

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
1 October, Anno Domini 2023
St. Luke 14:1-11

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

Beloved saints of the most High God,

The Pharisees' encounter with Jesus which we read today and the ensuing parables have much to teach us about how we conduct ourselves as people who believe the Bible. May God grant us His Holy Spirit that we may rightly learn from it and so walk in the way of faith.

Perhaps like me, you find the actions of the Pharisees really strange. We don't know where the man with dropsy came from. Some have suggested that he was a relative of the host or maybe a servant in his household. Others that he was a regular there at the house. Still others suggest that he was brought there by the Pharisees as bait for Jesus to see if He would break the Sabbath. It could also be that he was following Jesus and that's how he happened to be there on that particular Sabbath. Scripture doesn't say. All we know is that he was there and that the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely to see what he would do and that Jesus exposed their hypocrisy by a seemingly simple question with what should have been a very simple answer.

We have no evidence that the man asked Jesus to be healed. But he was sick. He was retaining fluid for some reason. That, however, was irrelevant to the Pharisees. They were hunting Jesus. Having mercy and helping this man were the furthest things from their minds. It didn't matter if they had deliberately brought him there or if he just happened to be there, he was a means to an end, namely, destroying Jesus.

Of course Jesus knew that. But that man was not just some prop to Jesus. Jesus cared about him and through him our Lord would also teach the Pharisees and show them their unbelief and hardness of heart, wanting always to convert them and save them. Jesus had compassion on this man's suffering. It troubled Him that this man was sick for the same reason that every blind man, every cripple, every demon-possessed person troubled Jesus. Death was on full display in them. If you look at the sick and the suffering and see nothing more than just some unfortunate

circumstance, then you are blind to what is going on all around you and your own great need for God's mercy and deliverance and therefore Jesus Himself.

Notice that St. Luke is sure to point out that it was the Sabbath Day when all this took place. That is the crux of the issue. The Pharisees loved their righteousness. They were smitten with their own supposed keeping of the Law, in this case, the Third Commandment. Hence Jesus' question - "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" We never receive an answer from the Pharisees but we can imagine it. God's commandment was clear "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." And God Himself makes clear what He means "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates." (Exodus 20:9-10) No work. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to heal the man so that they could puff themselves up with their "obedience" and say "Behold! This man works on the Sabbath Day! Clearly He is a blasphemer. We, on the other hand, would never dare to even imagine working on the Sabbath. Behold how righteous we are! Look on in wonder and dream of one day being as righteous and holy as we are."

They longed to puff out their chest in faux outrage as though they were the ones who really cared about the Law and even about their neighbor. But the reality is that they didn't care at all about either the Law or their neighbor. They sought nothing more than glory from one another for their outward piety. They were content with that and deluded themselves into imagining that God was equally impressed. They "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt." (Lk 18:9) Nevermind that the same God also spoke these words "You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them... You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again." (Deut. 22:1, 4) Do we imagine that this word from the Lord doesn't apply to people as well?

Thus our Lord goes after what the Pharisees love the most - money. He asks "Which of you, having a donkey (the better reading in the context) or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" (Lk 14:5) It is as if Jesus said "Oh yes, dear Pharisees. Your piety is beyond reproach. But what happens when there is money to be lost? What happens when your livestock is in need of help? Then, regardless of the day, you won't hesitate to come to the rescue. But when there is nothing to be gained, you are nowhere to be

found. You don't care about either the Sabbath or your neighbor, you hypocrites and blasphemers.”

The Law cannot justify you. That's not why it was given. You do not keep any of it to any kind of degree that you can take pride in, that should lead you to assume any kind of place of honor in God's presence. And even if you did keep some of it as you ought, you would still have done nothing but your duty and have nothing to boast of. If your relationship to God is determined by your obedience than you are a slave and not a son and sons don't inherit the kingdom.

And yet we still boast. We are desperate to do it. We are desperate for people to give us their approval because we did the right thing or even the acceptable thing. Why else would we join the crowd changing our Facebook image to the latest flag or empty symbol? Why would we chide those who do or do not wear masks, social distance, and vaccinate? Why do we make sure that people know which stores we aren't shopping at or banks we aren't investing in? We do it to signal our moral superiority and castigate those who do otherwise. It's not because we actually care about these things. It's because we want people to think we do.

Repent. Stop treating people like pawns in your mission to prove to God and man how righteous you are. Stop substituting causes and societal morality for the divine morality of the Ten Commandments. Stop ignoring the actual needs of your neighbor for a pretend righteousness that has nothing to do with Christ and only leads you further away from Him and His mercy.

Give careful attention to the parables that follow. Jesus is not giving etiquette lessons. When we presume to be something that we are not in God's presence, when our breaking of the commandments is acceptable or when we gloss over the commandments without considering their call to perfect purity of heart and mind, when we relish what we and maybe even others perceive as our own goodness, we will soon find God bringing us to humility. He will bring the full weight of the Law down upon us in order that we would drop the delusion that we are good enough and ought to be praised and rewarded. This is what He did to the Pharisees who would deny mercy on the Sabbath to the man with dropsy, not only in order to maintain their so-called purity, but also to destroy their own God who was eating at table with them. He used the Law they claimed to love to show them that, in fact they hated God and were wholly unrighteous. And even that was an act of mercy. God never reveals your sin simply to drive you to despair. He does it so that you would long for and turn to His mercy. He does it to drain your flesh that is swollen

with sinful pride so that instead you might be filled with His forgiveness and the Holy Spirit who breathes life and love into your heart.

What glory can there be in our own works against the backdrop of our crucified Lord? What credit can we take for anything when it is Jesus alone who suffered under the wrath of God, who died the death of sin in His holy and pure flesh? And besides that, what glory can men offer you that is more or better than the glory which was bestowed upon you in the waters of Holy Baptism? That washing of water and the Word was God's lawful work on the Sabbath of having mercy upon you and inviting you up away from the table of death to take the seat of a son at the banquet feast of victory in the kingdom of God. Those whom God invites to move higher are precisely those who know that they don't even belong at the table, who freely acknowledge their sin and unworthiness, whose only glory is the One who died for them.

Children of God, don't seek the glory of this world. I see all too often people being swallowed up by unbelief in their pursuit of the praises of men. Look at how many people long for and exhaust themselves to have riches or fame. Think about the endless stream of tragic tales of those who have become famous - drugs, suicide, pornography, mental breakdowns, divorce. And yet the parade of people who seek fame only grows longer and longer. How many people think that you have to accomplish something that everyone knows you for, or drive themselves mad trying to support the cause du jour? How many children are driven to depression or despair because they chase after the glory of "likes" or try to look like and do the things that they see people in social media doing? How many have debased themselves trying to get even a single person to show interest in them? How many turn away from Christ because being a Christian is not acceptable at school or work and they desperately want to fit in and be loved? How many of us run ourselves ragged and ignore our family and the things of God because they are trying to have and do and experience it all?

Stop. Put these things away from yourselves so that they can't lure into delusion or despair any longer. Return again to what God has made you in Holy Baptism and the divine and eternal glory that He has bestowed upon you there. The King has already invited you to move up higher, to sit at His table and feed you with the Bread of Life, the Body and Blood of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. You are precious to God. You don't need men to love or even like you. Jesus even makes clear that if you love Him they WILL hate you because they hate Him. They will not be your judge on the Last Day. They are not the ones before whom you will stand and give an account. It doesn't matter what title or degrees they hold. It

doesn't matter how much they demand that you glorify them and bow down before them. They are like the chaff which the wind drives away. In the day that they die all of their glorious plans will go to the grave with them. Those who exalt themselves and seek glory that belongs to God alone will be humbled eternally in the judgment of hell. But those who truly humble themselves now, who claim no righteousness or goodness before God, whose trust is alone in His mercy, will, on the Last Day, be glorified before all men and before the angels of heaven. Heads that now are bowed down in sorrow and humility and shame and are covered with the ashes of contrition will then be raised up and fitted with the crown of everlasting life. These, you, will be given a seat at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the precious saints of God.

May God the Holy Spirit grant us true humility that we may hear the King call to us "Friend, son, move up higher."

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.