

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth; for His word is truth. Amen

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (2021)

The Virtue of Humility

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“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11, ESV)

In the Gospel Reading for today, St. Luke tells us that Jesus has been invited to the traditional, weekly Seder meal which is given in remembrance of the Passover. This meal was extremely important in the lives of the Jewish people as it helped shape their daily and weekly liturgical life. Moreover, throughout St. Luke’s gospel the evangelist records numerous table fellowship meals which our Lord attended as He used these opportunities of teaching and eating to communicate God’s kingdom. Furthermore, His practice of table fellowship gave rise to the classic shape of the Christian liturgy: the Service of the Word (teaching) and the Service of the Sacrament (supper).

Indeed, there is a common thread between the Passover Seder and the celebration of “the breaking of bread” by the early church. Just think of the richness of the Seder meal. That meal which reminded the Jewish people of God’s saving action in protecting their sons when the angel of death came and took the life of every first-born male in Egypt. God was with them as they ate the Passover lamb, but now, God has become flesh and sits with them and eat with them at table. Our Lord Jesus was not only the invited guest, but soon, after His crucifixion and resurrection, He would become the meal itself. This was something new indeed, but these meals were also a source of conflict as the Pharisees and scribes objected to the company Jesus kept at these meals.

Our Lord would use these meals to proclaim the arrival of the dawn of a new era, the inauguration of a new testament in His shed blood. This new testament embraced sinners and outcasts, Gentiles as well as Jews. God in His grace desired to recline with His fallen creatures, teaching them and eating with them. However, when our Lord Jesus sat with sinners and tax collectors, the Pharisees and scribes often ridiculed Him, asking ***“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30, ESV)*** To which our Lord responded, ***“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:31–32, ESV)*** The Lord of heaven and earth humbled Himself before His fallen creatures to heal their sin-infected souls. How more humbling can our God be than lowering Himself to become one of us?

This meal, to which our Lord Jesus was invited, was hosted by a ***“ruler of the Pharisees.”*** Now it’s not as if this ruler was a friend of Jesus, he was not. In fact, he was opposed to the teaching of Jesus. So there was another reason he had invited Jesus. A sinister reason. St. Luke tells us, ***“They were watching him carefully.” (Luke 14:1, ESV)*** All the other guests were Pharisees and lawyers, and they were there to watch Jesus to see if He would heal on the Sabbath as He had done before (Luke 6:7), or to see if they could catch Him saying something that could be considered blasphemous (Luke 11:53-54). So the meal was meant to be a trap, a snare by which these religious zealots could gain evidence to use against Jesus, evidence which may result in His execution (Luke 6:11). Jesus did not disappoint.

As the Lord would have it, a man with dropsy appeared at the meal. Was he one of the table guests or a servant or a passerby we don't know, it really doesn't matter? What matters is that Jesus healed this man, He healed him on the Sabbath. The very thing the dinner guests were looking for, Jesus gave them. But our Lord does so by setting the stage and asking, ***“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” (Luke 14:3, ESV)***

The guests are shocked. Hoping to catch Jesus in an act of healing on the Sabbath, our Lord opens the door to satisfy their desire. But they are at a lost for words. In the past these same Pharisees and lawyers vacillated between anger and shame when Jesus would heal on the Sabbath. Now, given an opportunity to be warned of His impending action, these Pharisees are mute, unable to answer our Lord's question. Their silence indicates that our Lord's action of overturning the Sabbath requirements is irrefutable. Therefore, Jesus heals the man in their presence. Then He rebukes them saying, ***“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?” (Luke 14:5, ESV)***

Look at the Lord's rebuke of these Pharisees. He says you stiff-necked people, you won't allow something as essential as healing a sick person on the Sabbath to take place, but if it comes to something that is personal, something that belongs to you, you wouldn't hesitate for a moment to provide healing or rescue. What hypocrites these men were. They have corrupted God's meaning of the Third Commandment, “To Keep the Sabbath Holy” by adding to the prohibition against work the inclusion of providing loving care. Not only is this a man-made expansion of the Commandment, but it also illustrates their lack of compassion and humility. They say to themselves, “this is the Sabbath, I can't lift a finger to help, unless it's to help something that is mine.” What hypocrites! Moreover, when our Lord shows them their hypocrisy, they are again speechless. There is no question, Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and His teaching at this meal had just begun.

Having given them an object lesson in hypocrisy, our Lord now turns to their pride, their arrogance, their feeling of superiority. St. Luke tells us that Jesus observed these guest as they arrived, how they sought the seats of honor, those seats closest to the host. One could just imagine the jockeying that went on as these men thought of themselves more highly than the others. It reminds us of the time when the apostles argued over which one of them was the most superior. To which our Lord said, ***“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:25–27, ESV)***

When we hear our Lord rebuke the guests of their hypocrisy, this is a clear warning shot that neither should we exalt ourselves, but rather choose humility. But this is a difficult thing for the corrupted human nature to do since we are so filled with ourselves; with our ability to be better than others, with our ability to save ourselves.

When Jesus accused these guests of violating the meaning of the Sabbath, He accuses all human law givers. All those who believe they can earn heaven by their works righteousness. Such an error infected the Christian church as early as the days of the apostles and this was mostly because of their heritage; the Jewish church led by works righteous Pharisees. That same works righteousness by which these new Christian converts once lived. Change is difficult, old habits hang on. It as if they must have been Lutherans because as we all know Lutherans resist change. But seriously, we know that such an attitude was ingrained in Jewish converts.

St. Paul speaks of this error in his letter to the Galatians, reminding them of his conflict with St. Peter. He wrote, ***“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:11–14, ESV)*** Habits are difficult to change, as St. Peter found out.

This attitude has infected Christianity ever since. It really raised its ugly head during the period of Pietism. Pietism was that time when many Christians judged themselves and others by their outward compliance to man-made laws and regulations which were to guide their Christian faith. Such believers would react against anything that contradicted their man-made ideas of religious fervor and moral laxity. They considered themselves superior to other Christians and if you didn't conform to their ideology, you were considered a lost sinner, unworthy of their affection. But what did St. Paul say to the Galatians who were being led to believe salvation came from obeying the Law? He said, ***“we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16, ESV)*** Justified by faith, faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the Altar of the Cross. If they had accepted what these lawgivers wanted them to accept, circumcision, they would have been lost. St. Paul told them, ***“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.” (Galatians 5:1–3, ESV)*** Men filled with the arrogance of self-righteousness were trying to lead the Christians of Galatia away from the humility of Christ.

But a humble attitude is contrary to a superior attitude. If one clings to their superiority, it becomes ever increasing, even impossible to pray, forgive me Holy Father for I am a poor miserable sinner. Those who lack humility will say, “What, me, a poor miserable sinner. Heaven forbid! I'm a true believer. I'm a Christian. I have no need to confess that I am a poor miserable sinner. I have no reason to seek forgiveness for my sins because I don't sin.

For one as foolish as this we must pray. St. John rebukes them, saying, ***“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (1 John 1:6–10, ESV)***

Therefore, St. Peter urges you not to think too much of yourself and thus he exhorts you to, ***“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:5–7, ESV)*** Moreover, Jesus reminds you, ***“everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11, ESV)*** Furthermore, St. Paul says to you, ***“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” (Romans 12:3, ESV)*** These words from one

who thought himself to be the best of Pharisees but came to the final understanding that he was the foremost amongst sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) are so important in understanding the humility of a child of God. So humble yourself therefore, before the Lord. Humble yourself before your neighbor.

Therefore, St. Paul urges us to be humble as our Lord is humble. He says, ***“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*** (Philippians 2:5–8, *ESV*) Humility is a virtuous gift given to the believer that they might walk in the shadow of Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.