

Swollen Ankles and Hardened Hearts

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Proper 22C, 2025

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At a dinner of Pharisees and wealthy men, Jesus teaches about honour, humility, moral assumptions about wealth and poverty, and the great inversion of earthly values that the kingdom of God promises.

In today's gospel portion, we hear about a conversation between Jesus and a group of Pharisees. This conversation takes place over a dinner held at the home of one of the Pharisees' leaders. Jesus teaches about honour, humility, moral assumptions about wealth and poverty, and the great inversion of earthly values that the kingdom of God promises.

However, before we get to the discussion at dinner, there is an important bit of background we need to cover. The lectionary selection from Luke's gospel has omitted a few verses that tell us what happened on the way to the dinner. Jesus encounters a man suffering from dropsy and heals him, using the miracle as an object lesson about what is and is not permissible on the sabbath. This appears to be a very similar story to last week's gospel portion, where we heard about the long-afflicted woman being healed in the synagogue. The similarity may well be why today's healing miracle was left out of the lectionary schedule. However, the healing of the man with dropsy has more to do with Jesus' teaching about dinner manners and status than first meets the eye.

In the era of the gospels, dropsy referred to a condition where a person's body was swollen with excess fluid. (The word is still used this

way today, though the condition is now more commonly called edema.) Fluid collects and swells the skin, giving it a puffy appearance. If you've ever had swollen ankles after a long train ride, you are familiar with the condition. Along with swelling, the dropsy referred to in the Bible produced an excessive thirst in those it afflicted. This made for a strange situation where a person who appeared to have far too much fluid in them already could not stop drinking more water.

There was a commonly-held assumption that the primary cause of dropsy was lavish living. An excess of certain foods and general overindulgence were thought to be closely associated with the condition. These assumptions were so common that dropsy became a term used to describe anyone perceived as having some kind of insatiable appetite, whether or not they exhibited the physical symptoms. And, of course, overindulgence, especially of rich or luxurious goods, came with the association of sin. How could one possibly be so indulgent without sinning to do it? Hold this in mind as we think through Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees at dinner.

On arriving at dinner, Jesus takes note of how some of the guests have placed themselves in seats of honour, near the host. He suggests to them that the wiser course of action is to sit in the place of least honour. If the host chooses to move one's place up the table, it is to one's credit. If one has taken a seat of high station and must be demoted, one looks foolish and is humiliated in front of the other guests. This paraphrase of Proverbs¹ would have struck a chord with the other men at dinner, highlighting their behaviour as out of line with the wisdom of holy

¹Proverbs 25:6-7

scripture.

After this Jesus addresses the host and says that, rather than inviting his friends—the other Pharisees and his rich neighbours—he would have done better to invite the poor and the crippled. Jesus suggests he has only invited the rich guests in hope of a reciprocal invitation. While the poor may not be able to invite the host to a banquet in this life, they will attest to his righteousness on the Last Day. Surely this is the greater gift. Earthly wealth and status mean nothing in the final judgement, while holiness and righteousness mean everything.

We are not given a guest list for this dinner, but the attendees are a curious lot. Jesus mentions the rich friends of the host, but there are also Pharisees present. The Pharisees were an important religious sect in Jesus' day, they were not, generally, wealthy men. Many of them worked in trades to provide for their families. St Paul was a Pharisee² and continued his trade as a leather worker throughout his life. The host of the dinner, with a house large enough and resources to feed so large a gathering would have been the exception in the group.

That most of the Pharisees were men of average wealth who occasionally rubbed elbows with wealthy elites is an important dynamic to consider in this story. Jesus is speaking about those who take what has not been given to them—in this case, seats of honour at a dinner—and cautions that those who covet and presume to take what is not theirs may find themselves humiliated. Very shortly after this dinner, Jesus will tell a crowd of followers the Parable of the Dishonest Manager.³ The Pharisees ridicule Jesus for this teaching and Luke comments that

these Pharisees are “lovers of money”.⁴ This suggests that at least some Pharisees coveted wealth and wanted to accumulate money for its own sake.

Throughout his telling of the good news of Jesus Christ, Luke highlights again and again that wealth does not equal righteousness, poverty and disability are not the result of sin, and the more wealth one has, the greater one's responsibility to care for those who do not have enough. This philosophy of mutual care that necessitates the appropriate sharing of resources is not an invention of Luke. The Old Testament is filled with statements made by prophets and in wisdom literature about God's special care for the poor, disabled, and vulnerable in society. The clear message in these statements, often explicitly given as a directive, is that humanity ought to show the same care as God for their neighbours in need.⁵ Along with these commandments to share God's abundance equitably and to care for the most vulnerable comes the promise that, on the Last Day, God will set to rights the imbalance that humanity has created. Valleys shall be exalted, mountains shall be laid low, and every debt shall be settled.

The radical care and sharing demanded by the Old Testament is also present in the New. Jesus' own mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, sings while still pregnant that, through the birth of her son, God will cast down the mighty from their thrones, scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty.⁶ When Elizabeth asks why she should be so blessed as to receive a visit from the mother of her

²Acts 23:6

³Luke 16:1-13

⁴Luke 16:14

⁵Psalms 35:10, 82:3-4, 109:30-31; Proverbs 14:21, 21:13, 22, 28:27; Isaiah 58:6-12; Zechariah 7:8-10

⁶Luke 1:51-53

Lord and states that this is the fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord, Mary's response is not a gentle lullaby. Her song is one that describes God's blessing as a revolution in the world. One that fulfills the promises made to Abraham by ending the impoverishment of neighbour by neighbour, taking from those who have amassed undue wealth by exploiting those for whom they should show care, and showering with blessings those who have gone without for so long. The first shall be last and the last shall be first indeed.

In a world where some people take and hoard more than they need at the expense of their neighbour, it is foolishness to suggest that the neighbour's circumstance is somehow the consequence of their own sin or moral failings. Today, just as it was 2,000 years ago, so much of the suffering in our world is of our own making. We, collectively, choose to live in comfort made possible by the suffering of others. We steal from our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to enrich ourselves with earthly wealth, leaving a burning, blasted world in our wake. We are accruing a great many debts for the sake of our comfort that, one day, God will settle with us.⁷

Jesus heals a man with dropsy before giving a lecture on the danger of assuming and taking that to which one has no right. Dropsy, a common metaphor for the dangers of unbridled consumption, is healed only when the afflicted man seeks out Jesus and the healing that the Son of Man can give. If the man's illness was the result of gluttony and greed, then he will find his heart has softened and been changed in the same way his body is no longer swollen. God's healing is of the whole person, not one

part, nor of a symptom without addressing the cause.

There were Pharisees with Jesus when this healing took place, walking to the same dinner. Surely, when Jesus began to instruct about humility and the danger of selfish presumption, those men recalled what they had just seen and must have wondered if something more were at work in their midst. After all, God's healing is not only to relieve the afflicted but so that God's works might be revealed and God's glory known.⁸ Perhaps this meal, where they brush up against the wealthy they envy and fancy themselves, for a moment, among the elite of their community, will be one where they, too, see God's work revealed in their own lives.

After all, in spite of their presumption, Jesus does not say that the Pharisees and rich men should not eat. After all, the host of the dinner has invited them to the table. He may do with his wealth as he pleases, even if he chooses not to share it with those most in need. However, Jesus does say that the Pharisees and rich men should not presume they are the most deserving, most important, most entitled guests and should conduct themselves accordingly, lest they be made to look foolish before one another. Jesus calls them to consider how God has instructed them to live, and to allow God to soften their hearts, that they might be places where others see the works of God done, where God's glory is revealed, and where God's righteousness is what is desired most.

⁷Romans 14:10-12

⁸John 9:1-5