Sunday, November 25, 1973
IT'S BETTER TO BE SURPRISED
Luke 14:7-11

A persistent theme in the teaching and life of Jesus is that of humility. Jesus quickly noticed our human tendency to show ourselves off to others in a way that implies that we are really in a higher position than they. Sociologists call this, "status seeking."

We all know how prestige conscious we are, how bent on getting recognition, and how hurt in our dignity we are when we think some deserved recognition is denied us. Some of the most serious squabbles I know of have been caused be-cause of persons thinking they were left out or overlooked or shoved out of some place of honor. It's not a new problem as our scripture lesson shows.

Jesus was a frequent guest a dinner parties and other kinds of celebrations. Thus, he often noticed that as the guests were taking their places around the table, some of the guests immediately and almost without thinking went to the seats nearest the host, the place of honor, the head table. They just assumed that the places of honor were for them. No other thought entered their minds. If not for them, then for whom? A quick look around the room and at the guests showed them that certainly no one there was more deserving than they. So, without a trace of modesty, they took their places and let the rest of the company fend for themselves.

Seeing such actions and attitudes gave Jesus the setting and the occasion for the parable we read as our scripture lesson. I'm sure that he told this little story with a smile. "When you're invited to a dinner party, don't just automatically sit down in the best seat. It might happen that a more distinguished guest than you has been invited, someone you don't even know or someone you might've thought of as being less than you. Your host might be forced to say then, "I'm afraid that you are going to have to give up your seat for this guest." And with considerable em-barrassment, you will have to sit in the lowest place. No, it is better when you are invited to go and take your seat in an inconspicuous place so that when your host comes in, you may be the one who will be pleasantly surprised. The host may say to you, "Come now my friend, we have a much better seat than this for you."

Then Jesus added the clincher to the parable — "For everyone who makes himself important will become insignificant, while the person who makes himself insignificant will find himself important." Life is full of surprises!

This parable speaks to us on at least two levels.

1. First, on our human level, in our day-to-day relationships, there is a great deal of simple practical advice in the story. It is a good lesson in humility. In the parable, Jesus pokes fun at our own silliness for trying to think we deserve automatically the most honored spot. Perhaps some of us here have been embarrassed at one time or another in this matter of protocol and maybe our feelings have been hurt because we have had to give way to someone the host wanted to place higher than ourselves.

Jesus knew that it is part of our human nature to always be wanting to exalt ourselves we want to be served rather than to serve. We just like to see ourselves as being higher than some others. I'm sure that this is a part of the root of all racial prejudice.

In our time we even have to employ chiefs of protocol for fear someone might be insulted if they are placed in the wrong position in a receiving line or at the wrong place at the head table. The protocol officers help draw up guest lists and assign persons to seats. We have social registers so that all will know who is to be honored.

We all have this weakness of excess pride. The advertisers know this and play on it for all its worth and it's worth quite a bit, they've discovered! Listen carefully to the ads or read them carefully. "Move up to Schlitz!" "You deserve the very best." "Be a man of distinction." The people who write the ads, like Jesus, know that we falsely judge ourselves and others. We judge by the many outward signs of importance, the size of the home, where it is located, the kind of beer people serve, where the clothes are purchased. We talk of things as having "snob appeal."

None of us are completely immune from this kind of placing of values. And the church is not immune. Certain churches become known and like to be known as the place where all the "best" people attend. Who are the "best" people? Some studies have shown that when persons get promotions in their jobs, sometimes they think they have to move up and join the church where the so-called "best" people are members. After all, it is more fitting for their new position.

But Jesus would have none of this. He hit at our tendency to show off our prestige. Sometimes he was quite stern about it, particularly with church people who were not humble but were always seeking to draw attention to themselves. At one point he said about the church people of his time — "Beware of the Scribes who like to go about in long robes and to have salutations in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts they will have greater condemnation."

I think we clergymen are often more like those scribes than we like to admit. We like to put our degrees behind our names, wear our academic regalia, as if to say, "look at us."

The point is that in his life and teachings, Jesus reversed our usually accepted standards and values. In our fiercely competitive culture, with its intensified social stratifi-cation and its passion for wealth and prestige, note the contrast of the sayings of Jesus — "Whoever would be great among you rout be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all." We on the other hand, like to think of servants and slaves as inferior people.

In another place, Jesus said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And again, he said at another time, "But many that are first will be last and the last first." Isn't that in stark contrast to the spirit of our time?

We like to think that he who is first will always be first, or that those who are at the head table in our banquets, will be at the head table at God's banquets. We like to believe that what is needed to get to the top is an assertive quality, a clever calculating mind, feelings of not being too sensitive to the misfortunes of others, plenty of self-confidence and something of a flair of self-advertisement. "Blessed are the meek?" Not so!

And of course, what gives added weight to these sayings of Jesus in regard to humility is his own character, his deeds and his life. He was utterly indifferent to any person's economic position. He had the kind of mind which treats the rich and the poor alike. He attached no importance to social registers. He was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He grew up in a poor home, would not allow people to elevate him to a high earthly position, washed the feet of his disciples, and died at last on a cross.

It was this that left those who knew him awestruck — that he made himself of no reputation, took upon himself the form of a servant and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. And yet all through his life he dwarfed everyone around him, in moral stature towered head and shoulders above all of his contemporaries, so that if we know anything about Caesar Augustus and Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate, it is largely because of their association with him.

Thus, at one level, this parable is to help us laugh at some of our silly pretensions in human relationships.

2. But the story also speaks to us on a second level, for the parable is much more than a simple lesson in table etiquette or the folly of status seeking as we usually go about it. It is much more than simply a counsel of prudence on how to avoid humiliation in a social gathering.

At its deepest meaning the parable is a searching insight into the nature of all of us who yearn for the place of honor at the head table, the seat of fame — and to those of us who think we deserve this honor on our own merit!

It's a parable of the way in which God looks at us and treats us. Jesus is saying to us here that there is no place for our kind of pride in our status, our assumption of honor in the community of God. For in that community, God will seat people as he thinks they deserve, and a humble person will fare better than a proud one. In another place Jesus put it this way — "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The point is — God looks at things differently than in the way we often see them. In God's economy there are going to be many surprises!

In this parable and in many others, Jesus reminds us that from God's way of looking at things, many of us may be surprised. We are going to meet people who have been assigned high places by God that we would never have dreamed of; and we are going to find others down at the bottom whom we would've expected to see at the top. And as far as we ourselves are concerned, it's better to be surprised and asked by the host. to be seated in a place of honor than to be embarrassed and asked by the host to move down to the bottom. No one is more surprised than the lowly humble person who is summoned to God's nearer favor. That's the way with true humility.

Jesus talked about this kind of surprise in another place in the New Testament. He said that when the Son of Man comes in his glory, then he will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in in prison and you came to me."

But said Jesus, the people will be surprised! They will say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you and thirsty and give you drink. When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will say to them, "Truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto me."

The truly good people who are good according to God's standards are. those who are surprised at being called "good" by God. They are not those who keep reminding us how good they really are by saying such things as, "I'm not pre-judiced, why I know several black persons or several Indians, and I've never treated them badly."

According to Jesus, here and in other passages in the Bible, greatness, goodness, whatever you want to call it, is to be judged by one criterion --service. It is here particularly that he reverses generally accepted standards. To be prominent in the world's eye, to be talked about, to figure in the daily news, to be served, courted, admired, this for multitudes is what greatness is all about!

Not so with Jesus! It was dedication, treating all human beings with respect, and not rank that he cared about. Jesus never asked about any person — where does he live? What is his color? Or his job? Or how much is he or she worth in dollars? What he wanted to know was: "Is he or she sensitive to human needs? Does he see all people as brothers or sisters? Does he or she put others down?"

In God's eyes true stature belongs to the person who sees his life as ultimately belonging to God and not as his own to do with as he pleases, and that what God has given him in native ability and talent was given for the service of his brothers and sisters in the human race.

And because such people are always giving their lives away, they are always surprised when any credit is given to them. That's the right kind of surprise.

But what is the source of such humility and service? It's all part of seeing ourselves in the right perspective. Christianity has never argued that we ought to be humble. It's not a matter of ought or having to. When we are humble because we ought to be, we get people who are proud of their humility.

The kind of humility Jesus was talking about come to be a part of our nature because of the way in which we see ourselves in relation to God, his creation, and others.

William Beebe, the naturalist, made many visits to the home of Theodore Roosevelt, himself something of a naturalist. After an evening's talk, the two men would often go out of evening's talk, the two doors, gaze up at the sky and see who could first detect the faint spot of light mist beyond the lower left-hand corner of the great square of Pegasus, and then one or the other would recite: "That is the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It is 750,000 light years away. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our own sun." Whereupon, Beebe reports, Roosevelt would grin at him and say, "Now I think we are small enough. Let's go to bed!"

The Psalmist put it another way — "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God and dost crown him with glory and honor... O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!"

That is the source of true humility — seeing ourselves in the right perspective to God and others.

Now this does not mean that we are not to seek greatness, but it is greatness of another kind than that of which we ordinarily seek. Jesus stressed our God-given status, our latent possibilities, our unique value and worth. But we have not given ourselves this status or earned it. It is not of our own making. It comes from God. God has crowned us with glory and honor.

So, if we see ourselves, even dimly, against the vast back-drop of God's creation and if we see ourselves correctly in relation to all other persons who also have the same value in God's eyes as we, then no one will need to tell us not to rush for the seats of honor in God's community. God will tell us what seats are ours, and it will be better if we are surprised in our humility. Amen.