

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 31, 2025
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1-14

"Grace Takes Precedence"

Have you ever been watched? I mean when you know that someone is watching you? The first verse in today's passage from Luke says, "One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, **he was being carefully watched.**" Being watched can be unnerving, especially if you think the watcher is looking for a mistake or misstep.

A number of years ago I was commissioned to be the official representative of the PCUSA to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. It was an honor for me to meet with their GA, tour their churches and plan some joint projects. What I wasn't expecting though was that they thought I was a big deal. They treated me with the utmost respect and deference. I knew that I was being watched, but it was a benevolent watching not at all like the watching Jesus endured.

Every night for 10 days there was a lavish dinner given in my honor. On my last night in Taiwan my hosts threw the most posh dinner I had ever experienced. I knew it was posh because there were more forks than I had ever seen at one place setting. I was given the seat for the guest of honor and was served a luscious meal with all sorts of delicacies and many toasts to my wellbeing.

Now, I want you imagine that kind of dinner party thrown in honor of Jesus by a "high-society" person in town. Jesus knew he was being carefully watched, which means that he knew exactly what he was going to do when he did it. Jesus is seated in a mammoth dining room with an enormous crystal chandelier in the center of the vaulted ceiling. The table, the length of a bowling alley, is adorned with the finest crystal and china. Only the creme-de-la-creme are in attendance.

During the polite chit-chat, a man sitting next to Jesus mentions that he has had a terrible problem retaining water. His arms and legs had swelled up something terrible. The people in Jesus' time would have called it "dropsy." Then, to everyone's amazement, Jesus stands up, clangs on his crystal goblet with one of the many forks at his place setting, and says, "Everybody, Bill here tells me he's having trouble with his kidneys. It seems that

they're retaining fluid. What should I do? I mean, it is the Sabbath and we're not supposed to work on the Sabbath. Should I heal him or not?"

The dinner guests are dumbfounded. Not even the high-powered attorneys can muster a comment. So, right then and there, before they had even finished their appetizers, Jesus shoves the dishes to one side and tells the man to hop up on the table. And to the amazement of everyone, Jesus grabs ahold of the man and heals him. At one end of the table the hostess faints, while at the other end the host turns as red as the burgundy wine in his goblet.

Now, do you understand? Jesus' healing on the Sabbath wasn't just a violation of some obscure religious rule. It was a violation of civility and a social outrage. With this healing, Jesus attacked their whole world view. He spoiled their party. He upset their pomegranate cart. He rained on their procession. Why did he do that?

I believe that Jesus had at least two purposes in mind that day – one was to heal the man and the other was to do it immediately. Jesus took pity on this man and decided to heal him. But he also decided to heal the man **immediately**, on the Sabbath, even though his illness could have waited. Healing on the Sabbath when he could have waited was a shocking thing to do. Thus, it must have been Jesus' intention to shock.

The proper religious authorities would've said, "Just wait until tomorrow so you can do everything decently and in order." But decent and orderly is not what Jesus was about that day or any of his days.

Jesus' essential message is that we've got everything backwards and upside down. We think that first you live and then you die. Jesus says that just the opposite is true - first you have to die before you can live. We think that we should vie to be first when Jesus tells us to seek to be last. We think the mighty are to be honored but Jesus says the mighty will be brought low.

What the Pharisees had all wrong was their antiquated and rigid notion of the grace of God. Jesus was saying something powerfully radical to the Pharisees and to us. That radical good news is simply this, "God's grace takes precedence, at all times, over everything else." Over everything else? Yes, over everything else. Even over laws and traditions.

Well, why didn't Jesus just say that? Why did he have to embarrass everybody? Because he would have gotten the same response I get to some of my sermons – polite nodding while we think of things we need to do after worship. Jesus needed to do something extraordinary to grab their attention. If his point was that God's grace takes precedence over everything else, including the observance of the Sabbath, then that point could be driven home only by an act of grace on the Sabbath. Had Jesus waited until sundown, the

end of the Sabbath day, to cure the man he would have been warmly applauded for having been both charitable and law-abiding, but he would have compromised the very point he was trying to make.

Far from being accidental or incidental, the fact that it was the Sabbath is utterly crucial. The healing by itself would tell us of God's power but not powerfully tell us of his grace. Healing on the Sabbath, in violation of their interpretation of one of the Ten Commandments, would force them to reassess their understanding of God's grace. It is as if the idea of grace is so foreign to us that God has to jump up and down and do and say outrageous things to get this message across.

Sadly, we have been so thoroughly indoctrinated by the world that we just refuse to believe that God's grace is really that radical. Within ourselves, we whisper, "God is gracious only as long as I do everything right." And then, forgiveness becomes a task we accomplish instead of a gift we receive. We operate as if God has this enormous spreadsheet to keep track of our merits and demerits.

If we think that way about ourselves, it's no wonder that we think the same way about others. It's why we can write off someone as a total loss and as irredeemable. We think, "Surely God would be justified in saying to that person over there, 'That was your last chance, and you blew it.'"

But, praise the Lord, God doesn't think like us, especially when it comes to salvaging a single soul. God heals on his own Sabbath and breaks the law to demonstrate that very point. Most of us operate as if we believe that Christ died for us on the condition that we become the kind of people no one would need to die for. We fear that at some point we will exhaust God's grace. Like the two coeds who were discussing their latest reading assignment in religion class. Said one, "I'm only up to "grace." To which the other replied, "Oh, I'm beyond redemption!"

We fear that there is some heinous sin which would place us beyond redemption: "A just God could not forgive me if I did that." We place limits on the power of God to forgive us. But there is no limit to how far God will go to forgive us. Grace is not just a second chance, it is a seven hundred and seventy-seventh chance. Jesus had to be outrageous and heal on the Sabbath to make us understand this.

Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners. God does not withdraw that love when we turn out to be unworthy recipients, as we are. **We** cannot overcome our unworthiness even in a lifetime. And we can't make ourselves more worthy recipients next year than we are right now.

So this is the radically good news of the Sabbath healing - grace has nothing to do with what we deserve. God loves us even though we don't deserve it. And it is his love that

saves us, not our worthiness. Jesus healed on the Sabbath to shock us into the awareness that grace takes precedence, at all times, over everything else. And that's not just grace for us, but especially grace for others.

Our marching orders are to emulate Jesus and show grace to everyone. All our dealings should embody grace, with one another, at football games, with strangers, in traffic jams – everywhere we go we should leave grace behind. Why? Because that's what Jesus did. Also because like with Jesus we are being carefully watched – by our children and grandchildren; by strangers; by society. People out there want to know that people in here don't just talk about grace but act with grace.

Everything Jesus did was based on and surrounded by grace. For Jesus grace takes precedence at all times over everything else. Let me say that again so that we get His message - grace takes precedence, at all times, over everything else. Grace takes precedence, at all times, over everything else. So what is Jesus teaching us through this Sabbath healing? - repeat after me - **grace takes precedence, at all times, over everything else.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen