

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

Text: Luke 14:11. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

It's been seventeen weeks now since the end of the festival half of the Church Year, where we trace the life of our Lord Jesus Christ from His holy nativity, to His precious death and burial, to His glorious resurrection and ascension, to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But after that, it's like we're set adrift, floating aimlessly from week to week, from reading to disconnected reading, in this vast green sea of Trinity, praying for the day when we will wash up on the shores of Advent once more.

But what if it's not so aimless? What if, like a theme park water ride, we've been on a track this whole time, making our Jungle Cruise toward a definite destination? The service of Matins, I think, holds the key. You've probably noticed that the antiphon that comes before and after the Venite will change every so often. At the start of the summer we were singing, "The Lord has gathered us in the true faith." Then, for a while, it was, "The Lord has enlightened us in the true faith." And now, at least for a few more weeks, it's, "The Lord has sanctified us in the true faith." And if that sounds familiar, it should! It's straight out of Luther's Small Catechism. After confessing our faith in God's only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the Second Article of the Creed, we say we believe in the Third that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth—the same Holy Spirit who was poured out on Pentecost. Holy Trinity, then, and the many Sundays afterward explore this work of the Lord and Giver of life, who has gathered us into Christ's Body, the Church, like the netfuls of fish in the Gospel lesson for Trinity 5 (Luke 5:1-11), enlightened us with His Word, as He opened the ears and loosed the tongue of the deaf-mute in Mark 7, the Gospel lesson for Trinity 12 (vv. 31-37), and sanctified us in the true faith, that is, made *us* holy, set apart, a people for His own possession.

Which brings us to today's Gospel lesson from Luke 14, where Jesus, talking a bit about this sanctified life, says that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 11). Humility, we could say, is the honest recognition of one's lowly status. In the Magnificat, for example, Mary, the mother of Jesus, magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God her Savior, for, "He has looked on the humble estate of His servant" (Luke 1:48). She knows exactly who and what she is in relation to God. Those who were invited to the banquet with Jesus, on the other hand, did *not*. They refused to help a man who was sick and chose the best seats at the

table—why? Because they *saw themselves differently*. They looked in the mirror, and they saw greatness. They saw importance.

They saw a *fantasy*. They may have been wise in their *own eyes*, but in their hearts they were fools. They thought that by exalting themselves they could attain their heart's desire, which was to be seen by others. It's for this reason that they would practice their righteousness before others, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, trumpeting their tithes to the needy, praying their long and complicated prayers in public, making sure that everyone knew by the sullen looks on their faces when they were fasting (cf. Matt. 6:1-18).

But they were all of them deceived. This wasn't humility. This was *pride*. And pride is nothing but a delusion of grandeur. It is, in the wise words of King Solomon (cf. Prov. 25:6-7), putting yourself forward in the king's presence, only to be told, "You don't belong up here," and having to fall back to a lower place.

I've heard it said that a better name for the Fall into sin would be the Reach, since that was the devil's temptation to Eve: to reach up and take for herself not only the fruit of the forbidden tree but a *more exalted place*. Her eyes would be opened, and she would be like God, knowing good and evil. Of course, it was all a lie. She had already been made in the image of God, and all she had to do was *wait* to receive the fruit of the tree of life, and she would have eaten of it and lived forever.

But, as we all know, waiting is hard. And taking, well, that's easy. So, why wait, when you can take? Why settle for the life of a servant, when you can seize the crown and be king?

Because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. Everyone who attempts to make himself something will, in the end, be reduced to nothing, as we also heard in the opening words of today's psalm (2:1-6):

Why do the nations rage
 and the peoples plot in vain?
 The kings of the earth set themselves,
 and the rulers take counsel together,
 against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying,
 "Let us burst their bonds apart
 and cast away their cords from us."
 He who sits in the heavens laughs;
 the Lord holds them in derision.
 Then He will speak to them in his wrath,
 and terrify them in his fury, saying,

“As for Me, I have set my King
on Zion, My holy hill.”

You see, there is a King, and it's not you. And that may be one of the hardest lessons for us to learn, even as Christians. We want to be set above others. We want to be seen, just like the Pharisees. And the best way we know how is to *take* that recognition for ourselves. Only, the places of honor today aren't found at the dinner table. They're found in places like the internet, where you can present whatever spotless image of yourself you wish. They're found in our conversations in which we tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, and hurt his reputation. They're found in the heavy burdens we lay upon others and the speck that we can't *help* but point out in our brother's eye. They are even found in our thoughts, imagining evil in our hearts against our neighbor.

But these are merely delusions of grandeur. We are simply not as great as we think we are. In fact, we are worse. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” says the prophet Jeremiah (17:9). “Who can discern his errors?” David asks rhetorically in Psalm 19 (v. 12). And we all know the words of Romans 3: “None is righteous, no, not one...For there is no distinction: for all have sinned” (vv. 10, 23). We are not so different from the rest of our fallen race. Which means we don't deserve a place at the head of the table any more than the person we think deserves it *least*.

And yet, Jesus says, “he who humbles himself will be exalted.” It's not that *no one* will be exalted, but only those who are willing to *wait*; who, like the repentant tax collector, stand at a distance and say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13); who take the lowest place at the table, not as a clever trick or strategy, but as a sincere confession before God that *that's where they belong*. Honesty, it turns out, really is the best policy. What does it say in Psalm 32? “I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (v. 5). God sees you back there in the corner. He's not forgotten about you. He's the One who *invited* you! And at the proper time, He will exalt you. He will lift you up, and set you in a place of honor, near to Him, because He loves you, and He sent His Son Jesus to die for you.

So, “Have *this* mind among yourselves,” Paul says in Philippians 2, referring to Christ, “who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (vv. 5-8). There is no one higher than Jesus; and yet, He took the lowest place, becoming sin itself, suffering

shame and embarrassment, that you might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

“Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9). Good for Him, right? Yes; and good for *you*. For you have received that name in your Baptism. He has marked you with His holy cross and invited you to feast at His Table, where there is but one kind of unworthy guest: those who do not believe. But if you understand who and what you are in relation to God in Christ Jesus, then you are welcome. You’re a friend, an honored guest, joining angels and saints in a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come.

And on the Last Day He will raise you and all the dead, saying to you and all believers in Christ, “Friends, come up higher. Come up out of your graves and inherit the place prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Come up and receive the crown of righteousness. I declare it to be yours. For you are mine. And that’s no delusion. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In † Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo gloria