

Sermon for Trinity 17 – Luke 14:1-11

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

It's that time of year when we can safely say that school is now back in full swing. The same could be said of our Weekday School where our parish-family's young people are diligently learning their Bible stories, making new friends, and learning by heart Luther's Small Catechism. Though we're still several weeks out from our celebration of Reformation Day next month, think about Martin Luther. He wrote a tremendous amount, even without the modern luxuries (?!?) of Microsoft Word and Wikipedia. He wrote the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, in addition to over 80 volumes of Bible commentaries, sermons, and even hymns. He translated the entire New Testament into the German language. And one of his most famous works was a little book titled *The Freedom of a Christian*. In this writing, Luther put forth 2 main ideas: 1) A Christian is the most independent master over everything and subservient to no one. and 2) A Christian is the most obliging of servants and subservient to everyone.

This might appear to be a contradiction. After all, how can a person be independent and free while still being subservient and bound? So many times in Christian teaching we run into them: paradoxes—2 seemingly contradictory statements that create one greater truth. Such is what happens with Luther's statements from *The Freedom of a Christian*. "A Christian is the most independent master over everything and subservient to no one." and "A Christian is the most obliging of servants and subservient to everyone."

It's true. We are free through faith in Christ. He has freed us from all the pressure of trying to earn our salvation and from all the demands that must be fulfilled if we want to be God's child. We're free from earning our place in heaven and all attempts to affirm ourselves. We are simply and profoundly forgiven sinners: blessed children of God for Jesus' sake.

For this free gift of God's forgiveness, we are also joyful and obliging servants. We no longer have to fulfill the demands of the Law to be God's children, so now we gladly serve our neighbor and do good works for others in gratitude for every good thing Christ has done for us. God's Ten Commandments aren't there so we know how we can be saved. They exist so that we know how to help our fellow man and be a joy and a blessing to them.

It's this kind of freedom that Jesus talks about in today's Gospel. For the Jews, the laws of the Sabbath were among many they tried to obey, oftentimes reluctantly, so they wouldn't lose God's mercy. Obeying the Sabbath law for these Jews went well beyond the third commandment and included no physically strenuous work on the 7th day. Even the amount of steps one took that day had to be limited. They fulfilled these laws for the sake of themselves and supposedly to gain God's favor. They had placed themselves into the dubious position of being constrained and chained to the law while simultaneously not serving others—the exact opposite of being master over all and servant to all.

Our Lord shows what's wrong with this thinking: "... Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?' But they remained silent. Then [Jesus] took [the man who had dropsy] and healed him and sent him away. And [Jesus] 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?'"

The law about the Sabbath day, like all of the other Ten Commandments, exists for our neighbor's sake. Therefore, helping your neighbor can never be an obstacle. We are free so that we can serve each other.

Think about it: You're fulfilling the Sabbath day for the benefit of your neighbor right now. Even as I stand in this pulpit and preach this sermon. Even as you sit there. Or, in the liturgy, you stand. Or kneel. Or sing. Or speak. You are serving your neighbor sitting right next to you by expressing your faith in Christ through worshipping Him. Not only here, but also your neighbors out there. You're making the good confession that your gifts of a Sunday morning and a portion of your earnings are best used here in God's house. Here, by faith, you receive the blessed benefits of Jesus' death for you in the forgiveness of your sins. This is also for the benefit of your neighbor.

Jesus continues to push the point of us being independent masters over everything and subservient to no one, while being the most obliging of servants and subservient to everyone not only in deeds, but also in words. When it came to what place one had at the table and the exact order of preference that was so important at that time, "... He told a parable ... '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 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 shall be exalted.'

What Jesus said had profound meaning. He's not just talking about advisable rules for the person who wants to be honored. He's not giving a Ms. Manner's tutorial for dining. No, this is the very upside down order of things in God's kingdom. We are invited to the Mighty King's Wedding. We don't deserve it. If we come with expectations of where we should sit, be it among "the spiritual elites" or with "those who did their best" or with "those who at least aren't hypocrites," we'll be left standing in our shame.

We've looked down on others. We've compared ourselves to them. We believe we can claim some small part of glory for "not being all that bad." But how can that be when God's mercy is all or nothing? Yet if we attend with the shame of not being able to offer anything, we will be led to one of the places of honor. We who are finally freed from all prestige and the threat of the Law gladly serve in the most humble tasks; and those are the best.

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Being humble, humility, and humiliation. Humiliation is really nothing more than putting a cruel twist on that which is humble. The world does this all the time. And there's precious little more humble than confessing our sins and our wrongs. The world scorns our confession and humility, seeking to humiliate us at every opportunity. But not in the Divine Service. Not here. For here we humble sinners are granted forgiveness and exalted. Why? All because our humble Savior plumbed the depths of humiliation in dying on a cross for us. Jesus was humbled so that you might be exalted. So come on now, Friends: Move up higher! Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠