

The Rev. Charlie Holt:

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Word. We ask that You would be filling us with Your Holy Spirit and illumine and enlighten our hearts and our minds so that we might not just be hearers of Your Word, but also doers of it. May the preaching and ministry of Your Word be Your Word for the sake and glory of Your Son Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.

Well, our family has been rescuing dogs as of late. I told you the story about how we had rescued a Husky on Ortega Boulevard, Roxy.

My daughter is also a rescuer of dogs. She rescued a great Pyrenees. She had gone to the pound and saw this huge, beautiful white dog with really sad-looking eyes, and rescued this great Pyrenees. It's about the size of a polar bear.

It's a huge dog. She did this several years ago. And we took... My daughter loves animals. Her dream in life was to be a Shamu whale trainer. That was the big dream. And so having an animal to love and to care for has been great. But one of the wonderful things about Annie, we took her to a vet and the vet said, "These kind of dogs need jobs. They really need a job." And Annie's job has really been to protect Ashton. She was in school at Birmingham, away from us, but Ashton loves to go outside and walk. And it was nice comfort to us to know that she had a great Pyrenees by her side, who could intimidate any creepy people or any wild dogs or anything that would hurt our daughter.

But one of the comments that people often made when they saw this dog with her is, "Who's walking who?"

You ever heard that before? It's the dogs pulling you down the road, and you, "Who's walking who?"

Well, that's a little bit of what we have going on in our gospel passage, only it's not who's walking who, it's who's watching who, who's watching who.

And just like dogs, dogs often assert the alpha male or the alpha dog. In the case of ours, we have Walter, who is not very alpha. He's very timid.

And then our new street dog, Roxy, who is pretty darn tough, and Annie, who's big and can alpha anybody.

And so it's been interesting to watch the three of those dogs in their pecking order and trying to sort it out. Who's the alpha here?

Just a little interesting aside about alphas.

That's the Greek letter alpha, alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon, zeta. If you're in the fraternity or sorority, you've had to probably memorize that.

The word alpha comes with the letter A. And we in Greek, it's similar to English of what we use in our English alphabet. And in Hebrew, it's actually the same letter. In Hebrew, it's aleph. In ancient Hebrew, the letter A is very similar to what ours looks like.

It's this sort of rounded thing with the tails. And if you flip that over, what it is is a symbol of a bull.

And it's the chief, the head, the alpha, the bull of the flock.

And that's what A is, alpha, aleph, A, bull.

Another interesting little aside, bait in Hebrew is the Hebrew letter for house. It means house. And so when you put those two things together, aleph and bait, what you are spelling is ab. Does anybody know what the Hebrew word ab means?

Abba? You heard that one?

Father.

The bull of the house is the father.

And that's how words really got started.

And so there's something very deep within us instinctually. We see it in the animals. We see it in our alphabet. And it's actually in the pecking orders that we have socially as human beings. And so this is what is happening. Jesus is invited to an alpha's house. He's invited to what is described as the leader, a leader of the Pharisees.

On one occasion, when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath. And what does it say? They are watching him closely. Who are they watching closely? Not the leader of the Pharisees. They're watching Jesus closely. Why?

Because a new alpha is in town, right?

Somebody who has now spoken with authority, taught with authority, acted with authority. Just last week, we heard the story of the woman who was hunched over for 18 years. And in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, Jesus liberates her from the power of the evil one himself.

And sets her free, and she stands up and praises the Lord.

And what do the leaders of that synagogue do but correct the people and say, "Oh, what this man is doing is not appropriate on the Sabbath. We shouldn't be doing any healings on the Sabbath. There should be no driving out demons on the Sabbath. If you need to be delivered, come on a different day. But don't do it on the Sabbath day."

And so here again is another scene where we have what we might call in our day and age a power play, where the king has walked into the room, and people are sizing him up

and trying to figure out where do I fit in relation to him and watching him very closely. Who here likes to people watch? Does anybody here a people watcher?

And what are we doing when we do that, when we're people watching? And in some cases, it's just curiosity. We're fascinated by people that are different than us, and we might watch their behaviors. We're watching the way that

they dress. We're watching their emotions and their facial features. We are very perceptive people about other people. And in some occasions when we're people watching, we are also judging, aren't we? We're looking at them and going, "Well, how do I compare him? Is she prettier than I am, or is he more handsome than I am, or is he stronger than me? I think I could take him in a fight."

And you know our brains just kind of go there, you know, like does he have more money than I do or less money than I do, or boy, he looks down and out, or boy, that's a really nice dressed person. And what our brains do is we actually fill in stories for a person without even knowing who they are. And we're setting ourselves in a context in relationship to them. And again, it's a very instinctual thing to do. But Jesus sees this group of leaders sizing him up, and he decides, "I'm going to put them in their place."

And he does it by asking them a very simple question.

You guys have been posturing on this issue of healing on the Sabbath. Well, let me just ask you point blank as a discussion for the dinner party today.

Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

Silence.

They didn't have anything to say to him.

And then he actually sees a person that needs healing. This is the guys described as having edema, or in some versions of the Bible, it's called dropsy, but basically, it's too much fluid in your body, and it's your swelling in your legs or your arms. And we've seen people that have struggled with this. It's usually a coronary thing, is my understanding.

Jesus sees this person with edema. We don't know his name. Jesus sees him, sees his need for healing. It is the Sabbath day again, and Jesus liberates him from his sickness and restores his body back to health.

And then he turns back to the leaders again, and he asks him another question, and he's really getting at the crux of the matter. He says, "If you had an ox that fell into a ditch on the Sabbath, or let me make it more pointed, if you had a child that fell into a ditch on a Sabbath, would you get him out of the ditch?"

Again silence.

Jesus completely put them in their place and pointed out to them a very important thing for them to see in themselves because as they were sizing him up, they actually were judging Jesus on the basis of their religious theology and their views of power and authority and who's got authority and who doesn't have authority and do you have a right to do this? Have you been officially authorized by the official bodies to be healing and so on? There was all these kinds of power issues and dynamics and questions, and what Jesus

reveals to them as the most powerful guy in the room is that if you have all this power and authority and you lack love and you lack compassion, then your power is actually abusive.

Your power is actually corrupt because power without compassion and love is at worst neglect, leaving a child in a ditch or an ox in a ditch, but at its worst, its cruelty, and that's the self-centeredness of these religious leaders.

So who's watching who?

They were watching him at first, but then Jesus says, "Oh, by the way, I've noticed a few other things about y'all."

And he keeps going, and he says, "Here's what I noticed.

I noticed that when you came in here today and all the tables had been set up for everybody to sit, that some of you who you thought that you should sit at the places of honor.

Let me tell you a story.

This is Jesus. Let me tell you a story. You know, a man throws a wedding banquet and he says, "Guy comes and he sits at the highest place because he thinks he's all that." And he goes and sits at the place of the honor and says, "Don't do that because what if the host of the party has to come to you and say, 'Sir, that is not your seat."

That has been reserved for somebody that's actually more important than you, and then you are embarrassed and ashamed, and you have to go and sit at the lowest place."

Again, it's the same theme of our self-centeredness and selfishness, really is what it is. It's something that is deep within all of our hearts that we are just selfish people. And I'm not saying this like I'm not. I am.

I'm reminded of the story of the mother who was making pancakes. By the way, Downing made some great pancakes today. If you didn't come for breakfast, they were really good. But mom makes pancakes for her kids, and boys are fighting over who gets the first pancake. Do you ever have children that would say the me first? Let me be the first one. I want to be the first one. I want to do it.

And the boys are fighting over who gets the first pancake, and the mom goes, "Oh, this is a great teaching moment." Let me ask them, "What would Jesus do in this situation, boys?" "Oh, meet, meet, meet." One of the boys says, "I know the answer to this." Jesus would say, "My brother, you have the first pancake." The mother was so proud. "Yes, finally gotten through to these kids."

And then the boy turns and he says to his brother, "Brother, why don't you be Jesus today?"

Even in our false humility, sometimes we can be very self-centered.

And we have to just be so careful about it.

Jesus then turns to the man that had hosted the party, and he says, "You know, I noticed

another thing about what you did here.

I noticed that you invited all the important people from town, you know, the rich people, the prominent people, the people that are the important people. Those are the people you have in your house today."

He says, "That's the kingdom of God's perspective, that's not the way you should do it. You need to go out and invite the poor, the meek, the lowly, the needy, the crippled, the blind, and bring them into your house and show hospitality." He says, "But the reason why you did it, you invited the people into your home because these are the people that can repay you."

In other words, you did it for selfish reasons.

Even though you are acting like a servant, you are acting like a host; you are actually hosting for yourself and with selfish aims and selfish motivations.

I often think about a lot of times, and I just watch as pastor and we have dynamics in the staff, we have dynamics among members, we have dynamics with those who are members and those who are visitors and guests. And I just, you know, I think Jesus is always watching us and just noticing how we relate to one another and how we think about ourselves and our own motivations. Is this for me? Am I being selfish here, or am I doing it genuinely to serve other people?

You know, what does Jesus see when He looks at our breakfast and our dinners, and our special lunches that we have? I've often observed, and I'm not trying to critique you, but I just want you to become aware of it, to open your eyes, and to see with the eyes of Jesus. I've often observed that sometimes we'll have a new person and they will sit at a table by themselves.

And I don't know why new people do that. It's almost like I dare you to be my friend. You know, like I'm just going to go sit by myself, and it's like this reinforcing thing, like nobody loves me, everybody hates me. But you know, that might be some of it, you know, like I dare somebody to come and talk to me.

But there's also, you know, put yourself in the position of a person that's new or needy

that they don't want to, they don't know how to break into an existing group.

They don't know how to break into the dynamics and to be welcomed. And some people are good at that, but some people are really needing to be welcomed in and invited.

And I think, you know, what Jesus would have us do is whenever we have a gathering, whenever we're doing something that's about hospitality and being in community with one another, that we're not just paying attention to the people that are our friends and our family and people that, "Oh, I really want to talk to him because that's going to be good for my business," or whatever it is, not to get out of ourselves sometimes and be looking for the person that we don't know, looking for the person that might be in need of some love or some care or some attention.

And more often than not, those are people who are isolated, and they need community.

They need somebody to recognize them and bring them in to the body of Christ. I'll end with a story.

At St. John the Divine, we had a woman that started English as a second language course,

and it ended up being a very large group of people coming to our church. It was like 150 students from, I think it was 44 different countries. They spoke 33 different languages.

And these were not our members.

And I remember when we first started the program, some of the attitudes that were there, you know, like us and them kind of language. Who are these people coming in and using up all of our toilet paper in the lady's bathroom?

That was the kind of ,À I literally heard that. They're using all the soap. They.

They are doing this.

And it was wonderful, though, that as we started to realize that's just being selfish and we started to challenge our self-centeredness and began to really genuinely welcome this group of people into the life of our fellowship, that they actually started coming to our church and they wanted to be members of our church. We had more people baptized out of the ESL program as adults than any other thing. I mean, yeah, it was a lot of babies that we were baptizing our own members, but that was where all the adult conversions were coming from, was from the ESL program. We baptized a woman from Russia whose husband was assassinated by Putin.

Can you imagine the need that she had for community?

And we welcomed her in. Or a woman from China who had escaped the social pressure of China with her daughter.

And I saw her one day sitting outside the church, and she said, "Am I allowed to go in there?"

And I said, "Of course you're allowed to come in here."

And when she came out, she had tears in her eyes and she said, "I felt something in there that I haven't felt since I was a little girl when I had gone to my grandmother's church in China."

She gave her life to the Lord and had her and her daughter baptized.

We had a man who had been ransomed by his wife for \$3,500 from the people of ISIS.

And here the Lord had just brought all of these people to our congregation to love and to care for.

And I have to admit that the first impulse was they're using all of our toilet paper.

We can be so selfish, can't we?

And yet the Lord would have us see and watch with His eyes and His heart.

And while we may be somebody and have something and be important and have power and authority,

merge that with the love of Jesus Christ and allow His heart to be our hearts, your heart.

And as the writer of Hebrews says, "Be careful to welcome the stranger because many by doing so have entertained angels unaware."