

“Knowing Your Place”

Luke 14:1–14

The setting for today’s Gospel lesson takes place in the house of a prominent Pharisee. According to St. Luke, it’s the third invitation our Lord received to have dinner in the home of a Pharisee. In chapter 7 (36-50), Jesus was invited to Simon, the Pharisee’s house for dinner. The meal was interrupted by one of the town’s prostitute’s, who had the audacity to wet Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair, kiss them and then pour perfume (which she had brought with her) on them. Our text tells us, “When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is –that she is a sinner.” Oh, those Pharisees were getting what they were **watching** for, a real eyeful.

In chapter 11 (37-54) Jesus is again invited to eat with a Pharisee. But the Pharisee **noticed** that Jesus did not wash first before eating the meal. Jesus’ responds with a harsh series of woes pronounced upon the Pharisees for their lack of love of God and their self-righteousness.

This morning’s Gospel reading from the 14th chapter of St. Luke begins with these words, “One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were **watching** him carefully.” Our text continues, “And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy.” (one of our commentaries informs us that dropsy was an affliction which causes an abnormal accumulation of fluids in connective tissues and cavities of the body with symptoms of swelling and defective circulation. It is usually a sign of more serious medical problems.) Our text continues, Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?’ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away.”

As one of the members of our Wednesday morning Bible class so aptly noted, “Pastor, these certainly weren’t happy meals.” They were opportunities for our Lord to get to the heart of the matter which is always the matter of the heart. The healing of the man with dropsy is incidental to this story.

Important? Yes! A miracle! For sure, especially if you were the man cured. But the fact that Jesus sent him away immediately after he healed him, seems to tell us that he had other significant issues that needed to be addressed.

What comes to your mind when someone is called a Pharisee? Aren’t we implying they are self-centered, pompous, self-righteous, rigid, and unloving. You may have other adjectives to expand the list. We find folks we label as Pharisees somewhat repulsive. If possible we avoid associating with them.

When I receive information about former classmates from the high school or college I attended a few years ago, that have died, I page through the year books, look at their photo and pause to see and remember what I can about them. In the 1960 edition of the *Shield*, more commonly known as the Milwaukee Lutheran High School yearbook, I ran across two quotes supposedly attributed to two members of our graduating class. These quotes were part of brief paragraphs located beneath their senior class photos. One read, “I’m not conceited because then I wouldn’t be perfect.” The other, “I am the most humble person in the class.” Knowing both of these classmates, I was surprised at the quote attributed to the one, but not so much by the other. What remains of my long term memory reminds me that one of those classmates always seemed to have difficulty remembering that there was no letter I in the word TEAM. What a Pharisee, I thought. My prayer at that time – “Thank you God that I am not like that guy!” That kind of thinking only leads to the realization that I too am a Pharisee.

In our text, the Pharisees were doing what they did best, watching. They watched closely to see if Jesus would break one of their rules. It was not a rule of God, but of men. The rule stated, “Thou shalt not heal on the Sabbath.” That was merely one rule of the hundreds they added to God’s law and insisted everyone follow.

The Pharisees were also rather quick to judge and to condemn others. They observed and nitpicked at the behavior of Jesus. They wanted him to slip up so they could condemn him as a sinner. They taught that salvation was the result of God’s mercy plus man’s obedience. As soon as they included obedience in the equation, that became the thing they emphasized more and more, and God’s grace received at best, lip service. Most of their time was spent discussing their rules and how to live a better life. God’s forgiveness got little or no mention in their conversations.

Jesus also condemned them for their self-righteousness. As he put it in today’s Gospel lesson, they were always choosing the highest place. They felt they were the best people who deserved to sit in the best seats. Even Jesus’ own disciples had

established their own pecking order regarding seating, hadn't they? The Pharisees trusted in their own obedience and moral progress. They naturally looked upon themselves as mature and spiritual people. So it was easy for them to look down upon "sinners" such as tax collectors and prostitutes.

Once you are sitting in the highest place, at least in your mind, there is no reason to repent. So the Pharisees paid little attention to the message of John the Baptist and to Jesus, who said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!" The Pharisees also rejected the forgiveness offered in Baptism. Why should they need forgiveness when they were not big sinners like other people? They were doing fine, or so they thought.

So who are the real Pharisees today? Well, look to your left and to your right and in front of you and behind you. They are everywhere and perhaps you might find the biggest one you know by looking in the mirror. Over the years I have heard members or former members say to me, "I don't go to church anymore because it's just full of Pharisees." You know, all of us are more willing to trust our own obedience than trust the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. All of us sometimes soften the law's perfect demands so that we can say we have kept them. All of us are natural born Pharisees. If someone wants to call us Pharisees for these reasons, we can gladly and repentantly say "Yes, I am a Pharisee."

But by God's grace, we have received the gifts of repentance and faith from the Holy Spirit. God's Word has shown us that we are indeed sinful human beings, unable to save ourselves with our own self-righteousness, unable to heal ourselves from the cancer of sin and very much in need of a Savior. When we truly recognize this, we can't do anything but fall on our knees and confess our sins before God and beg for His mercy. We choose the lowest place for ourselves when we call ourselves sinners who deserve eternal punishment.

The humble and repentant person knows that he needs help. He seeks God's grace and mercy in Christ knowing that the only merit and worthiness that profits him is Christ's and not his own.

This is the kind of God you have: A God who is mighty, yet who took on human weakness: A God who cannot suffer, yet He did; a God who cannot be resisted in His power, yet a God who was and is still, rejected by men. You have a God "who made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross."

When He was lifted on the cross, He lifted you out of sin and death. But there is even more. He has also lifted you up to the highest place. He sits at the highest seat in glory, at the right hand of the Father. Soon, He will call out to you, "Friend, come up higher." Then you will ascend to where He is, and sit in the glorious place where you shall see God face to face. There's even more. There is an eternal banquet that He has earned for you by His suffering when He humbled himself even lower than you ever could. By His blood He has bought you glory and honor, instead of the shame at the lowest place that you deserve.

My dear friends, by God's amazing grace, know your place, the lowest place that you have established for yourselves and highest place because of the all availing sacrifice of your savior, Jesus Christ. Cling to His promises, live in His forgiveness, consider others better than yourselves, and boast only in Christ who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Amen.

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