

31 August 2025
Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A Feast of Joy and Happiness”
Text: Luke 14:1-14

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

When you heard the Gospel read today, and maybe you have a dinner planned for today or this week with your friends or family, and you didn't ***invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind***, it's okay! You can still have it! Some of our happiest times are when we gather with family and friends, when we can just relax, laugh, and share. When we don't have to worry about what others think of us; we can just be ourselves because we are among family and friends. Jesus is not criticizing that today. In fact, He Himself did that! It's just that *His* friends were sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and other undesirables and outcasts. He ate with Matthew and his gang, Zacchaeus and his family. And these were feasts filled with joy. So no, Jesus is not criticizing that today, because that's not what's happening in the Gospel we heard today.

The feast that we heard about today, that Jesus was at this day, ***at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees***, had a different purpose. This wasn't family and friends, and a relaxed good time. This was about seeing and being seen. This one was about pecking order, your social standing. Being with those who were good for your career. So you wore the proper clothes, you jockeyed for position. Where you got to sit and who you sat next to was a big deal. Some of you have been to banquets like that. You see who's there, who's been invited. Others are looking at you, who's sitting where. It's not relaxing. It's tense, it's exhausting.

So it was on this day, and so they all tried to get the good seats, the best seats. Which means . . . think about it . . . if they're all jumping into the best seats, then where did Jesus get to sit? Not there! In the back maybe? By the door?

Which is probably how this man with dropsy got to stand before Him. Maybe the lawyers and Pharisees brought him in and set this up as a test, as a trap for Jesus, to see what He would do. Maybe. But maybe not. Maybe this man just came in. That *was* possible. For it was traditional, a traditional show of piety not to *invite* the stranger or the poor, but to keep the door open for them, with the understanding that this was just symbolic and some fool didn't take this seriously and actually

come in! And if someone actually did . . . well, you could stare him down. Make him feel uncomfortable. Maybe generously give him a few morsels, but then hurry him on his way. He really didn't belong there. Everyone knew that.*

*Except Jesus, it seems. Jesus acknowledges him, this intruder. Almost like he's no intruder at all. Like the door *really* was open to him! And He wants to give him more than just a few morsels - He wants to heal him. *Is that okay, guys? Can I do that? It won't take long . . .**

Now, do you get it? Do you see what Jesus just did? The head of the table is now not up there, but back here, where Jesus is! And who gets to be there, with Jesus, in that place of honor? This man with dropsy. **Jesus has turned the room completely around.** And His host and his guests are not happy about it. They don't say anything. They just sit and steam in silence. So Jesus heals this man, bringing a little joy and happiness to this gathering.

And then, in perhaps the continued uncomfortable silence that ensued, Jesus says: *What? Ya'll do the same thing. If your **son or ox falls into a well and it happens to be a Sabbath day**, you don't leave him there until the next day! **You pull him out.*** Rules for thee and not for me, apparently. And He was right. They had. They would. They couldn't deny it. But that didn't change their thinking. We're not even told they were amazed at the healing! They were just indignant. Jesus was messing everything up! This isn't how things are supposed to work.

Except it is how things work in Jesus' kingdom. So Jesus tells a parable about a wedding feast, to teach them. And whenever you hear a story about a wedding feast from Jesus, you know Jesus is talking about His kingdom, and His love for His Bride, the Church, and how it is with Him. And at His feast, the room is all turned around. Those who you thought would be up front, aren't. Those you thought would be in the back are brought forward. And the door to His feast really is open! It's not just a show of piety which He really doesn't mean and doesn't really want you there - *this feast is for you.* His friends and family. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to jockey for position. *It's not about you!* It's about Jesus and His gifts *for you.* Jesus' feast is a feast of happiness and joy.

It's about us being that man with dropsy, a disease that made you swell up and disfigured you and made you an awful sight to look at. It was painful and dangerous. It's what sin has done to us. It has disfigured us. Swelled us up with pride. Made us ugly by how we act and what we say.

But Jesus' door is open. And so we come in here and we stand before Him, ugly and disfigured and swollen and dying. And it's not just lawful to heal us of our sin and

death on the Sabbath, it's exactly what the Sabbath is for! It's why Jesus is here. And so He does. *I forgive you all your sins*, He says. Words that are proclaimed next to the Font, reminding us that we are baptized children of God. But then He doesn't send us away. *Au contraire!* He turns the room around and gives us the seats of honor at His table, to feed us not with just a few morsels, but with heavenly food, His own Body and Blood. A feast of joy and happiness - joy not only for us, but for Jesus. Who has come to eat with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and other undesirables and outcasts. You come as nothing, or less than nothing. You come with sin and guilt and shame. You come puffed up with sin and dying. And Jesus takes all that away. *Welcome, welcome! my son, my daughter. Here, take my seat. Here, eat and drink my food. I am most happy you are here!*

If you are not amazed at that, I don't know what else to say!

Because you know what you did this week. You know how you were this week. You know how you stumbled and fell into the same old sins, how you failed to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself. How you lived as if God did not matter and as if you mattered most. *And Jesus knows it, too.* Which is good news, not bad! Good news, because if you had some sins Jesus didn't know about, how do you know He died for them? But if He knows them all, then He took them all, and He died for them all. They're on Him and not on you. And He atoned for them. All. He took the fire of God's wrath against them all. And He came here today to forgive you and feed you and welcome you and heal you. **For you to rejoice in His love, and for Him to rejoice in you.**

Now, Jesus got criticized for that, for eating with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and other undesirables and outcasts. And He does today, too. The Church is criticized for being full of sinners, hypocrites, failures, undesirables. To which I say: *Yup! We are!* That's exactly right. And that's why we're here. Because we deserve nuthin'! But what we deserve isn't given here. Only gifts here. Only grace here. **If you're not a sinner, don't come. But if you are, welcome.**

And Jesus isn't the only one welcoming you. We say in the liturgy that we gather here with *the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*, and we do. But realize what that means! That means that if Jesus gives us the places of honor here at His table, that means all the company of heaven are moving over to give you their seat! Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, Elijah, Elisha, Matthew, Peter, James, John - all of them! You're not just the guy who snuck in the door but they don't really want you here and so are staring you down. No! They're moving over to give **you** their seats. Because the last shall be first. The humble shall be exalted. The unworthy counted worthy. That's how it is with Jesus, at His feast, in His kingdom.

And as members of His kingdom, you now get to do the same. Not because you have to, but sharing in Jesus' happiness and joy. We do what we do not to be repaid, because we've already been given all the gifts and grace of God - more than we deserve and far more than we can imagine. We do so now because Jesus and His love live in us. What He does for us, we can now do for others.

Because God's gifts always grow. And they grow by being given away. So if you're not giving, if you're keeping or doing for yourself, you're actually doing the opposite of what you think you are. But when you give, when you serve, when you help and forgive, when you move over and let others have your seat, happy are you and joyful. Not with the joy and happiness of the world, but with that joy and happiness that the world can neither give nor take away. That is the gift of God. That is Jesus. The joy and happiness of a man who once had dropsy, but who I now like to think is here with us, a part of *all the company of heaven*, and welcoming us. Saying to us: **I was once where you are, and soon you will be with me where I am.**

Now, I don't know if that's true, if that man with dropsy was saved. But I know what is true, and even better - **that Jesus says those words to us.** And made them so. He came and was once where you are, and even worse - on the cross for you! And now risen from the dead, you will soon be with Him where He is, healed, forgiven, and restored, in Paradise.

That's how it is in Jesus. That's how it is in His turned-around kingdom. That's how it is at His quite-different-than-the-world feast. Not competition. Grace. Not deserving. Gifts. For you. From Him. And we do not remain silent. We sing His praise. We confess His name. And we keep checkin' the door! Because who Jesus might be bringing in to be with us next . . . *You just might be surprised.*

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.

* These details from Norman Nagel, "Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost" in *Selected Sermon of Norman Nagel*, (c) 2004 CPH, p. 208-212.