The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

18 September, Anno Domini 2016

St. Luke 14:1-11

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

Today’s texts hold before us what should be the most incredible freedom - humility and selflessness. What joy to live a life of sacrifice spent in service to your neighbor rather than constantly worrying about yourself. What freedom to not be obsessed with how great we are or at least seem to be! What freedom to be able to be genuinely happy when your neighbor succeeds and you don’t. Today, Christ teaches us again that you don’t have to worry about how wonderful or cool or tough or put-together or well-dressed you are because your Heavenly Father loves you. He doesn’t demand or expect that you be great. He isn’t waiting for you to impress Him and earn His approval. He loves you dearly because you are His baptized child. You wear the glorious robe of Christ’s righteousness! You are precious to Him and He has freely given you the beauty and perfection and greatness of Jesus.

And yet how our sinful nature wars against this gift of God. Every fiber of our being wants to be great and accomplish great things. We love to be known and recognized. We love it when people fawn over our accomplishments and achievements. How many hours, how much energy, time, and money do you spend trying desperately to make yourself better? How much do you worry about being all that you can be? How much do you push your children to always strive for better - better grades, better performances, better behavior? We are raised to believe that vulnerability is a liability. We want to avoid weakness and brokenness and work feverishly to make it something else. We hate suffering and being brought to nothing. We fear the exposure. It’s the way of the flesh. Books, podcasts, television shows, and even many pulpits have become ever-flowing fountains of wisdom on how to make yourself more impressed with yourself. And they would have you believe that only then, when you have become this uber human, then you can be happy. Make yourself successful, wealthy, fit, stoic, organized and then you will be loved and revered. Be great and people will envy you.

And it isn’t enough for us to be enslaved to this notion. We then inflict the same bondage on our spouses, our children, our friends, and our family. We demand that they also have to attain to this artificial level of achievement and goodness. We burden their consciences with the terrible thought that they won’t receive our love or care until they have reached all our goals and met all our expectations, until they fit the image of what we want them to be.

Repent. Unmask the pride that afflicts every fiber of our being. Your sinful flesh knows how to concern itself with only one thing - itself. The devil would have you believe that you must be better, smarter, faster, stronger than someone else in order to be of any value in the world and in the eyes of God. You have to be the charmer at every get together. You have to have all the answers when people come to you for help. You have to have a trim waistline and be able to bench press a car in order to deem yourself healthy. You have to be fashionable. Your house has to look like something from HGTV. You have to draw a paycheck in order to be considered a contributing member of society. We all alike want to exalt ourselves and take the places of honor in our families, in our jobs, and even in the church. We humbly make sure that everyone is aware of our great sacrifices and hard work.

What pride can’t understand and in fact hates is mercy because mercy and compassion and pity are for weak people. Mercy is shown to those who have no strength, no ability, and have done nothing to deserve it. Pride sees the poor man with dropsy and is more concerned with its own self-righteousness than having compassion and healing the man. Pride sees the neighbor as little more than a ladder to climb in order to get to the higher seat. Pride sees depression and thinks the solution is to just get over it. Pride sees poverty and says “get a job.” Pride demands payment for wrongs suffered. Pride sees marriage and children as an intrusion because they are messy and they demand sacrifice and selflessness. And the pride that hates and withholds mercy from others reveals that terrible truth that we hate mercy for ourselves. It loathes the insinuation that it can’t improve and fix what is broken by itself. It can’t fathom the idea of humility and taking the lower seat so that another might be exalted. Pride robs us of God’s greatest gift - the mercy of Jesus Christ who humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross to exalt us. The true end of pride, regardless of what the world and your flesh would have you believe, is misery and condemnation.

As God teaches us in His Word time and again, the kingdom of God is nothing at all like the kingdom of men. The world may praise you when you do well for yourself but God is unimpressed. The kingdom of God lay nestled in a bed of hay, was rejected by His family, and abandoned by His friends. The kingdom of God was despised by the outwardly pious and righteous. The kingdom of God was willingly and gladly stripped and beaten and ridiculed and hung exposed on the cross for all the world to see and scorn - for you. The kingdom of God knows nothing of pride or self-promotion. He gave no thought to Himself or His desires. His every thought was to obey His Father’s will which meant that His every thought was bent on saving you from the dung heap of your pride and the eternal judgment that awaited you. The Son of God gladly took the lowest place, your place, humbling Himself to the point of death, so that you might be exalted with Him and sit at the right hand of the Father.

Make no mistake about it. Jesus came for sinners. He came for losers and rejects. He came for misfits and outcasts. He came for the weak, the broken, and the hurting. He came for those who don’t think they need Him and those who know they aren’t worthy of Him. He didn’t come to show you how to attain righteousness on your own, but to give it to you as a free gift. He sees and knows what your flesh doesn’t want to admit - you are weak, broken, and unable to fix yourself. Jesus isn’t in the business of fixing you or empowering you or laying out the program so that you can do it yourself. He’s in the business of redeeming you, forgiving you, bearing the full burden of all your sins. He covered Himself in your shame and guilt, He wore the filth of your loveless words, your prideful hatred, your merciless demands placed upon your hurting neighbor. Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who used His true, divine greatness - His immeasurable love and compassion - to save us instead of lording over us how imperfect and wretched and weak we are. He has born your sin and death to the grave and left them buried there. Baptized into Him you have been resurrected with Him to the right hand of the Father, exalted to the highest heavens, and been given a seat at the King’s table where no one less than the king Himself feeds you with His own Body and Blood. But if you are too good for that, if you will storm the gates of heaven with your own merits, if you will not receive salvation as a beggar and a helpless child who can offer nothing, if you refuse that same mercy to others who, like you are in need of unmerited mercy, who cannot help themselves, whose minds, hearts, and bodies are broken, then you can be assured only of this, that you know nothing of the love and mercy and compassion God has shown you and you will not taste its fruits. And in its absence, you will know only the torment of God’s wrath and justice now and for all eternity.

Do not run from humility in a vain attempt to glorify yourself. You will only find yourself humiliated on the last day as you stand before the judgment seat of Christ and receive the just desserts of your pride. Instead, know the great joy and freedom of Jesus’ humility, who took no glory for Himself, though He was worthy of all of it, and instead offered the entirety of His life for you and for the world. You are nothing on your own. But in Christ, you are nothing less than a child of the God of heaven and earth. Come, friend. Come, dear child. Move up higher to the place at your Heavenly Father’s table that Christ, your brother and Savior, has prepared for you.

May the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.