

“It came to pass [that] Jesus went into a house of a certain ruler of the Pharisees, to the eating of the Sabbath meal...” This was a great weekly feast that the Pharisees, no doubt, took great pride in hosting. This was no ordinary dinner party. This was the weekly, Friday night, Sabbath cedar meal, a solemn ceremonial dinner that was a weekly celebration of the greater Passover cedar meal. There was spiritual significance to this meal. It was preparation for the hearing of God's Word the next day in the Synagogue. It was a small weekly reminder of God's grace to His children given in the Passover and Exodus. It is sort of like how we talk of our weekly Divine Service here each week being a little Easter and a little Christmas and, even more, a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come.

But lo and behold, there he was — a stranger who certainly did not belong at the dinner party. He was actually worse than a stranger. He was ceremonially unclean and ran the risk of ruining the Sabbath for the invited guests. The man had a disease called dropsy — what we today would call edema. This is usually a result of congestive heart failure. His body was retaining too much fluid which was causing parts of his body to swell and become severely deformed.

Today, doctors would simply give a diuretic drug. Back then, there was no help. One just lived with it as it became worse. The Jews considered such a person to be no better than someone with leprosy — to be unclean, unholy before God.

How did this man get into the house of the ruler of the Pharisees? It seems like he just appeared there “Behold” there he is. It would be like hosting a party in your home and all of a sudden a stranger just invites himself in. The appearance of the man with dropsy must have been a shock and surprise — but not to Jesus, of course.

Here was a man who was as low as one could go. He didn't belong. He was cursed, unholy, without hope. Notice that the stranger never says one word nor does he do anything. But the Holy Spirit gathered him in, inviting him on the scene into what becomes Jesus' own Sabbath feast. Just as suddenly as the humble man with dropsy appears, equally as suddenly Jesus takes over as the host of the Sabbath meal.

Jesus responds by getting up to teach. This is what Jesus does at His meals. He speaks His Word and teaches to the invited guests before they are fed. He speaks to the ones who are humble and don't belong there, like our humble man with dropsy, and likewise to the ones who feel important and exalted. You know them: the ones who have been around all their life, the ones who always know each other and are always inviting each other, those who always go straight to the head of the table, assuming they have the place of honor because of their own deeds, who have quite a nice clique going, all the while not noticing their neighbors in need.

Jesus' teaching of the Law was this: "Is it permissible on the Sabbath to heal, or not?" Should I give relief for this man's suffering, or not, on the Sabbath? Jesus asks.

How cutting this question is to everyone. To the man with dropsy, it was a reminder that he did not belong, that he was unable to help himself, that his body was ravaged by the effects of sin, and that his life was dependent upon the mercy he knew he needed. Without saying a word, he was banking on Jesus being merciful and gracious, as He had been to so many others He had healed. He was there trusting on Jesus to act for him.

The question puts the Pharisees into a bind. If they say "No" to Jesus' question, they are denying a neighbor in need the help he so clearly needs. By saying "No" to Jesus, they would be seen as either the most heartless of people or make them liars and hypocrites (for how would they respond when it was their time of need.) If they say "yes, it is permissible," they would make worthless years and generations of layers of self-created traditions to attempt to follow God's law, in this instance in terms of honoring the Sabbath day. Of course they would do what was necessary when it came to their own need.

They remained silent. They were made unable to respond to Jesus' teaching. The devil in the details had their tongue.

That's what happens to those of us who dare to go to the head of the table on our own accord. Sooner or later, God's righteous Law reflects back to show just how much of a hypocrite and liar you are. Sooner or later, the real host of the feast is going to come by and call on you to repent of taking the first place at the table at your own invitation. The host is going to call on you to repent of being so self-righteous, to repent of handling everything yourself, to repent of wanting to do everything according to your own rules and by your own wisdom. He is going to call you down from your lofty perch and put you where you belong, at the low end of the table.

We need that change. Due to our sinful flesh, we constantly need to be reminded of our inability to be righteous in God's sight by our own power and strength. You simply have no ability to follow, much less add to, rules for being pious or religious or devout. Every day you are reminded that you are not the host of God's feast. You are merely the guest. You need to repent and humble yourselves. As a matter of fact, you need to realize that you are the man with dropsy. You are the man who not belong, who has no place at the feast, on your own account.

It is at this point that Jesus speaks His precious, life-giving Word in our ear. "Friend, move up higher." Then, God's glory is yours. Jesus does for you what He does for the man with dropsy. "Then he took him and healed him."

Jesus takes a hold of you in Holy Baptism, you who have no standing before Him resting in your diseased, sinful flesh, unholy, unclean, without hope. Jesus takes you up into Him and makes you well with His life-giving waters. And in His Word of Absolution, He forgives you. It is as simple as that. Then, He invites you to process up to His table and take the place of honor at His rail, kneel down and humbly receive His ongoing meal of salvation and healing and forgiveness and comfort. Here, in His Holy Word of Absolution and in His Sacrament, Jesus gives you His glory.

The one who did not belong, the one who rightfully claimed the seat of honor at the Father's right hand, has come down and taken on sin, that which breaks down the body and leads to dropsy and cancer and sickness, and takes his humble place at the dinner party of sinners. He who delivered Israel in the Passover delivers you in his becoming man and suffering sin and death for you. He who died innocently on your behalf could not be held in the tomb. The hold of sin and death is broken forever.

Now, in His Baptism, you belong to Him. He is the host of the eternal feast where He steps up and not only makes you feel welcome, but makes you into one who belongs. He makes you into one who can stand confident and made well by his grace. He gives you the ability to tell the devil and this world to take a hike with their doubts and temptations. I am God's own child. I'll gladly say it. I am baptized into Christ. I am fed by Him. I am made well, forgiven, and given life. This is how you can now speak.

Now, friends, as you gather weekly you come and process up for your great and eternal benefit, up to the head of this table, and receive your Lord's great gifts, His gifts delivered here for you, his gifts that make you well, forgive you, and send you on your way. Your gifts that are not earned, but freely given, for you need them and your life is dependent upon the mercy of Him who alone gives you forgiveness, life, and salvation and honors you before the Father in heaven.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.