
GOSPEL FOR THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Luke 14:1-11

One Sabbath, when He went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching Him carefully. And behold, there was a man before Him who had dropsy. And 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. And He said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" And they could not reply to these things.

Now He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

1. We need to treat two things in this Gospel reading. The first one is something common in all Gospel readings. The second one, now, is something particular. The first, which is common to all Gospel readings, is that it shows who the Lord Christ is and what we are to expect from Him; and therein faith and love are pointed out to us.

2. Faith is pointed out in the fact that this man with dropsy had previously heard the Gospel, namely, that the Lord Christ was a kind, good, and beneficent man who helps everyone and lets no one go away unhelped and un comforted. If he had not heard this about the Lord's reputation, he would not have run after Him into the house. He must indeed have had some knowledge about Him, have heard something great about Him, and have believed what he had heard.

3. This Gospel, as was said, must first be preached and heard before we believe, namely, that God is so kind and merciful to us that He has sent this Son down from heaven to help us. The conscience must hear and believe these words. Otherwise, even if all creatures were kind to us, that would not help us if God were ungracious and unfriendly toward us. On the other hand, if God is pleased with us, then no creature can harm us, as St. Paul says to the Romans [8:31]: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Let death, devil, hell, and all creatures be angry, but they can do us no harm at all. Therefore, this Gospel reading must graciously show us this man who is God. From this our heart derives faith and a cheerful confidence that God will help us both in dying and in living.

4. We also see this in the man with dropsy, who had previously heard about the kindness of Christ, and thus believed that He would also demonstrate His kindness and goodness in him. It would have been impossible for him to be helped if he had not believed. The Gospel sounds throughout the whole world, but not everyone believes it. The Pharisees also sat there, saw these things with their eyes, and grasped that He was a kind man, but they did not believe in Him. Therefore, it could neither improve, comfort, nor help them. This has been said about faith.

5. Then, we also see love in Christ, which proceeds to produce fruit not for itself, but for others, as true love does. This has been said in general about the first part of this Gospel reading.

6. Now, in particular, this Gospel reading teaches us what we must necessarily have, if we are to make use of the laws which regulate the external, bodily matters and affairs which are to be kept in the Church. If we want to act correctly, we must deal very prudently and cautiously with these things, especially where there are weak and timid consciences. There is nothing more tender in heaven and on earth which can less tolerate joking around than the conscience. People say that the eye is very tender, but the conscience is still more tender and sensitive. This is why we see here and there how gently the apostles dealt with consciences, so that they did not perhaps disturb them with laws.

7. Now, because we cannot live without law, and yet there is danger in dealing with law since the conscience quickly sides with it and gets entangled in it, we will say a little about how far such laws should be promoted. People certainly say in the proverb: "Much depends on having a good interpreter." This is especially true when we are dealing with laws. If there is no one who knows how to explain and discern the law correctly, then it is difficult and dangerous to deal with it. We have previously experienced how consciences were severely afflicted and only forced into hell and damnation under the

tyrannical governance of the papal laws. Thus there is a great danger if people do not know how to moderate and manage the laws correctly.

8. Therefore, we should know and keep this rule (which Christ Himself gave and also shows in this account) that all laws, divine and human, which concern external activity should bind no further than love extends. Love should be the interpretation of all laws. If this is not so, then it is already over, and the law—no matter what it is—quickly causes harm. It is stated in the pope's book: "If a law goes against love, it should immediately cease."¹ This is, in short, said about divine and human commands. The reason is that all laws were given only to support love, as Paul says, "Love is the fulfillment of the Law" [Rom. 13:10]. Likewise: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" [Rom. 13:8]. If I love my neighbor, then I help him, protect him, honor him, and do what I would want done to me.

9. Now, because the laws altogether support love, they must immediately cease if they would run against love. Therefore, everything here depends on a good sovereign who interprets the laws in accordance with love.

Take an example from the life of priests and monks. They are bound in the law to say Mass at this time and to pray at that time. Accordingly, if a poor man should come and ask them for some service at the time when they are to say Mass or to pray, they would say: "Go away! Now I must say Mass and attend to my prayers." They would do the poor man no service, even if he should die.

The most holy monks and Carthusians,² who observe their laws and statutes so strictly, have also done this. Even if they saw the soul leaving a poor man and they could easily help him, they still would not do it. If they were Christians, they should be ready to interpret all their laws or their statutes in accordance with love and say: "Go away, Mass! Go away, Sacrament! Go away, prayer! Go away, orders! I will gladly dispense with these works. I will serve my neighbor. The love which I practice toward my neighbor is golden compared to the works."

10. We should manage all laws in the way that love shows, so that we keep them if they serve and benefit our neighbor but abandon them if they would cause harm. Take a coarse example. The father of the house has an arrangement in his house that he serves now fish, now wine, now meat, now beer, according to what he has and can obtain. Perhaps one of his servants becomes sick and cannot drink beer or wine and cannot eat meat or fish, and the father of the house would give him nothing else but would say, "No, my laws and arrangement show that I will give you nothing else"—what kind of a father

¹ Luther attributes this statement to a Pope Leo in *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), LW 31:108.

² See Sermon for Easter Sunday, fn. 11.

would he be? He really should be given hellebore to purge his brain! If he were a reasonable man, he really should say, "It is certainly true that my law and arrangement demands that we eat meat or fish today; nevertheless, because this food does not agree with you, eat whatever pleases you." Look at how the father of the house manages and bends his laws according to love! Thus all laws should be managed and bent in accordance with love for our neighbor.

11. Accordingly, when in the Old Testament the Law was not understood nor moderated in accordance with love, God gave to the people the prophets, who were to interpret the Law not in accordance with its severity, but in accordance with love. We have an example of this in Moses himself. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt back and forth through the wilderness for forty years. Now, Abraham had been commanded that every male was to be circumcised on the eighth day [Gen. 17:12]. This command was clear and had to be done. Yet Moses relaxed this command and circumcised no one during the whole forty years [Josh. 5:2-8].

12. Now, who gave Moses the authority not to keep this law, which God Himself had given to Abraham and earnestly commanded? He had that authority because he knew how to manage the laws out of love for his neighbor. In other words, the laws must serve him and the people, and he [serves] the people, not the Law. During the journey, they had to march every day dressed for battle. Therefore, so that they would be all the more ready to travel, and would not be hindered, he relaxes this [law about] circumcision and says, "Even though this law has been commanded and we must keep it, yet we can manage it in the way love requires." Thus he delayed circumcision until they finished the journey. All laws should be explained in this way in accordance with love and necessity. Therefore, here it depends only on a good interpreter.

13. The same thing happened with David when he ate the consecrated bread, which no one was permitted to eat except the priests, as Christ Himself often cited this example in the Gospels [1 Sam. 21:6; Matt. 12:4; Mark 2:26; Luke 6:4]. David was not consecrated, nor were his attendants. Yet when he was hungry, he went to Ahimelech and asked him to give him and his people something to eat. Ahimelech said: "I really have nothing except this holy bread." David took it and confidently ate it. Now, did David sin against God's command, which openly forbade those who were not priests to eat the holy bread? No. Why not? Because necessity compelled him, and he had nothing else to eat. Thus necessity and love cancel all laws.

14. So also here in the Gospel reading Christ heals the man with dropsy on the Sabbath, even though in the Old Testament the commandment to keep the Sabbath was very severe. Look at what the Pharisees do here! They lie in wait to see what the Lord will do. They would not have helped the man

with dropsy, even if they could have helped him with a spoonful of wine. Christ, however, interferes with the Law, cracks it, and sets free the poor man with dropsy. He publicly shows a reason why He did this by saying: "It is certainly commanded to observe the Sabbath; but when it concerns love, then the Law must yield." He gives them a coarse example with which they must agree and concludes in such a way that they can answer Him nothing. He says,

"Which of you, if your ox or donkey falls into a well, will not immediately pull it out on the Sabbath?" [Luke 14:5]

15. It is as if He means to say: "You fools, are you not mad and foolish? If you do this for an ox or a donkey, you should much more do this for your neighbor, when it is necessary to help him, without any consideration that it happens on the Sabbath." "The Sabbath," as He says in another place, "was made for the sake of man, and not man for the sake of the Sabbath. Thus the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" [Mark 2:27-28].

17. Christ deals with the Sabbath here in a way that has it serve people. We should proceed in the same way with all such laws and observe them only so far as they serve love. If they do not serve love, they are at once to be broken, whether they are God's or man's commands. Take an example from our former errors in the papacy. Suppose someone vowed to go to St. James.³ Now, the command is written down: "Whoever vows something should keep his vow" [Ps. 76:11; Eccl. 5:4]. He has at home wife and child, servants and household; what should he do? Should he proceed and go to St. James, or should he remain at home and support wife and child? You decide what is most necessary and what fits best with love. I think that it is more necessary for him to stay at home, work, attend to his livelihood, and look after his wife, children, and domestic servants. With his pilgrimage to St. James (even if it were not otherwise incorrect and idolatry), he would accomplish little good. He would even spend and neglect more than gain.

18. A second example. A pregnant woman has vowed not to eat meat on Wednesdays, as many foolish women have done. This woman possibly brings great danger on her fetus and on her body. Now, the fools, the father confessors, come along and say: "Dear daughter, it is written in Scripture: 'Whatever is vowed must be observed.' This is God's command, which you must surely observe." The good woman is soon taken captive by this and bound in her conscience. She goes away, keeps her vow, and harms both herself and her fetus. Both those who teach her this and she herself are in the wrong, because she did not esteem love more than the vow, by which she did God no service

3 See sermon for St. John's Day, December 27, on John 21:19-24, fn. 1.

nor pleased Him; rather, she angered Him by keeping her vow. Therefore, we should say: "Look, you are carrying a fetus. You must serve this fetus and stop this nonsense, so that nothing worse happens." All laws end in love.

19. This is the way priests, monks, and nuns, along with their vows, should be handled. When they say, "Yes, we have vowed, and it is written: 'If you have vowed, then keep it to the Lord your God' [Ps. 76:11]," then say: "Look, there is also a commandment: 'You shall serve your neighbor' [Matt. 22:39]. However, in your estate⁴ you cannot serve your neighbor. You cannot even live within it without sin. Therefore, confidently leave your estate and take up an estate in which you can serve, help, and aid your neighbor. Do not look at the vow which you made not to God your Lord, but to the devil; not for the salvation and happiness of your soul, but for the damnation and destruction of both body and soul."

20. If only you are a Christian, you have here the authority to dispense with all commandments, if they would hinder you in love, as Christ here does. Even though it is the Sabbath, He confidently goes ahead and helps this man with dropsy. He then points out sufficient and plausible reasons for doing this work on the Sabbath.

21. There is still a point in the Gospel reading about sitting at the head [of the table], which we must touch on a little bit. When the Lord noticed how the guests, the Pharisees, chose to sit at the head, He spoke this parable to them:

"When someone invites you to a wedding, do not sit at the head, since he has perhaps invited someone more honorable than you, and then the one who invited you and him will come and say to you: 'Friend, yield to this man,' and with shame you will have to sit at the foot," etc. [Luke 14:8-9]

22. This parable unfolds the Pharisees' and scribes' command and precept that we should honor the great and powerful by yielding and letting them sit at the head. Christ here reverses this and says, "Whoever wants to be the greatest should sit at the foot." Christ does not want a peasant to sit above a prince; that is not fitting. The Lord is speaking here not about worldly but about spiritual governance, which requires humility from all. Even though the world and external governance hold that the leaders should sit at the head, this does not apply to the spiritual governance. It has nothing to do with it, for it deals only with the heart. Christ does not make mayors and judges, princes or lords, but commends these to reason, which deals in external matters. There must be magistrates, and honor is due to them because of

⁴ See sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity on Mark 7:31-37, fn. 3.

their estate. However, the spiritual governance holds that whoever wants to be great must humble himself.

23. This is why the Lord said to His disciples who were quarreling about which of them would be the greatest: "Worldly kings rule, and people call the powerful 'gracious lords.' You, however, are not like that. Rather, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the noblest like the servant" [Luke 22:25-26]. Then He makes an example of Himself and asks: "Who is the greatest: the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at the table? I, however, am among you as one who serves" [Luke 22:27]. In another place He said, "If someone wants to be powerful, regard him as your servant, and whoever wants to be noblest should be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a redemption for many" [Matt. 20:26-28].

24. Our Papists have explained this passage, twisted this Gospel reading, and said, "Yes, the pope should certainly be the least or the youngest, sit at the foot, and serve others, but this is to happen in the heart." They have devised a way in which with the heart they can sit at the foot, be the least, and serve others. Then, however, they attacked emperor, kings, and princes, and even trampled them underfoot, just as if emperor, kings, princes, and lords should not also have in their hearts this Christian humility of which the Lord here speaks.⁵ Thus, with their explanation, they produce a carnal, worldly pomp and arrogance. If they had humility in their hearts, they would demonstrate it with their deeds. Christ is not only speaking here about outward humility, for the inward is the source of the outward. If it is not in the heart, then it will scarcely come out in the body.

25. Therefore, the Gospel wants to have all, however and whoever they are, altogether humble, so that no one is superior to others, unless urged and elevated to that by regular authority. This is what the Lord wants with this parable which He speaks to all and which all should do, whether they are high or low. This is why He also rebukes the Pharisees and great lords who want to sit at the head, strive for it, and always choose the highest places. However, they ought to accept this if they are chosen for it by regular authority, just as if they were pulled up to it by the hair.

26. Now, however, they go ahead and mix spiritual governance into the worldly and think that it is enough if they are humble at heart, for then they certainly sit at the head! Yes, indeed, the humility of the heart must flow into action and be shown. Otherwise the humility is false. This is why each one

⁵ By the sixth century, it was customary that the emperor kissed the pope's feet when they met. By the early eleventh century, the custom of foot-kissing had become an established ritual in the ceremony for the papal coronation of emperors. Cf. Luther's preface to Barnes, *How Popes Adrian IV and Alexander III Showed Good Faith to Emperor Barbarossa* (1545), LW 60:347-51.

should sit at the foot, put himself under the feet of others, and not move up unless urged to do so. If he does this, he does well. If he does not do this, he will come to nothing. This is what the Lord wants as He concludes this parable by saying,

"For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." [Luke 14:11]

27. St. Augustine makes a comment here which I wish he had omitted, for it stinks of Adam's vessel. He says, "A sovereign should not humble himself so greatly that respect for his authority is weakened." This is spoken in a pagan and worldly way, not a Christian way, but we can certainly forgive it in such a man. Even in the saints not everything is perfect yet.

28. The summary of this Gospel reading is that love and necessity rule over all laws. There should be no law which is not bent and managed in accordance with love. If it is not, then it should be done away with, even if an angel from heaven had made it [cf. Gal. 1:8]. All this is to serve to strengthen our hearts and consciences. Accordingly, the Lord Himself teaches us how we are to humble ourselves and submit to others. However, we have said enough in previous postils about what this virtue of true humility is.