



Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
31 August 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen. Last Thursday, Pastor Tony and I had the opportunity to be out in the community in a new way. We participated in the investiture of a new judge in Waukesha County. It was my first investiture. We showed up in our clergy collars and waited for the festivities to begin. It was much like an ordination service for a new pastor. Family and friends are invited. All the other judges attend wearing their judge robes. Someone shares words of wisdom and maybe a little roasting of the judge-to-be. There are prayers. The new judge takes their oath. Then they are dressed in their new robe. A gavel is presented. There is applause. The new judge gets to speak. A final prayer and then a reception. It sounds almost exactly like an ordination. After all the festivities, Pastor Tony and I picked up pizza at a place downtown and as we were waiting for the pizza we decided to have a beer. We do not often go out for beers in our clergy collars, but it is always exciting. Mostly because Pastor Tony gets called Father a lot and we get more than a few strange looks as we do all the normal people things just with fancier clothing. I walked up to the bar to order our beers and when the bartender came over, I asked her what the Wednesday special was. She said, “well first, it is Thursday,” and “it is only an extra dollar off the normal price.” I thought maybe my collar would get me the extra discount – but perhaps she was not a believer. And to add insult to injury, no one else offered to buy our beers either – which happens more often than one might think in some parts of the country. The best part of the day was walking into the courtroom. We were told to find the clerk of the court. When we introduced ourselves, she took us right to our seats. In the front row, in the very center of the courtroom. I mean, we are talking VIP seating. Honored guest kind of seating. Until we realized that those same seats were probably where the accused are seated during a criminal trial. Oh, how the perspective can change.

In the days of Jesus, the honored guests sat closest to the host. The places of honor were often reserved for those who had standing, who knew their status in the community. Religious leadership, wealth, or a family name might get you an honored place at the table. It was not uncommon at dinners for guests to scramble for the seats closest to the host of the meal. But Jesus seeing this, tells the story – “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host,<sup>9</sup> and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.<sup>10</sup> But when you are invited, go and sit down at 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 the table with you.” It is one more opportunity for the followers of Jesus to watch their world turned upside down in the presence of Jesus.

In Tanzania, among our sisters and brothers of our sister parish, Samaria, it is not uncommon for our pastors and members of our delegation to be offered seats at the head table. For all the moments, I would like to blend into the crowd – to even sit among the people of our sister parish – we do not even get the chance to make that choice. We are often ushered to the highest seats of honor. Which also means, we get first shot at the roasted goat – which may or may not be the highlight of your day – depending on how much you like roasted goat. One of the great moments in Tanzania comes when we watch our delegation leader ushered to the head table. It amuses me, because our delegation leader is always a woman. Sarah Wehmeier de Aparicio leads the delegation and therefore is provided a place of honor. In a country where the patriarchy still holds much sway, having Sarah ushered to the front of the room, to a place of honor, is a beautiful example of the world turned upside down when Jesus is known as teacher and worshipped as Savior.

It is why, here at Ascension, as some of you point out, the pastors receive communion at the end of the meal instead of first. I am sure some liturgy and worship professor I had in seminary is rolling over in their grave that we do not take communion first. No doubt a few of our former Catholic friends, here today, wonder why the pastors do not receive communion first – and why some Sundays, they even allow some of you lowly lay people to serve the bread. It is long standing tradition, ancient tradition, that the pastor communes first. But,



in a world where Jesus taught us that our hospitality and our welcome should both be welcome and beyond what you might know or receive anywhere else, the honored guests at the meal are not your pastors but the people of God who gather to worship and receive the presence of Jesus in bread and wine. On top of that, Luther argued again and again, that in the absence of an ordained pastor, anyone could speak the scriptures over bread and wine and then offer the bread and wine as communion with the real presence of Jesus intact. Really, Pastor Chris? Yes, really. More important to Luther, was not the person standing at the altar, but the invitation for all of us to receive communion in both kinds – bread and wine. Straight out of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (I know you knew that already – but it never hurts to remind myself.) The one thing we do differently as your pastors, is to share the common cup among the three of us at the end of communion. I am not sure we will ever return to sharing the common cup in the congregation after Covid, but among your pastors there is a trusted understanding that the sharing of the common cup reminds all of us that we are in this community of faith as one, together, without reservation or apology for our shared journey in this life of faith.

But Jesus is not quite done with us yet. "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." Luke does not tell us how the dinner guests reacted to the story Jesus tells. Does he have any idea what he's asking? The answer is of course Jesus does. And more to the point, Jesus knows exactly what it means to let go of the "ladder of success" for the sidewalk of service.

I was reminded of the story of James and John, the disciples, who take Jesus aside and make the ultimate ask before any of the other disciples can get in line. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup> And Jesus said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." When the rest of the disciples find out, they are livid with their friends, James and John. And Jesus wastes no time in settling the score for all of the disciples. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Our place in the Kingdom of God is no more important than our place at the table today. Jesus asks us to believe that our behavior at the table matters — because it does. Where we choose to sit speaks volumes – just look around the room – back row, front row, near the organ or direct line of sight to the pulpit. Hide in the middle or choose the end of the pew for a quick getaway. Where we choose to sit speaks volumes and the people whom we choose to welcome reveal the stuff of our souls. Bless those who cannot repay you. Tend to the poor and those in need. Choose to be anonymous in your love and in your giving. This is God's world we live in, and there is nothing ordinary about God's grace, or this gift of life we receive. In God's house, the strangers at our doorstep are the angels we are asked to entertain with the places of honor at our table. As it is for all of us, may it be for all the world. This is Ascension: It's what we do. Amen.