

1 September 2013
Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“When Higher is Really Lower . . . and Vice Versa”

Text: Luke 14:1-14; Hebrews 13:1-17

A gentle reworking and representation of a sermon from six years ago. A sermon I needed to preach to myself this day . . .

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pride is a tricky thing, because it comes in so many shapes and sizes, and manifests itself in so many ways. Some of them obvious, and some not so obvious.

Pride is something we all have, though none of us likes to admit. You do not have to be invited to a banquet to vie for the seats of honor. That is a competition in which we are all involved – in our families, in our workplaces, among friends, and even in the church. It is why I feel gypped when something is done for another but not for me. It is why I lash out at others when they do not do for me what I want, or what I think I deserve. It is why I look down on others when they do not live up to *my* expectations. It is why I feel slighted when I do not receive recognition for my efforts, or my faithfulness. It is why I get disappointed with others – because pride sees the sin in them and overlooks (or excuses) the sin in me.

Pride begins with me. I am the starting point and everything and everyone else is judged in comparison. *Even God*. It is sin and selfishness lived to their logical conclusion. So twisted is our pride that even when I take the lowest seat, it is often with *the prideful expectation* of being moved higher! Humility is used as a way to receive more praise. Even confession of sin can be turned into the pride of greater self-examination than the next guy! And so pride is rightly one of the seven deadly sins, because it focuses all on me – and takes my eyes off of Christ, the source of our life.

But in contrast to all of that today is the man in the Holy Gospel with dropsy. He is so easily overlooked in today’s reading, but he is really the key. He knows who he is. No pride here. He is not one of the beautiful people. Not popular. He is considered a loser. He is alone. He is afraid. He is marred and outcast. He has nothing to give, he can only receive. He is swelled not with pride, but with the effects of his disease, making him look grotesque. He is there because the traditional piety of that time said to have your door open for the stranger and the

poor – which the Pharisee did . . . but with the expectation that no fool of a stranger or person in need would take this seriously *and actually come in!* But if he did, you could always stare him down, or make him feel uncomfortable in other ways, so that he'd leave and not make that mistake again! After all, who wants such a person ruining a perfectly good dinner party . . . or (to put it in more contemporary terms) who wants such a person ruining a perfectly good Divine Service, or a perfectly good vacation, or a perfectly good Sunday afternoon nap, or our perfectly good, well-planned, laid out life!

You see, pride doesn't like messes. It likes everything where and how *I* want it to be. Everything and everyone in its place. No surprises. No inconveniences.

Perhaps that's why there are always messes around Jesus. For while this man entered through the open door of the Pharisee, it is not to the Pharisee that he has come, but to Jesus, whose open door is a *truly* open door; whose invitation is a true invitation; and whose grace is true grace. And when you truly open your door, you know whose going to come in? *The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind*, the sinful messes like you and me. We who have nothing to give, but who have come to receive from the goodness of our Saviour. His forgiveness, life, and love. The gifts He has come to give to us who need them. For the exalted One has humbled Himself and come into this world of sin to pull His sons and daughters out of the pit of sin and give them life. The life that we so desperately need.

And so we come, not in pride but in truth – swelled and grotesque with the sin we've committed again this week, with the pride we've pushed others down with this week, with all the failures and shortcomings of this week, and repent. We use the words printed in the hymnal, but sometimes we don't even need those - we stand here ashamed, with the speechless, simple silence of the drowsy man, standing before our Lord in our broken nothingness. To hear again His wonderful Word that washes us clean: *I forgive you*. No matter who you are. No matter your past, present, or future. No matter how disfigured with sin. *I forgive you. I love you. You are mine.*

But our Saviour is not content with that – with inviting us in but then relegating us to a seat in the corner or in the back! Forgiving us (since He is a Saviour and all that) but not really wanting us here. No! He then gives us even more. Giving us who have no right to even be here a seat of honor at His table, so that He can serve us! With His own body and blood. The medicine of immortality. The food of eternal life, the fruit from the tree of the cross. For it is on the cross where the One with the highest place freely took the absolute lowest place.

Luke told us today that Jesus noticed how those who were invited to this feast took the places of honor. You know what that means? He wasn't in them! He who

deserved the highest place didn't take it, but came to be with us. The greatest became the least; the perfect One became the greatest sinner. He came and took our place, our sinful place at the bottom of the totem poll, so that you might have His place at the head of the Table. The place where sons sit! Because in Christ, you *are* a son, and the Father loves you so, and exalts you with an exaltation higher than we could ever exalt ourselves.

And this is so because the One who opened the door of mercy to us is the One who opened the door of the tomb, defeating the sin and death that beat us up, knocked us down, disfigured and uglified us and which held us captive - defeating sin and death and gave us our life back again. A new life. A better life. A life as it was always meant to be. A life with hearts filled no longer with pride but with love; with minds filled no longer with sin but with forgiveness; with lips filled no longer with gossip but with prayer. Not pretending that the sin and messes of our lives aren't there, but knowing that they are, and that we cannot fix ourselves, and that *here* is the healing and the forgiveness that we need. That we simply cannot live without. The life that became yours in Holy Baptism, as the Father made you His child, swaddled you, raised you, and promised you a future and a kingdom which has no end.

And so the words of Jesus that we heard today are not so much a lesson in humility or table etiquette, as they are a Gospel - a good news - **for you**, showing the wonderful work of Jesus **for you**. For our Saviour who *took a drowsied man, healed him, and sent him on his way*, has done the same for you - taking you in Holy Baptism, healing you with His absolution, and sending you out with His food, strength, and blessing. Out into the callings, the vocations, the lives and relationships He has given you, that you may so do for others. Not because you have too. Not because that's what the "traditional piety" tells you to do. But because that's what the love of God in Christ Jesus compels us to do. The Gospel *given* to us also now *lived* in us.

And that, in the upside-down way of the Gospel, is also *moving up higher!* Even though it looks to the world like moving down. For when we pridefully try to move ourselves higher we are really sinking deeper into sin. But in loving and forgiving and serving others who have fallen and collapsed in sin, in shame, in difficulty, in trouble, or like those we heard about in the reading from Hebrews: the strangers, those in prison, those who are mistreated, those under oppression . . . is this not to be with the Son of God and in His place? And so to be called, to be *vocationed*, to a higher place, even though it looks lower and less desirable to the world and to our sinful natures. But as sons and daughters of God in Christ Jesus, we can now *freely* take our place with the least, with those in need. Knowing there is no higher place to be. And this not in order to be repaid, but because we have already

received what is far beyond the price of silver and gold – the body and blood and life of Jesus, which will never end.

What will end are the things of this world. But when they do, Jesus wants you to know, His door will still be open to you. For when the things of this world end for you - whether that is at the end of a long, full life, or a life ended too soon by disease or accident or tragedy - you will enter that heavenly sanctuary, where your Bridegroom and His unending feast is waiting for you. And if you want to picture that in your mind, think of the last wedding you were at, when the bride stood at the entrance of the church looking to her groom, and the groom stood at the front, looking back to his bride with joy and love for her. So it will be in that day for you and me, as the Spirit leads us to Christ Jesus, and Jesus takes us to the Father as His own. That day when all sin, pride, division, heartache, pain, and tears will be gone. When we who have suffered here with Him, will there be glorified with Him (Rom 8:17).

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.