

Trinity 17

Luke 14:

The Bible is filled with all sorts of good advice. Jesus echoes the words recorded by Solomon in the Proverbs: “Don’t glorify yourself before a king or stand in the place that belongs to the nobles. It is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put down in front of a prince whom your eyes have seen.” This is practical advice. If you are invited to a dinner, be mindful of the one who invited you. It’s not your party. You’re a guest. So act like it. Don’t get caught up with how big of hats other people are wearing. Instead, count yourself to be less significant than other people.

This is good advice, which has earthly benefits. If you are always trying to insert yourself into every conversation, always trying to schmooze with important people, stepping on others to get up higher, then people will notice. They’ll peg you as a selfish, conceited, arrogant, prideful opportunist. And of course, you don’t want that. So be humble. Be willing to start small and not be noticed so much. This will work out for you. It will teach you patience. It will help you be content with what you have and where you are. And you will end up with more gratitude in life. While the Bible teaches us this good advice, it isn’t simply a how-to instruction on moving up and being exalted in this life. Jesus isn’t giving us a rags-to-riches pep-talk on how we can be successful if we only have the right attitude. Sure, this is how you could take Jesus’ words. And any unbeliever can follow this advice. You can learn to say “Yes, sir” and “No, sir,” and do as you’re told until you are promoted from one rank to the next. You could treat humility as simply a hoop to jump through. But then you would be missing the point. Jesus is teaching us humility toward God. God is the one who has invited us to his banquet. God is the one who gives us rest and peace. We don’t deserve it at all. We are sinful, unclean, and altogether unworthy of God’s attention. And yet, he has invited us. This is truly humbling.

Jesus was eating dinner at the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. It was the Sabbath Day. It was the day of rest, established by God so that people would give their bodies a break from their labors and find rest for their souls in God’s Word. It was a Sabbath to the Lord. What does this mean? It means that we should fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. It is God’s Word, which invites us. It is God’s preaching, which gives us rest. Just as Jesus proclaims, “Come to me all you who are laboring and carrying a heavy load, and I will give you rest. (Matt 11)” The Sabbath Day had rules and regulations attached to it. Following this outward principle of resting your body certainly has benefits. You need time to decompress. But again, if we take this to mean simply that we shouldn’t do work, then we miss the point of what rest is. And we find ourselves so busy avoiding any kind of work that we become anxious and restless, hoping that no one will judge us. All the while we judge others who don’t meet up to this regulation.

When we recognize that God is the one who has invited us to the Supper, then this shapes the way we see humility. God was not obligated to invite us. He didn’t invite us because of our good work ethic or because he saw some potential within us. It isn’t a job interview. God isn’t testing us out to see if he wants to invest in us. No, God has fully invested himself in us. He has sent his own Son into the flesh so that we would be joined to him. Leaving the highest seat in heaven, he took the form of a servant, looking like any other man. He has come to associate with poor, insignificant, unworthy sinners. And he has, purely by his own mercy, invited us to dine with him.

The Pharisees were watching Jesus closely. And yet, they weren’t finding any rest. Because they were jealous of Jesus, only seeing him as a superstar and influential person. But we should also

watch Jesus closely. We should pay attention. We should hold everything he does and says to be sacred as we gladly hear and learn what he has to teach us.

Jesus healed a man who had some kind of disease that made him swell up with water. He healed him. He gave him rest. But before he healed him, Jesus asked if it was lawful. Is it against the rules or not to heal someone on the Sabbath Day? On this day of rest, is it ok to give someone else rest from his pain and illness? The question sounds absurd. It would be like asking if it's ok for a pastor to preach about marriage at a wedding. It would be like asking if it's good to forgive someone who has sinned against you after you hear that God has forgiven you. Is it ok to do good to someone else when God is doing good to you? On this day, which God himself has set apart for the express purpose of giving you rest, is it alright if you follow his example and learn from him how to give rest to your neighbor? Jesus's question exposes just how blind these people are as they are fixing their eyes on his every move.

Then, after Jesus heals the man, he asks them another question. "If your son or your ox falls into a well, won't anyone of you pull him out immediately on a Sabbath?" Of course they would! Is this not exactly what God intends for us? He pulls us out of the well of sin, which we are all born into. He calls us his children, his sons, inviting us to sit with him and eat.

It's at this point when Jesus teaches them that when they are invited to a wedding feast they shouldn't take the highest seats of honor. Take the lower seat. It's better to be asked to come up higher than to be told to step down. This is sound advice. But again, what is the heart of Jesus' instruction? Who has invited you? God has invited you. Even when you are sitting in the lowest seat, you still have God's invitation. It is his invitation alone which gives you honor no matter how little you are noticed in this life.

Jesus sums up his teaching with these words: "If you honor yourself, you'll be humbled, but if you humble yourself, you'll be honored." These are words Jesus repeats more than once. They reflect the words sung by his mother while he dwelt in her humble womb: "God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the lowly." Jesus speaks of this as something that will happen. His mother sang of it as something that has already happened. Both are true. God will exalt the humble, and he has exalted the humble.

God will exalt the humble. When you recognize how unworthy you are because of your sins, you can draw strength from this. He will rescue you from every evil of body and soul, possession and reputation, and finally, when your last hour has come, he will give you a blessed end and graciously take you from this vale of tears to himself in heaven. He will raise your body up on the last day. This is his promise. No matter how much you lose in this life, no matter how insignificant you look or feel, God will exalt you at the right time. This is our hope. This is what we live for. It's what we look forward to.

And at the same time, God has exalted the humble. He has rescued us from our sins through the redemption of his Son Jesus Christ. He has called us as his children in the waters of our baptism. Even here today he invites those who tremble at his Word to draw comfort from it, to eat the very body and blood of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord Jesus who pleads for them at the right hand of the Father. His Word, which you hear today, is his invitation. And by the very act of inviting you to dine with him, he has already exalted you, just as he promises to exalt you at the right time. He has already seated you with Christ.

This is the source of your humility. It is that God himself swoops to our level, takes the lower seat with us, bears our burdens, and feeds us with his own wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

So follow the example of your Lord. As he has invited you, as he has been hospitable to you, be hospitable to your fellow redeemed. I'm talking about the ones who gather with you right here around the gospel and sacraments. I'm talking about those whom you know and love. But I'm also talking about those whom you might not know very well. You may have no idea how significant or insignificant they are in this world. Yet here they are. Why are they here? Out of habit? Out of family tradition? Or is it because they need rest? They need rest for their souls. They see in their own flesh nothing but sin and toil. But in Christ, in his blood, in his righteousness, they find rest for their souls and a conscience cleansed from guilt. And Jesus embraces them. He forgives them, saves them, joins himself entirely to them, and he will exalt them. Those who receive one of the least of these receives Christ himself. Seek to associate with these kinds of people. Because it's an honor to commune with them, to talk with them, to bear their burdens, and to find with them rest and peace in the wisdom and grace of Jesus Christ. This is better advice than you could ever find in this world. Amen.