12th Sunday after Pentecost – August 31, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 13:1, 7-14 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of 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, insisting on our own way? Do we rejoice in the truth, or do we rejoice in the wrongdoing? 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. Because they had been warning Jesus about his behavior. They had let him know that Herod was out to get him. Remember that reading we had back during Lent, when Jesus called Herod a fox? That actually comes right before our reading today in Luke's Gospel. You see, Jesus had been helping the wrong kinds of people at the wrong time. Now the Pharisees want to see if they have succeeded in scaring Jesus straight. So, they are watching him at this Sabbath meal to see if he will dare to break the Sabbath law again after healing that bent-over woman in last week's Gospel reading. And in verses 2-6, left out of today's reading, they find out. Sure enough, Jesus is not deterred; he heals again. And this time he's in their face about it. He asks them 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 are watching Jesus, Jesus is watching them too. He notices how they are acting, and what their actions reveal about their character and their priorities. They maneuver for the best seats, the places of honor, each of them looking out for himself. And let's remember that this is a meal of Pharisees. 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 want either 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 themself. 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 they proclaim, loud and clear, whom they 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.

I will remind you again of my rule about Pharisees. When we have a story about Pharisees, 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 teasing, of course: you can sit where you want. But there is lots of room up front here. But beyond that silly example, what does Jesus see? Are our weekly Sabbath gatherings here welcoming of others? Do we really mean what we sang in our opening hymn, that "all are welcome in this place"? Or do we tend to welcome only certain kinds of people here, people who are like us, who share our taste in liturgy and music, or those who will help us pay our bills? And 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, 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 discomfort here.

Jesus is watching, and he sees our discomfort, and our resentment too. But 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 only for the lowest of the low, for thieves, bandits, and rebels, and only for the subjected peoples of the Roman Empire. Roman citizens who had to be executed weren't crucified. They got the quicker and less painful sentence of beheading. Jesus takes this lowest seat for us and for our salvation, taking upon himself the humiliation and suffering of the world, enduring pain and death in order to disarm death, and to open for us a way forward, a way that leads through death to resurrection life, to a way of love and hope in the midst of sin and suffering.

Whether we meant it or not, our opening hymn was true. It was the passive voice that saved us from hypocrisy in that case. All *are* welcome in this place if this place is God's house, because God is the one who welcomes. As we watch Jesus on his way to that lowest seat of the cross, we also 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, blessed and broken 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 our hypocrisy. May they see us putting the common good ahead of our own 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 may they see us boldly taking the lowest seats at the tables of the world, reaching out in genuine love and hope to 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. May they know with us the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding, and may that peace draw and keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.