

Sunday morning rolls around once again. You've brushed your teeth and eaten your breakfast, in whichever order you prefer; you've showered, gotten dressed, and you've even walked the dog. All that's left is to grab your keys and go to your vehicle when the phone rings. Your mom has rolled her ankle, maybe sprained it, getting ready to meet you at church, and she thinks she needs to see a doctor. It's in a lot of pain and she can't walk on it, let alone safely drive on it. Can you take her?

Can you? This isn't your mother asking anymore. This is Jesus. Can you take your mom to the hospital? You know you won't be in and out of emerge in the 30 minutes before service starts. You won't even make it to church by the time pastor Scott has finished his sermon. If he preaches long you might make communion, but there's no guarantee of that.

Do you fulfill the third commandment or the fourth? Do you remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy or do you honour your mother? Best case scenario (and I'm being facetious here) is that her neighbour is unchristian and therefore not attending Church on Sunday, so they can drive her because the worst you'd be doing is ruining their sleep in.

No, obviously the answer is you take your mother. We can answer this quickly, I hope. A lot quicker than the Pharisees, I'd suppose. In the beginning of the Gospel lesson, Jesus silences them with this situation, with a man in front of them with dropsy, like edema, the build up of water under the skin and the swelling of the joints. "Can you heal on the Sabbath?" They choose not to answer. So He forces the question by actually healing the man, and asks "If it were your son or your ox even, stuck in a well, would you not have been so merciful?" This time, they can't answer.

But before we get on our high horses about the Pharisees, know this. It's not that we're exceptionally kind and caring; it's that we care about Sabbath-keeping less. The commands of God, or at least how they'd interpreted them, were of utmost seriousness, and what Jesus was placing before them was an impossible situation, but one that He'd made all too likely with His second question. Do I keep the Sabbath or do I care for my possessions, especially my child? I can't keep them both.

And for one who believed in the utmost necessity of keeping every bit of God's Law, this becomes a nightmarish paradox. You cannot pick a right answer without also picking a wrong one.

And this is only the start of the Sabbath feast. After some awkward silence, and I'm sure some well-intended small talk about anything else, Jesus takes note of who decides to sit where and whom the guest has decided to invite as a whole, and He decides to tell some stories.

And the first one is very, very good advice. Should you ever want to avoid humiliation, don't take the seat of honour around the dinner table. Don't assume you're the guest intended to sit next to the birthday boy at Boston Pizza. In this day and age, we're far too uncomfortable with making others uncomfortable so no one would really say "can you scoot on down? I really wanted to chat with Michael over dinner." But everyone else around the table is thinking it. Best to avoid the awkward looks and the strange tension as the host talks with everyone else around you, all while forgetting to ask you how your day was. It's a much more honorable thing to assume you get the last corner seat, the one by the bathroom in the restaurant, and have the centre of attention invite you over to chat, and sit.

His second piece of advice makes much less sense to us. To the host of the day, he nearly chastises him for inviting those who are well to do, those who are his friends and might like to hang out with him for a second time. "Don't invite friends or brothers to your banquet but instead invite strangers who won't know where to send the invitation when they decided to host a feast, or even better yet invite those who never could pamper you as you do them at your party." Jesus recommends inviting those who would be left in life begging for food, much less throwing a banquet. Which, honestly this may have happened on this account, as we aren't told who the man with dropsy is. He made it in the front doors somehow and seems as though he would be fed (even if they had issues with Jesus healing him).

Jesus, here, is teaching about generosity. Do not only serve when you know you'll be served in return. Don't welcome those who will, or let alone can return the favour. To care for the least of these, those who cannot care in return, this is a blessing and it means you will be repaid in the resurrection.

Jesus tells these parables, parables about a wedding and a banquet, He tells them at a Sabbath feast. So you'd better believe that these are not simply tales to tweak our morality, stories to adjust the economy of man to be more humble and generous. It's certainly those, and so much more.

He begins on a Sabbath, He touches on a wedding, and ends at (or rather, we pause at) the resurrection of the just. All of this is descriptive of the kingdom of God, of His economy of giving and taking, and it gives a beautiful picture of how God invites and serves.

And all of it seeks to tear down the record-keeping we do to justify our existence. Do not seek to tally up your righteousness, presenting before God just how many Sabbaths you've kept, how many times you've refrained from using His name when you wanted to curse at a stubbed toe, how many times you've honoured your parents with your presence and respect and Mother's Day presents. Don't count it up, pretending that you can place before Him even a moderately righteous life. Don't think you, a sinner, can keep it all straight, let alone that you've actually done it.

That is, don't assume that you've come with such good standing that you might get to sit at the head table. It is so much better to sit at the farthest seat in the heavenly wedding banquet, minding your own business with whatever company you find yourself amongst and enjoying whatever is passed your way. Should the host deign it right to move you forward, so be it, but just to be invited is bliss. And to be humiliated would be horrific.

And the fact that you're invited at all is because the host calls out to those who cannot help themselves, who cannot return the favour. So don't pretend that it's because you've kept enough of the commandments or served the world enough love.

Christ alone, in His miracle and in His life, demonstrates these two parables, lives as perfect guest and perfect host, and what He does for the poor suffering man, He does for you as well.

The apostle Paul writes: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, 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 the cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name is above every other name.”

He ought to have been brought the best tribute, given the spot of highest honour, and He shouldn't have had to lift a single finger but instead should have been served the whole eternity through. And yet, out of love, He humbled Himself. He wrapped Himself in human flesh to serve, and He finds a man with dropsy and has mercy on him. He is perfectly fine taking the last seat at the table, or even taking up the dishes if there isn't a seat for Him—He has no issue if the well-offs look down on Him because He doesn't follow their etiquette, and instead He offers a banquet for all who couldn't throw their own (that is everyone!).

“Welcome to God's kingdom,” Christ says to His company. “Welcome to paradise unending; welcome to my Church.” Today you have been invited to feast at the table of One who was crucified so that you might have a spot rather than be turned away for your sin, because you can't keep your leger spotless, you can't keep the balances held up in righteousness. He takes your place, sitting among the outcasts, the condemned, so that you would sit in the place of honour, served even by Him, and He is not afraid to get His hands dirty and turn a few heads by stopping mid-feast to care for your needs of body, mind, and soul.

“Welcome,” He says. And then He invites you to do exactly the same, actually, He invites you to know that He is doing the exact same through you. You have been united with Christ, and therefore you serve as He serves, you invite as He invites. You have His humble and generous mind among you. It's

why our reading from Hebrews urges us “Be content with what you have for He has said ‘Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.’” Do not worry about a spot at the table, and don’t worry about who’s going to pay you back. God has created you, and Christ has proven He still cares for you, and through His love He will provide for you as He does for the sparrows and the lilies. So sit at the end of the table, even taking up an apron. And spend what He’s blessed you with on those who need it. Though you may never reap a benefit for it in this lifetime, Christ assures you that you will be exalted; you will be blessed. And maybe that’s with a higher seat at the banquet table in heaven, maybe it’s by seeing up there with you those whom you served down here. Either way, Christ blesses then you immensely more than you could hope to be repaid down here.

So served by Christ, living with Christ, we in His kingdom now serve others just as He has served us, as only those who live in Christ can. We won’t do it perfectly; we certainly won’t fulfill all the commandments, but we go in confidence knowing that He brought us in by His perfection in spite of our imperfection, and He will continue to love us through all our blunders. So go and love that others may be raised up by the humility and generosity of Christ through you. Go and live out His kingdom even now, rejoicing that your spot at the wedding feast is secured, through Christ our servant and Lord.

Amen.