

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity: Luke 14:1–14

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A Sabbath dinner with Jesus in the house of a Pharisee. You just know this is going to be good. A teachable moment, ripe with possibilities. The Pharisees are watching Jesus carefully. Waiting for Him to make a slip. Do or say something so they can pin a charge on Him.

Enter a man with dropsy. Just the sort of person you want dropping in on your nice little dinner party with Jesus. You're just getting started with the appetizers and drinks and in walks this man with a distended gut and stands in front of Jesus.

"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" Jesus poses the Law question to the experts – the synagogue lawyers and the Pharisees. They took pride in this sort of thing. Codifying the law. Making it doable. 613 dos and don'ts. Thirty-two kinds of work you could not do on the Sabbath. Was this one of them? What about healing? Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

If you were one of the lawyers or Pharisees, you would get out your Talmud and Mishnah and check in the table of contents under "Healing" to see what the rabbis said. Was it work or wasn't it? Well, it depends who did it, I suppose. If you do it, then it's work. If God does it, then it isn't work. But if God does it through you, well... hmmm...not so sure about that. Best not say anything at all. That would be safest. "They remained silent." Silence did the poor man no good, of course. The Law can never heal.

What about a son or an ox who has fallen into a well? Wouldn't you get him out? Would you even have to ask whether it is lawful to do this on a Sabbath? Would you wait until the next day just to keep the law? Of course not! "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." So what do you do? The Sabbath law says "no work". The man is there to be healed. Ignore him and you break the fifth commandment. Heal him, and you break the third. You're caught between a rock and a hard place.

That's how the Law works. It won't guide you as much as paint you into a corner where no matter what you do, you'll walk on wet paint. It's the same way with the man in the ditch who fell among thieves and the Samaritan who came to be neighbor to him. Only someone who is

free from the Law is free to do goodness and mercy for the neighbor with no legal strings attached. And when one is free from the Law, one no longer has to ask the question “Is it lawful?” Rather the question will be, “Is it merciful, loving, good, gracious?”

Jesus is utterly free. He is the Lord of the Sabbath and the Lord of creation. He brings healing not the way the healers do, but as the Source of all healing. What He did for this man with dropsy, He wants to do for all by His dying and rising. He bears our infirmities, our sicknesses, all the ways that Sin has ravaged our lives. He became our Sin. Our sickness too. “By His wounds we are healed.”

Jesus heals the man and sends him on his way. And the lawyers and Pharisees have nothing to say about it. It makes no sense to them. How can this “Sabbath breaker” do the works of God? How can someone who seems to run roughshod over all the religious rules have the power of God to heal at the same time? To the Law, this makes no sense, but the Law can’t bring healing. You don’t heal people by giving them commandments. In fact, to the legalist, the man who was sick probably did something to deserve being sick. That’s how it works with the Law. You get precisely what you deserve.

Let’s admit it, we think the same way, though we may not say it out loud. Our religious old Adam believes that you get what you deserve, even when it comes to illness. You must have done something wrong. Violated one of the commandments of health, dieting, and exercise. And even more, our religious old Adam believes that God only works through good people, the obedient ones, the commandment keepers. So we hold pastors and church leaders to standards we ourselves aren’t willing to keep, which serves two purposes. First, it allows us to knock them down whenever we perceive a weakness or failing on their part. Second, it lets us off the hook, because “hey, I’m not holy enough to do that job.” A win/win situation for the old Adam. He can judge others and justify himself at the same time.

Jesus has this dinner party wrapped around His little finger. All eyes and ears are on Him. A perfect time to unleash a loose bolt of a parable. “When you go to a wedding feast, don’t take the honored seats next to the bride and groom but sit with the low-lives and the degenerates in the back. That way you won’t be embarrassed when someone higher than you bumps you from your seat and you’ll be honored when the host says, “Friend, come up here.”

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

This is less about where to sit at a wedding than it is about how the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom works. The Law is not there to exalt you. Try to use the Law of God to exalt yourself and admire how spiritual, religious, and wonderful you are, and you're going to be humbled. Boast in your goodness, and the Law will put you in your place. Justify yourself with all the good you've done, and the Law will reveal you for the sinner that you are. There is always someone better than you. But be humbled by the Law, take your place among sinners as the chief of sinners, and you will be exalted by the Bridegroom Himself as He says to you, "Friend, come up to a higher place."

That's essentially what happens here every Sunday. We enter the doors in the back of the church as poor, miserable sinners confessing that we sin in thought, word, and deed, that we are by nature sinful and unclean. And Christ forgives us and says to us, "Friend, come up to a higher place. There is a place reserved for you at my table." The kingdom of God is precisely opposite those fancy restaurants on the west side where the celebrities and rich get the preferred seats and don't even need a reservation while the low-lives have to wait their turn if they get in at all. The last are first, the first are last. Sinners are justified. Sinners are welcome to the Lord's table. If you're not a sinner, you have no need for the Supper, no need for the Word of Christ, no need for Jesus. You can make it on your own.

There are actually people today saying that Christians shouldn't call themselves sinners. A popular women's speaker named Joyce Meyer says exactly this. I quote: "I am not poor. I am not miserable, and I am not a sinner. That is a lie from the pit of hell. That is what I was, and if I still was, then Jesus died in vain. I'm going to tell you something folks. I didn't stop sinning until I finally got it through my thick head I wasn't a sinner anymore. And the religious world thinks that's heresy and they want to hang you for it. But the Bible says that I am righteous and I can't be righteous and be a sinner at the same time."

Well, I don't know what Bible Joyce Meyer is reading, but the biblical fact is that a baptized believer is precisely sinful and righteous at the same time. He is a sinner covered with a righteousness that does not belong to him. He is Christ wearing an Adam suit, or as Luther put it "simultaneously sinful and righteous." Who leaves the temple justified, according to Jesus? The proud religious Pharisee who boasts in his commandment keeping and compares himself to others? Or the humbled tax collector who is too ashamed even to lift his eyes to heaven and can only pray, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." According to Jesus that man, the tax collector, went home justified. Unless you take your place alongside the chief of sinners,

you cannot be saved. Christ came to save sinners. Christ died for sinners. Christ justifies sinners. Christ forgives, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. And if you're not one of them, you don't need Jesus. The sad and ironic fact is that people like Joyce Meyer are not proclaiming the faith of the kingdom of God but the religion of the old Adam who loves to be told he's no longer a sinner. He's better than others. He's doing well.

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

It's the same with who winds up on your guest list too. Jesus says, "When you throw a party, don't invite the A-list, the rich, your friends, and the people who like you. Invite the least, the lost, the losers of this world – the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind – precisely those people whom the religious Pharisee thought deserved their lot in life for what they had done. You will be blessed precisely because they can't repay you." That's a picture of the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom, right there. A bunch of losers who bring nothing to the table and can't begin to repay Jesus for the privilege of being there. We are all beggars.

No less than the apostle Paul, Saint Paul, said this: "Christ died for sinners of whom I am chief." Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to the Law even to death. Jesus was exalted, raised to the right hand of the Father to save you. His humbling and His glory are yours. To be humbled by the Law is to be crucified with Christ, to be set at the lowest seat in the depths of death and grave. It is to die. And that's all the Law of God can do. It can't make you a better person. It can't make you righteous before God. It can't heal you. It can't give you any special place or privileged position in the kingdom. It can only drive you to the lowest place, that is, to your death.

And from there, and only from there, you hear the voice of Jesus your Savior say to you, "Friend, come up to a better place. Come sit at my table at a feast which has no end."

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 14:1-14 / 1 September 2013", posted 2013-09-01 (<https://htlcms.org/2013/09/2539/>).