

SERMON

Sermon at a Communion Service

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Luke 14:1–11 · 1949

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St. Nicholas Church

Text: Luke 14:1–11

In the name of Jesus. Let us all pray.

God, no one is free except you, you who are Lord over heaven and earth. We pray you: break the bonds that hold us captive, and make us free as children, in your Son's kingdom. Amen.

The text is read.

Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it. Amen.

Our text tells of two different things. The first half describes how Jesus heals a sick man on the Sabbath. The second half gives a word about the place one ought to take when one is invited to a feast. It is fitting to begin in the latter part of the text.

So: take the lowest place at the table. Then it can happen that you are asked to go up. If you yourself take the first place, the host cannot step in and give you a better place. Either he lets you sit where you sit, and then he has not honored you, but only let you be. Or else the host changes the placing, and then it must go downward. Upward it cannot go. Then it must become dishonor instead of honor. It lies in the nature of honor that it can only be given, not taken. One can thirst after honor, but then one must direct one's striving to doing something which the company freely honors. One cannot command forth the honor itself. One cannot take it. One must receive it.

As it is with honor from people, so it is also, from a definite point of view, with life from God, righteousness before God. If one hunts after that righteousness, one does not reach it. Then

life dies. But if one sets oneself lowest, lets go, then life comes, for then one is in faith. Humility is faith. And “whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

But now an important question must be put. If one sets oneself low with the intention of thereby coming high, does one not then take the honor — by a roundabout way? Is not the Christian faith and the humility only a selfishness? And is not Jesus’ word today about the placing at the wedding a worldly wisdom in the style of the modern conversationalist’s advice: “If you wish others to speak of your good sides, do not speak of them yourself”?

Even if it were so, this would be good advice, especially for those who spend their time at the university. But now it is not so. One understands the word better when one reads the continuation of the chapter here in Luke. This begins with Jesus being invited to a meal, and healing a sick man there. Then come three sayings in a row, all of which deal with meals: first our word, that one shall set oneself lowest; next the exhortation that one shall not invite friends or rich people when one makes a feast, but the crippled, the lame, the blind — one shall go down to the neighbor in need; last the parable of the great feast, the great supper, whose kernel is that God does just so. He leads the poor and the crippled into his banquet hall. He seeks the lost. He goes down into the depths when he comes in Christ. Here is set out what it means to “humble oneself.” There is no possibility of speaking of what humility is without speaking of the neighbor, of the human world. And when the neighbor comes into the connection, then the religious intention is broken down. Then one wrings the backbone of the calculation. If I stand before my neighbor, my “neighbors,” I cannot set something “behind” the neighbor: now I humble myself in love of the neighbor “in order” afterward to win something before God. For this calculation is to “exalt oneself” over the neighbor, to set a cleft between oneself and one’s fellow human being. As far as life stretches, it must be given away. Its goal is death, the dark. And to affirm this meaninglessness, to squander one’s life in service, that is to “humble oneself,” to fall down into the earth and lose one’s existence. To live so is to be humbled, down. But this is to be exalted, for it is to be in Christ, yes, to be in God. Christ is the grain of wheat that is cast into the earth. God dwells in the depths, among the poor. How could one be “higher,” more exalted, than one is when one is in Christ, in God, who is our [illegible word] Lord? Everything is turned upside down here. Lowliness is the highest height, a share in God’s downward work of creating. Highness is the I’s loneliness in the empty, self-taken honor, far from God, far from the living human fellowship.

But in that loneliness we are most often locked. Yes, it is the normal thing in the world that one's own gain is hunted. Therefore the inner cold is also the normal thing. For we live in a twisted world. Instead of striving in the heart after the best for others, we strive from the heart after our own best — and against us stands the law. The law is the care for the best of the others. God forces justice forward in life together through the law. Even in the first table of the law, the first three commandments, our neighbor is present. "Hallow the Sabbath day. That day you shall do no work, nor your son or servant or your ox or the stranger. Remember that you yourself were a slave in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 5). It is something peculiar to Israel to ground the holy day in this way, "humanly." The commandment is given by God, but it aims at the good of human beings. Our neighbor receives protection when we receive commands. Sin is that we stand against the serving, against God. Therefore the pressure of the rule of the law lies rightly over our existence. We all understand the first half of the text. There stood Jesus Christ on earth. In him the purity of human life welled up. In him the spirit of serving was flesh. He was given out for the whole world, and where he went forward he loosed people, freed them, without himself reaching after honor. Then the meaning of the law was fulfilled, and in the same moment the rule of the law burst. "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." To heal a sick man is to carry out a work for the sick man's rescue. It is to realize the meaning of the Sabbath, and then the Sabbath falls, as a shell bursts when the fruit ripens. Jesus is the restorer of life. The locked life, slaving under the law, as it were straightens itself out and becomes free where he goes forward and where his word sounds. "He took him by the hand," it says in the text, "and made him well and let him go his way." Go into life. Set yourself in your place in God's creation and give your life away in faithful service toward the neighbor in the place that is yours. Do not build up some tower of righteousness for yourself. Do not exalt yourself. Humble yourself instead. Live. That is, lose your life. No joy is like that joy, the joy in the collapse of the self and the fellowship of brothers, for there God breathes, there Christ dwells.

Life in truth consists, then, in this double thing: to be in God and to be in the neighbor, to be stretched out, reached out toward these two directions, open toward God in faith, open toward the neighbor in love. And these two opennesses are one single openness. For "God is love." If one looks for God, one may look through the universe in vain, until one finds him on Golgotha, in the given-out, given-away human life that is dying for the rest of us. Are we come to fellowship with God? Then we are already inside this stream that wells toward the service of the others. Then we already have the fellowship with people, even if for the moment

no person is with us. Our existence, our work, our prayer is enclosed by human fellowship and itself flows toward human fellowship. Faith and love are a unity. One is locked, unfree, choked by the law, so long as one does not believe. But if one believes, then one lets go the whole building of righteousness and becomes free, no one's subject, inside God, at home in the meaning of life itself, which is — to serve, to go about and freely be everyone else's servant, without law, let out of this hell where every act was to benefit oneself and where everything in heaven and on earth stood against one, let out of this demonic thing where one unceasingly "exalted oneself" and thus became "humbled," became judged, let into this paradise where one freely "humbles oneself," believes and serves, and thereby in every moment only "is exalted," that is, near God. For to be away from God is to be humbled, and to be near God is to be exalted.

Are we not far from this freedom? Are not the churches locked to pious laws in this unhappy Europe, where no new creation happens any more, but where the Spirit has become mute? Is there not a churchly unfreedom before the neighbor, a closedness which is at the same time a closedness before God and his living works, so that nothing happens, no bonds loosen, no sick become well any more? We see the growth of the dictatorial pressure of the state round about us. But its growth, the growth of unfreedom, is the growth of the law, the hardening grip around peoples in whom self-denial and willingness to sacrifice are dying. Where the serving does not freely well up in single persons, there the law at the top of society must be sharpened and stretch farther and farther into human destinies. When shall this iron grip loosen? When shall freedom see its field widen, instead of seeing it daily shrink together? So runs the life-question of European culture today. And the deepest answer is this thesis, spoken by one of the twentieth century's few real prophets: "When the movement away from God has got so far that one has come in under Satan, then the renewal begins." Then it is the end of this empty concept of freedom, this hunger for freedom for one's own I — which is Satan's freedom to twist us — and one understands: freedom is the inmost being bound to the spring of life. Freedom is to be in God, nowhere else than in God. Then the Spirit begins anew to blow over this old tormented part of the world. And then perhaps one also understands something else, which for so long yet it is hardly worth trying to speak of. Perhaps one then understands the speech about heaven, about the resurrection from the dead.

For the word about heaven has in the highest degree to do with the matter we are now touching. To wait for the full freedom is to wait for the resurrection from the dead. That is, it is willingly to go into death in order to come out on the other side, where Satan is struck

down and our selfishness at last choked. When our surroundings, our neighbor, are not loosed, when we do not have the inner power which is a spring in the desert for the others, this is a witness to our own captivity. The way out of the prison is to follow after Christ, for he has been inside the prison and gone out by dying and rising. The way out is to listen for his word and then go, walk, affirm this dark which death, the serving, the giving out, is. Only let the demands of existence work on one's own I. Let the law do what it will do, that is, subdue, discipline, "humble." And then, in the middle of this earthliness, listen, hear the King's word from heaven: "Let not your hearts be troubled or fainthearted. Believe in God, believe also in me... I will that where I am, there you also shall be. And the way that leads to where I go, that you know... I am the way, the truth, and the life." We still feel the bonds and the fetters around us, so we are not arrived, but on the way. But we are not in Christ only when we have arrived, but already now. We are on the way, with him, for he is the way. Even under the discipline of the law we are in Christ, for we are under the cross, and the cross is his, his way. Because we still struggle and have not got power over our selfishness, therefore the law has meaning and right against us. Therefore the law has a task to shoot in our bodies. Therefore there ought to be health, soundness, in the hardness and strictness of earthly existence. If we can only believe, if we can only hold fast that we are on the way, that is, if we can only hope for heaven, then we can be in the middle of the world of the law and yet never become slaves of the law, but on the contrary always be "the freest lords of all things and subject to none." The law rules and decides about one thing and another, but we freely affirm its government, for its aim is the good of our neighbor, which we ourselves will in love. Our heart is above the majesty of the law. Faith rests in hope, tastes already now the resurrection and the eternal, waiting freedom. The law kills us, certainly. But there is a strange joy in being killed, for we know now that we have the enemy inside ourselves. It is he who dies. But we, we rise. We are renewed in "our inward person day by day," because we "look to the things that are not seen" (2 Corinthians 4). The law binds itself to the old person, who is to be crucified daily, so that the new person rises. If the old person is left in peace, then "one exalts oneself" and becomes "humbled" — dead for eternity. If the old person is killed, then "one humbles oneself" and becomes exalted — living in Christ for eternity, risen from the dead. The words about "humble" and "exalt" speak, strictly taken, of Christ, of his cross and his resurrection. But because Christ is our way to life, the words also speak of us, of our death — and of our life, which is hidden under our death.

But now our hard question returns. When one strives in this way through the dark of this life in order to arrive at the resurrection, does one not then take honor for one's own part? Is one not unceasingly left in egoism, though one extends it over the boundary of time? At the beginning of our sermon we saw the exaltation lying down in the lowliness itself, because God was in the depth. Then fellowship with God was the same as love of the neighbor on earth. Then we had not yet brought in the thought of a following glory after the struggle of this life. But now, in what we said last, one was first humbled and then in any case exalted. Does this not unite both faith and love of the neighbor? Is there not a poison of selfishness in this whole hope?

To this two things are to be said. First: one takes the joy and the hope as egoism chiefly because one thinks that heaven is an imagination. The only thing one then takes into account is the soul-life of an uncertain religious person. In this soul there is a hope of a heaven. Here egoism dwells, one says. The whole matter becomes another if one really reckons that there actually comes a "kingdom that cannot be moved," that the resurrection of the dead draws near irresistibly, as the spring draws near. One is not ashamed to rejoice at the approaching spring, for no one claims or believes: "The spring is for my sake. The spring comes to me specially." It comes to others also. I am in a company that tastes the spring, and in it the goodness of God. Behind it all stands the giving God. To wait for the resurrection of the dead is to wait for God's victory, the freedom of the whole creation, the total catastrophe of the enemy of life — and of oneself only to hope to be one note in this mighty jubilation. In the imagined state of blessedness the I can be the center. But in the kingdom that in reality comes one day, we are with God and with the neighbor, loosed out of I-ness, settled in love.

Second: in this earthly life our serving, our giving out, is needed, simply so that earthly life shall be possible to live. If one wants to strike out the resurrection of the grain of wheat as selfishness, one cannot in any case strike out the offering, the death. For this is the worst sickness of our being, that we human beings do not want to live for one another. The giving out for the neighbor on earth, the affirming of the dark of the servant-life, is in any case necessary. If you are anxious that your hope of heaven is exotic, then let it be, and live for the neighbor. Christ comes anyway, though you do not long for it. He is used to many kinds of disciples, not only to John, but also to Thomas and Peter. The earth is like a mighty banquet hall, a press of people. Everywhere is our neighbor. So go, then, without speculations about the future, and only with joy bear your lot. Go and take the lowest place at the table. Amen.

Let us all pray. (The short church prayer.) Amen.

Translator's notes. He gave this sermon no title, so none is set under the English heading. One word after "our" is marked illegible in the typescript and is left blank. "Ära" is honor, because the feast-placing is about the seat of honor. The person invited stays you, as he addresses the hearer. The unnamed prophet is left unnamed. The short church prayer is announced and not written out.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·