

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 14:1-11: "Taking the High Road"
September 22/23, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Blessed Lord, You put down the mighty from their seat and exalt those of low degree: Save us, we beseech You, from pride and vainglory, from self-seeking and false ambition. Give us a humble and contrite spirit, that we may think less of ourselves, more of others, and most of all of You, our mighty God and Savior; to whom we ascribe all praise and glory, now and for evermore. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 123)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

One Sabbath, when [Jesus] went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching Him carefully. And behold, there was a man before Him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they remained silent. Then He took him and healed him and sent him away. / And He said to them, "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?" And they could not reply to these things. / Now He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, in whom we have been raised up and with whom we have been seated in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6), dear fellow redeemed:

It is ironic that the phrase "**Taking the High Road**" was most likely coined by a politician, since politics is where "taking the high road" almost never happens. Politicians watch for any slip-up by their opponents and then portray the mistake in the most negative light. The primary goal is not justice or the promotion of truth, but political victory. And if a career is ruined by the mud-slinging, so be it.

The Pharisees of today's text were like our politicians. They hated Jesus. They wanted His efforts to fail. They wanted to discredit Him before the public, and if possible, to eliminate Him. One of these Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him on a particular Sabbath day. This sounds like a neighborly thing for the Pharisee to do, but he and his friends had ulterior motives. We

are told that *“they were watching him carefully.”* Picture them watching Jesus like a hawk watches its unsuspecting prey. But Jesus was not unsuspecting. The trap they were setting for Him would not catch Him by surprise.

I

In the room was a man with dropsy, a condition causing fluid retention and swelling in the skin. Would Jesus heal him? On another occasion, a religious leader had criticized Jesus for healing a disabled woman on the Sabbath. *“There are six days in which work ought to be done,”* he said, *“...and not on the Sabbath day”* (Lk. 13:14). It may well be that the Pharisees now brought this man with dropsy before Jesus as a test. Would Jesus break Sabbath law with so many witnesses present?

Jesus perceived the trap; he knew what the Pharisees were thinking. The text says that *“Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees.”* He answered their thoughts even though they hadn't verbalized them. *“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?”* He asked. They thought this would be forbidden according to the law. They believed that healing would be work, and God said no work should be done on the Sabbath. If Jesus healed on the Sabbath, He must not be from God. This is how their thinking went, but they did not say a word.

Then Jesus healed the man and sent him on his way. Now the Pharisees had Jesus where they wanted Him! But before they could level an accusation, Jesus asked how many of them would leave a son or an ox in a well on a Sabbath day. Would they call down that they would like to help, but it would just have to wait until tomorrow? Obviously not. They would do whatever it took to bring the son or the ox to safety.

What was Jesus' point? His point was that the Pharisees should remember why the law was given. It was not given to promote an external righteousness, an outward keeping of the rules. God wanted His people to rely on Him and not on themselves. He required a day without work, so that people would set aside time to hear His Word and pray. This is how they would show love for Him according to the Third Commandment.

But this Sabbath requirement did not negate the other Commandments of God. If someone had fallen on the Sabbath, his neighbor should help him up. If someone were sick or hungry, his neighbor should carry medicine or food to his home. These things would show love for God by showing love to a neighbor.

Love for God and neighbor is the entire focus of God's moral law (Lk. 10:27). When you wonder whether something is right or wrong, you should ask yourself if it is loving. Even if you know it is true, is it loving to spread gossip about a neighbor? Even if someone said a mean thing to you, is it loving to say something mean back? Even if someone invites you to share their bed outside of marriage—even if it is someone you love—is it loving toward God or the consenting partner to ignore the institution and commitment of marriage?

Today's culture promotes a different definition of love. We are told that love means accepting and agreeing with whatever a person chooses to do. And if we question how others live their life, then we are called hateful. But Jesus questioned the Pharisees. Is it because He hated them? No, it is because they lacked the love that God requires, and He wanted them to recognize it. He

wanted them to see that their concern was not for God or their neighbors; it was for themselves. That is the problem today. People are full of self-love. They think their choices are right even when God says they are wrong.

II

It is tempting for us to feel morally superior to these people. We do not do the things they do. We know what God's moral law says, and we want to follow it. But self-love can work its way in there too. We imagine God must be pleased with us because we are not like the sinners around us.

But think about the parable Jesus told. Suppose you were invited to a wedding feast along with all sorts of criminals and sinners. Looking around, you hear some of the bad people boast about their evil deeds, while others hang their heads in shame. Then all are told to take seats at the table, but with this caveat: everyone is to sit down based on how good they are compared to others. The bad people not sorry for their sins immediately head for the best spots because they are only concerned about themselves. The bad people sorry for their sins shuffle toward the less honorable places.

But to which end of the table do you go? On the one hand, you could say that you have not fallen into the serious sins of either the boastful or the humbled criminals. You have not killed anyone. You have not stolen anything. You have tried to be a good neighbor. Certainly you should be seated higher than the bad people who are not sorry for their sins. But on the other hand, the standard of God's law is perfection. Even if you have refrained from outward sins, what about the sins of your mind and heart? The scene could get ugly fast, with people fighting over the best places.

But Jesus says to you and me, "*go and sit in the lowest place.*" **Take the High Road** by taking the lowest place. The Letter to the Philippians says, "*Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves*" (2:3). We should not concern ourselves with what we think we are (pretty good), or what we think others are (pretty bad). We should stick with what we know. We know that we are sinners who have not perfectly kept God's law. If the table in Jesus' parable were God's table, then no one would belong at it either in the high or the low places.

But still, we are invited to the heavenly banquet. We are invited because Jesus "*humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Phil. 2:8). He gave up the highest place, which was His by right. No one even approaches His greatness. He left the highest place, and took the lowest. In fact, He gave up His seat at the table altogether, so that there would be plenty of room for everyone else.

He showed perfect love for all, but they did not all love Him in return. When the Pharisees could not find any sin in Jesus, they told lies about Him and twisted His words. Then they got Pilate to condemn Him to death. Jesus could have dragged all their hidden sins out in the open, and none of what He uncovered would be a lie. He could have shown the ugliness inside every religious leader. But He took the high road. He said nothing while false accusations were hurled His way. Then He took the high road, literally, when He carried His cross up the hill to Golgotha outside the walls of Jerusalem.

This is where the perfect Son of God was crucified, the humble Healer of dropsy, disability, and most importantly, the sinful heart. He poured out His blood to wash away each transgression, including yours. Every sinful stain of your past, every failure to do and say and think what God says, every prideful judgment of the imperfect lives of others, the Lord forgives it. You deserve the lowest place, but Jesus has taken you by the hand and said, *"Friend, move up higher."*

You have not always taken the high road – with your siblings, your parents, your spouse, your classmates and co-workers, your fellow church members –, and these sins may still trouble you. But while others may hold your sins against you, God does not. He looks upon you in grace as though you had never done anything wrong.

That does not mean you and I can boast about our transgressions. Nor do we have the freedom to sin as much as we like, just because we know sin is paid for. Humble children of God do not embrace sin. They flee from sin, and when they fall into it, they repent of it.

God did not create us for sin, but for righteousness. He created us to love Him and our neighbor. When our neighbor attacks us despite our efforts to love, then we pick up the cross and take the high road after Jesus. Nothing good is gained by "digging up dirt" on others and "slinging mud." But much good is gained by a humble disposition toward others and a humble trust in Jesus.

The Sabbath rest that no person could obtain by his own efforts, is freely given us by our loving Savior. He has lifted us out of the pit of sin we had fallen into and brought us with Him to be seated at His heavenly banquet. Because of His humble suffering and death, we will be exalted with Him for eternity.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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