depending upon the severity of the water retention, the swelling can cause extreme disfigurement.

According to vs. 3, Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisee and his guests. He beats them to the punch by asking the question first. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" The Third Commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." What does the 3rd Commandment say about a man diseased with dropsy?

Notice the Lord's question, "Is it lawful to *heal*...?" The man with dropsy, one of the least and last of their community, doesn't require work but love and compassion. This isn't a question of whether one can put in some overtime on the Sabbath or do some too-long-neglected chores around the house. If that were the case, Jesus would have reacted quite differently. But this is a real human being with a real disease needing real compassion, not the meaningless, evil-hearted trickeries of a bunch of stuffy, arrogant theologians.

The chief Pharisee and his legal friends look rather silly and they know it, hence the deafening silence (vs. 4). No verbal answer could be given because it was blatantly obvious. Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? Of course it is. It's lawful to show love and compassion to your neighbor in need. That's what the Sabbath was all about in the first place. So Jesus heals the man with dropsy and sends him home complete and whole (vs. 5). The Third Commandment to keep the Sabbath was fulfilled, not to mention, the greatest and second greatest of all the commandments:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (c.p. Deut. 6:5). This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (c.p. Lev. 19:18). On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:27–40).

Lest they miss that most-important point, Jesus asks a simple question with an obvious answer, "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?" (vs. 5). Of course they would, without any hesitation. You don't have to stop by the local expert in Jewish religious law to see if it's lawful and good to help your son when he's fallen into a pit, needing rescue. That man with dropsy is worth more love and attention than an ox!

Jesus gives that love and compassion, not only to the man with dropsy but to every human being, including you and me. His entire life and ministry was one of rescuing the lost, the lame, the condemned. All humanity had been cast down into a pit of evil and despair. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, God's eternal Son, lifts us out of that eternal pit and sets us free to live with Him in His kingdom as reborn sons of God.

Jesus healing the man with dropsy was yet another witness to this love and compassion that God desires to give all humanity. But the Pharisee and his honored guests are clueless to God's loving work of grace. After Jesus sends the healed man away, the guests begin picking their seats for dinner. Everyone is trying to sit as close to the ruling Pharisee's place as possible. In that culture, the ones seated closest to the host were the most favored and honored guests. It's something like VIP seating today.

Our Lord takes the lead again and warns them that the way of pride and arrogance will, in fact, lead to their ultimate humiliation. Look at Jesus' summary statement in vs. 11, "For every who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Our Lord's instructions here aren't about social etiquette, table manners, or how not to promote yourself in the eyes of your peers. He's teaching us about Himself and life in His kingdom of grace. Jesus is the enfleshed Son of God. Jesus willingly left His Father's right hand in glory, the highest place of honor, in order to become the least and the last of all humanity. The Lord Jesus absorbs every form of human sin and degradation, takes them to His cross in bloody agony, endures His Father's wrath, dies and is buried in a borrowed tomb. The Greatest becomes the least and the last.

Three days later, on Easter morning, the Father exalts His humbled Son by raising Him from the dead. And then 40 days after Easter, Jesus ascends to the Father's right in glorious majesty and splendor having secured salvation and victory for His beloved people. Jesus' teaching in vs. 11, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" is first and foremost about Himself.

This pattern of humility and then exaltation is embedded into the very fabric of Christ's Church. We come to Jesus as the least and the last; like the man with dropsy in today's gospel reading. The humble were exalted. But the Pharisees and lawyers, the first and greatest, were humbled – cast down – by divine rebuke and judgment.

We come to Jesus each and every Sunday as the least and the last; we make no claims and invoke no rights. We come to His feast of life and salvation sitting in the low

places only to find that Christ singles us out and invites us to move up and sit with Him in the place of honor. Every time we receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, Jesus is exalting us to the highest place of honor. We don't earn such an honor. Completing catechism classes and becoming a church member does not reserve you a seat. It's Jesus and Jesus alone who invites His guests and exalts them to heights of heaven itself.

According to vs. 12-13, the truest picture of heaven's feast is to "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" to your next celebration. The humble being exalted graciously, magnanimously.

We don't live in a culture that promotes hospitality and care for the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Social services, food banks, and soup kitchens are there to take care of the poor. Don't misunderstand me. The people working in these areas are doing good and noble work. But we've allowed ourselves to become distant to the poor and needy. I've had strangers at my dinner table but none of them were homeless or desperate for real help. And yet, Jesus and the entire Biblical witness encourages and in some places, commands, that we show real, tangible compassion on the poor. Today's epistle reading from Heb. 13:1-3, exhorts us to charity and compassion, "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body."

Our Lord even speaks a word of blessing upon us (vs. 14) when we care for the poor, "and you will be blessed, because they (i.e., the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, c.p. vs. 13) cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." I encourage you to find ways to show the love of Christ to the poor of our communities. Be imaginative and deliberate. And remember, the Lord Jesus stands with you, "you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

The least and the last being exalted by Christ to highest seats of honor, this is what life in God's kingdom is all about. This is what life in the Church is all about – feasting in the presence of Christ, rejoicing forever in the forgiveness of sins, trusting in the gracious exaltation our Lord gives to the humble. Glory be to Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.