

12th Sunday after Pentecost – August 28, 2022

Luke 13:1, 7-14

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The world is watching us. And by us, I mean those of us who call ourselves Christians, those who profess to be followers of Jesus. They're watching to see if our actions match our words, to see if our sermons and hymns and prayers about love for God and neighbor on Sunday mornings show any signs of affecting our actions and attitudes during the rest of the week. They're wondering whether Jesus' call to take up our own crosses results in any sort of real sacrifice on our part, whether we're willing to give up even a little of our comfort or our privilege in order to benefit our fellow human beings or the rest of God's good creation. They're watching to see if our behavior bears any resemblance to Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Are we Christians patient and kind? Or are we boastful, arrogant, and rude... envious, irritable, and resentful? Do we insist on our own way? Do we rejoice in wrongdoing, or do we rejoice in the truth? I'm sure it depends upon whom you talk to when you ask questions like this, but more and more I'm hearing about people who are not seeing us Christians at our best.

The Pharisees in today's Gospel reading were doing their own watching. They were watching Jesus. They had been warning Jesus about his behavior. They let him know that Herod was out to get him. Jesus has been helping the wrong kinds of people at the wrong time. Now they want to see if they've scared him straight. So, they are watching Jesus at this Sabbath meal to see if he will dare to break the Sabbath law again after healing that bent-over woman on the Sabbath in last week's Gospel reading. In verses 2-6 that were left out of today's reading, they find out. Jesus is not deterred. He heals again. And this time he's in their face about it. He asks them before he heals whether they would pull their own animal out of a well if it fell in on the Sabbath. They don't answer, so Jesus goes ahead and heals a man suffering from dropsy. He doesn't call them hypocrites this time around, but he doesn't have to. They recognize the problem.

And while they're watching Jesus, Jesus is watching them too. And he notices how they're acting, and what their actions reveal about their character and their priorities. They're maneuvering for the best seats, the places of honor. Each of them is looking out for himself. And let's remember that this is a meal at of Pharisees and friends. These are the most pious, most observant religious people of the day. They've included Jesus in their get together because he has become a prominent religious leader. They either want to win him over to their way of practicing the faith, or to expose him as a false teacher and prophet. But it is Jesus who will do the exposing here. He sees how their self-serving behavior flies in the face of their professed piety, how it ignores the greatest commandment, to love God with their whole heart and their neighbor as oneself. And so he speaks up. Self-centeredness and self-promotion reveal not only a lack of concern for the neighbor, but also a lack of concern about God. In the small, mundane actions of everyday life, he says, you proclaim, loud and clear, whom you really serve. And it is not only the guests behavior that does this. The host is implicated too. He doesn't invite just anyone to his dinners, only the cool kids, the ones he wants to be seen with, and who will be able to pay him back. His display of hospitality is as self-serving as his guests' jockeying for the good seats. It's an investment that he hopes will pay off in future invitations from them. He scratches their backs so they'll scratch his.

Once again we have a story about Pharisees. Which means we have a story about ourselves, the good Christian people who show up in church on Sunday mornings. What does Jesus see when he looks at us and our behavior? Surely he is pleased that we tend to sit toward the back of the room. If we've learned nothing else, we've learned that lesson, right? I'm just teasing, you can sit where you want. But there is lots of room up front here for social distancing. But beyond that silly example, what does Jesus see? Are our weekly Sabbath gatherings here welcoming of others? Or do we really welcome only certain kinds of people here, like those who will help us pay our bills? We usually run fairly large deficits at this time of year that we make up by the end of the year, but this year it's larger than usual. You've seen the financial reports. So there's that. But what does Jesus see in our daily lives? How do our actions from Monday through Saturday proclaim whom we trust and whom we serve? I'm guessing Jesus sees that when we have people over, if anyone does that any more in the age of Covid, that we don't invite random people we encounter at the grocery store or on the streets of downtown Champaign. We invite our friends and our family, people who return the favor by having us over. I don't know about you, but I don't really want to change that pattern of behavior. And I will say that I am maybe just a little resentful of Jesus' suggestion to the Pharisee host about what his guest list should look like, which by my rule applies to me too. I expect your share my feelings here.

Jesus is watching, and he sees our discomfort, and our resentment too. And he invites us, with the Pharisees, to keep watching him, which thanks to Luke (and Matthew, Mark, and John), we are able to do. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem in this part of Luke's Gospel, and he invites us to watch as he takes the lowest seat of all on the cross at Golgotha. Crucifixion, you see, wasn't for everyone. It was for the lowest of the low, for thieves, bandits, and rebels among the subject people of the Roman Empire. Roman citizens who had to be executed weren't crucified. They got the more humane, quick-and-painless execution of beheading. Jesus takes this lowest seat for us and for our salvation, taking upon himself the humiliation and suffering of the world, and enduring the pain of death in order to open for us a way forward, a way that leads from death to resurrection life, and a way of love and hope in the midst of sin and suffering.

As we watch Jesus on his way to that lowest seat of the cross, we see him host his own dinner for those who follow him, a meal of his own body and blood. It is a meal that he invites us to continue often in remembrance of him, so that we may become what we receive, Christ's own body for the life of the world. It is a meal that is set before us once again this morning.

The world is watching us, dear sisters and brothers in Christ. May they see us repenting of our selfishness and hypocrisy. May they see us putting the common good ahead of our self-interests. May they see us turning in faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the promises of God for Jesus' sake, and boldly taking the lowest seats at the tables of the world, reaching out in genuine love and hope for a world torn by hatred and suffering. May they see and be drawn to the life that Jesus makes possible, the life that God has intended for all people from the creation of the world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.