SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 1985

"MORE THAN A LESSON IN ETIQUETTE"

LUKE 14:7-11

JESUS WAS A FREQUENT GUEST AT DINNER PARTIES. IN THIS INSTANCE, REPORTED IN LUKE'S GOSPEL, HE HAD BEEN INVITED TO DINNER AT THE HOME OF A RULER, A PHARISEE, ONE WHO WAS HIGH UP IN THE GOVERNING CIRCLES. WHO THE OTHER GUESTS WERE, WE DON'T KNOW, BUT JESUS NOTICED THAT AS THE GUESTS WERE TAKING THEIR PLACES AROUND THE TABLE, SOME OF THEM QUICKLY TOOK THE PLACES NEAREST THE HOST OR HOSTESS, THE SEATS OF HONOR. THEY AUTOMATICALLY ASSUMED THAT THIS IS WHERE THEY BELONGED. OTHERS WHO THOUGHT THEY WERE EQUALLY IMPORTANT HAD TO SETTLE FOR SEATS FURTHER DOWN THE LINE.

SEEING SUCH ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES GAVE JESUS THE OCCASION FOR TELLING A STORY OR PARABLE. HE SAID, "WHEN YOU'RE INVITED TO A DINNER PARTY, DON'T JUST AUTOMATICALLY TAKE THE SEAT OF HONOR. IT MIGHT HAPPEN THAT A MORE DISTINGUISHED GUEST THAN YOU HAS BEEN INVITED, SOMEONE YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW OR SOMEONE YOU THOUGHT AS BEING LESS IMPORTANT THAN YOU. YOUR HOST OR HOSTESS THEN WOULD BE FORCED TO SAY TO YOU, 'I'M AFRAID THAT

YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO GIVE UP YOUR SEAT FOR THIS GUEST.' AND WITH CONSIDERABLE EMBARRASMENT, YOU WILL HAVE TO SIT IN THE LOWEST PLACE."

RATHER, JESUS SAID, "IT IS BETTER WHEN YOU ARE INVITED TO A DINNER TO GO AND TAKE YOUR SEAT IN AN INCONSPICUOUS PLACE SO THAT WHEN YOUR HOST OR HOSTESS COMES IN, YOU MAY BE THE ONE WHO IS PLEASANTLY SURPRISED. HE OR SHE MAY SAY TO YOU, 'COME NOW MY FRIEND, WE HAVE A MUCH BETTER PLACE THAN THIS FOR YOU.'" THEN JESUS ADDED THE COMMENT--"FOR THOSE WHO EXALT THEMSELVES WILL BE HUMBLED AND THOSE WHO HUMBLE THEMSELVES WILL BE EXALTED."

THIS PARABLE, ALTHOUGH IT COMES FROM A SITUATION WHERE ETIQUETTE OR PROTOCOL IS INVOLVED IS MUCH MORE THAN A LESSON IN ETIQUETTE. IT SPEAKS TO US ON SEVERAL LEVELS.

1. FIRST IT HAS SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT OUR DAY-TO-DAY RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER. IT REMINDS US TO PRACTICE HUMILITY AS A WAY OF HELPING US TO BECOME HUMBLE PEOPLE.

IN THE STORY, JESUS POKES FUN AT OUR OWN SILLYNESS FOR TRYING TO THINK WE AUTOMATICALLY DESERVE THE MOST HONORED PLACE. PERHAPS SOME OF YOU HAVE BEEN EMBARRASSED AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER IN THIS MATTER OF PROTOCOL AND MAYBE YOUR FEELINGS HAVE BEEN HURT BECAUSE YOU HAVE HAD TO GIVE WAY TO SOMEONE THE HOST OR HOSTESS

WANTED TO PLACE HIGHER THAN YOU.

JESUS KNEW OF OUR HUMAN TENDENCY TO EXALT OURSELVES IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS. WE WANT OTHERS TO KNOW THAT WE HAVE POWER AND INFLUENCE. GOVERNMENTS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS 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.

WE JUDGE OURSELVES AND OTHERS BY SUCH OUTWARD SIGNS OF IMPORTANCE, WHERE ONE IS SEATED, WHERE SOMEONE LIVES, THE LABELS ON ONE'S CLOTHES. DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT'S WHY IN THE PAST FEW YEARS CLOTHING LABELS HAVE BEEN ON THE OUTSIDE SO EVERYONE CAN SEE THEM?

JESUS REMINDS US: "IF ANY ONE WOULD BE FIRST, HE OR SHE MUST BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANT OF ALL." THAT'S IN STARK CONTRAST TO THE WAY THE WORLD OPERATES. WE LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT THOSE WHO ARE FIRST WILL ALWAYS BE FIRST--THAT THOSE WHO ARE AT THE HEAD TABLE AT OUR BANQUETS WILL BE AT THE HEAD TABLE AT GOD'S BANQUETS. NOT NECESSARILY SO, SAYS JESUS. "FOR THOSE WHO EXALT THEMSELVES WILL BE HUMBLED; AND THOSE WHO HUMBLE THEMSELVES WILL BE EXALTED."

2. AND THIS LEADS US TO A SECOND AND DEEPER LEVEL IN WHICH THIS SAYING OF JESUS SPEAKS

TO US. IT IS IN SOME OF THE HUMBLING EXPERIENCES OF LIFE THAT WE CAN MEET GOD. OR TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, MANY TIMES IT IS NOT UNTIL WE ARE HUMBLED THAT WE ARE OPEN TO GOD AND THEN FOLLOWING THAT, WE ARE EXALTED IN THE RIGHT WAY.

WE CAN BE HUMBLED IN SOME SURPRISING WAYS AND IN SOME OF THE EVERYDAY EVENTS OF LIFE, AND MEET GOD IN ANOTHER PERSON.

IN HIS BOOK ENTITLED "RAGMAN", WALTER WANGERIN, JR., A MINISTER, TELLS A STORY ABOUT SUCH AN EXPERIENCE.

IT IS ABOUT HIS ADOPTED SON, MATTHEW, WHOM HE DESCRIBES AS BEING BORDERLINE HYPERACTIVE. "THE KID LEAPED BEFORE HE CRAWLED AND PLAYED FOOTBALL BEFORE HE TALKED. HE WATCHED THE TELEVISED GAMES WITH HIS WHOLE BODY--THAT IS, HE RAN EVERY PLAY IN THE LIVING ROOM, DROPPING BACK FOR THE QUARTERBACK, SHOOTING FORWARD FOR THE WIDE RECEIVER, MAKING MAGNIFICENT DIVES FOR BULLETBALLS, AND THEN MANAGING EVEN TO TACKLE HIMSELF AGAINST GLASS HUTCHES AND EXPENSIVE CHINA. MATTHEW WAS THE WHOLE TEAM, AT THE AGE OF FOUR."

WANGERIN SAYS OF HIMSELF, "NOW I AM A PATIENT MAN. I'M A PASTOR. I'M PAID TO BE PATIENT. BUT MATTHEW HEARD OTHER DRUMS . . . HE WATCHED WHAT HE CALLED 'THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN'

WITH WORSHIPFUL ATTENTION. AND THAT WHICH HE BELIEVES IN, HE BECOMES."

THERE CAME THE DAY, WHEN IN ORDER TO FIND SOME PEACE FOR MY WORK, I COMMANDED MY SON TO HIS BEDROOM, THEN BOWED MY HEAD OVER MY TYPEWRITER AND BEGAN TO WRITE, WHEN AN ALMIGHTY CRASH ERUPTED FROM MATTHEW'S BEDROOM, TOGETHER WITH THE SOUND OF SPLINTERING WOOD.

THE BEDROOM DOOR WAS STILL SHUT. NO MATTER. I COULD READ INSTANTLY WHAT THE "SIX MILLIONs DOLLAR BOY" HAD DONE--FOR HIS FOOT STUCK THROUGH THE DOOR TWO AND A HALF FEET ABOVE THE FLOOR. WHEN I OPENED IT IN THE PROPER FASHION, I DRAGGED A CHILD OUT, SMILING, ON HIS BACK. "HI DAD," HE SAID, "I TRIED TO COME THROUGH." THROUGH MY TEETH; STRANGLED SCREAMS AND VERY HEAVY JUDGMENT UPON A CHILD'S HEAD, I SOON TOOK THE SMILE FROM HIS FACE, EVEN BEFORE WE TOOK HIS FOOT FROM THE DOOR.

AT THE AGE OF EIGHT, MATTHEW RAN AWAY FROM HOME. THIS IS THE CAUSE-EFFECT SEQUENCE AS BEST WANGERIN CAN REMEMBER IT, AND AS HE LOOKS BACK HE CAN UNDERSTAND WHY THE BOY RAN AWAY.

AT NIGHT WE PRAYED A REGULAR PRAYER, CERTAIN PORTIONS OF WHICH I ITALICIZED FOR THE EDIFICATION OF MY SON. WE PRAYED, "JESUS, SAVIOR, WASH AWAY, ALL THAT HAS BEEN WRONG TODAY. HELP ME EVERY DAY TO BE GOOD AND

GENTLE, MORE LIKE THEE." AND THEN SONS MATTHEW AND JOSEPH WERE TO CLOSE THEIR EYES IN A FINE AND TIRED OBEDIENCE AND GO TO SLEEP.

BUT ON A PARTICULAR NIGHT ENERGIES SIZZLED IN MY MATTHEW. I FOLDED MY HANDS, STANDING BETWEEN THE BEDS. WE WERE A PICTURE OF FAMILIAL DEVOTION. "JESUS, SAVIOR, WASH AWAY ALL THAT HAS BEEN WRONG TODAY. HELP US----MATTHEW, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

MATTHEW HAD SLIPPED FROM COVERS AND CONCENTRATION, WAS SITTING ON THE FLOOR, EMPTYING A CARDBOARD BOX OF SOME 3000 FOOTBALL CARDS. "SORTING MY CARDS," HE SAID.

"NO YOU'RE NOT." THROUGH MY TEETH. "WE'RE PRAYING. IT'S TIME TO GO TO SLEEP. IN BED, PLEASE, FOLD YOUR HANDS, PLEASE. NOW: JESUS, SAVIOR, WASH AWAY, ALL THAT HAS BEEN WRONG TODAY. HELP US-----MATTHEW, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" HE WAS TROTTING OUT OF THE ROOM. HE WAS GOING TOWARD THE BATHROOM. "TO BRUSH MY TEETH."

WELL, TOOTH-BRUSHING IS MY RULE, AFTER ALL; AND THE BOY IS OBEYING A RULE, GRANT HIM THAT. AND I SHOULDN'T COUNTERMAND RULES WHICH EARLIER I HAD EXTOLLED WITH WONDERFUL PROOFS OF IMPORTANCE. PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE. I LET HIM GO. I BOWED MY HEAD AND WAITED. PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE, YES; BUT VESUVIUS IS A VOLCANO.

WHEN HE RETURNED, BROAD-GRINNING, WHITE-TOOTHED, CONTENT WITH HIMSELF, WE MADE WHITE-KNUCKLED FOLDS OF OUR HANDS AGAIN, AND AGAIN WE DROVE INTO OUR PRAYERS: "JESUS, SAVIOR, WASH AWAY ALL THAT HAS BEEN WRONG----MATTHEW, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

"TO THE BATHROOM. TO GO TO THE BATHROOM." AND WHAT WAS I TO DO? IF HE DID NOT GO TO THE BATHROOM, THE KID WOULD WET HIS BED, AND THEN HIS MOTHER, AND MY WIFE, WOULD FIND GOOD REASON TO BECOME HIS PROTECTOR AND MY ADVERSARY, HERSELF DEFEATED BY WET, STINKING SHEETS.

WHEN HE BOUNCED BACK INTO THE BEDROOM AND BACK INTO HIS BED; WHEN HE FOLDED HIS HANDS SO SWEETLY, HE NOTICED A CERTAIN SMOLDER IN MY COUNTENANCE.

"AREN'T WE GOING TO PRAY?" HE SAID. "TOMORROW," I ROARED, "WE WORE THE PRAYER OUT TONIGHT!" "AREN'T YOU GOING TO HUG ME?" HE SAID. "TOMORROW," I THUNDERED, AND LEFT. "TOMORROW!"

BREAKFAST. MY WIFE CALLED THE CHILDREN, FOUR OF THEM, TO WASH THEIR HANDS TO EAT. THREE OF THEM WASHED THEIR HANDS. ONE OF THEM DIDN'T BUDGE, WAS READING THE SPORTS PAGE IN THE LIVING ROOM. I WAS NO LONGER A PATIENT MAN. "MATTHEW," I SAID, "DIDN'T YOU HEAR YOUR MOTHER?" "YES," HE SAID, "I HEARD HER."

"WHAT DID SHE SAY?" "SHE SAID, WASH YOUR HANDS." "AND WHY HAVEN'T YOU WASHED YOUR HANDS?" IN PERFECT INNOCENCE, THE CHILD LOOKED UP AT ME FROM THE FLOOR. WITH PERFECT RATIONALITY, LIFTING TWO FINGERS, HE ANSWERED ME. "BECAUSE SHE DIDN'T ASK ME TWICE."

WANGERIN THEN REMEMBERS THAT ALL OF HIS RHETORICAL SKILLS, HONED FOR MORE THAN TEN YEARS IN THE PULPIT, FLASHED IN THE LIVING ROOM, DAMNED A CHILD FOR A NO-ACCOUNT AND WITHERED HIS SOUL TO NOTHING. "I SINNED AGAINST MY SON."

THAT AFTERNOON HE RAN AWAY. CLARENCE FIELDS, CUB SCOUT LEADER CALLED FROM THE CHURCH. "ISN'T MATTHEW COMING TODAY?" "HE SHOULD HAVE COME STRAIGHT FROM SCHOOL," HIS FATHER ANSWERED. "THAT'S AN HOUR AGO. HE ISN'T HERE YET," SAID THE CUB SCOUT LEADER. MATTHEW'S FATHER COVERED THE MOUTHPIECE AND SPOKE TO JOSEPH IN THE KITCHEN. "DO YOU KNOW WHERE MATTHEW IS?" HIS BROTHER SAID, "YES" AND THEN SAID "NO." "HE RAN AWAY," SAID JOSEPH, "BUT I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE WENT." "FROM HOME?" "HE SAID HE WASN'T WORTH NOTHING. HE SAID HE WASN'T COMING BACK!" THEN JOSEPH CRIED.

AND SAID WANGERIN, "A HAMMERING BEGAN IN MY OWN CHEST." IT WAS NO EASY THING TO TELL THE SCOUT LEADER THAT MATTHEW RAN AWAY. THIS IS MY SON. THIS WAS MY DOING.

THE CUB SCOUTS IMMEDIATELY DEPLOYED, ALL LEAPED INTO THE LEADER'S CAR TO GO LOOKING FOR MATTHEW.

FOR MY OWN PART, SAID HIS FATHER, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. THERE WAS WATER IN ME THAT THREATENED TO DROWN MY SOUL--AND I COULD HAVE BEEN GLAD TO DIE, OR TO WEEP, ONE. LORD, HOW I HAVE MISHANDLED MY SON, MY SON, MY BUSY, EXUBERANT, VULNERABLE SON!

I WENT OUT THE FRONT DOOR. I WANDERED INTO BAYARD PARK AND BEGAN TO CROSS IT THROUGH TREES. OH, MY SON, WHAT HAVE I DONE TO YOU. GUILT IS A VERY REAL PAIN, THICK IN THE CHEST, SHARP IN THE GUT, AND ALMOST INTOLERABLE.

THEN I SAW HIM--MATTHEW, DRAGGING HIS LITTLE SELF ACROSS POWELL STREET AND INTO THE PARK, COMING HOME. I DIDN'T TOUCH HIM. I HADN'T THE RIGHT. I HELD MY DISTANCE AND FELL IN STEP BESIDE HIM.

"YOU RAN AWAY?" I ASKED. "YES." "BUT YOU CAME HOME." I SAID THAT AS BRIGHTLY AS I COULD, AS THOUGH THINGS WERE MADE RIGHT THEREBY. HE SAID, "I SAW A MAN. I THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO KIDNAP ME. I WAS AFRAID. SO I CAME HOME."

WE WENT HOME IN SILENCE, HE TO HIS ROOM, I TO MY STUDY, WHERE I SAT IN MY CHAIR AND COULD

NOT MOVE. I FACED THE OPEN DOOR AND GRIEVED FOR THE PAST AND THE FUTURE TOGETHER. I THINK IT WAS A HALF HOUR LATER THAT MATTHEW PASSED THAT DOOR, GLANCED IN, SAW ME AND STOPPED. "YOU OKAY," HE SAID. "NO," I SAID. "ARE YOU SICK?" "NO. YES." HE GAZED AT ME A MOMENT, PERPLEXED, AND I DROPPED MY EYES. WITHOUT A SOUND, NEITHER SOBBING NOR SIGHING, I CRIED.

"OH-H-H-H," SAID MATTHEW SOFTLY. "NO, DAD," HE SAID, "DON'T WORRY." HE CAME INTO THE STUDY AND PUT HIS HAND ON MY KNEE. "I LOVE YOU," HE SAID. HE SMILED BRIEFLY. AND HE LEFT.

THEN WANGERIN THOUGHT TO HIMSELF. "THAT CHILD!" THAT CHILD HAD NO RIGHT TO FORGIVE ME SO! WHERE DID HE GET THE KNOWLEDGE? WHERE DID HE GET THE MATURITY, THE TRANSFIGURING POWER TO MAKE ME HIS SON AND TO MAKE HIS SON FREE? NO, THIS WAS NOT LOGICAL. THE SEQUENCE, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN MY SIN AND HIS CHARITY, WAS BREACHED; SOME OTHER CAUSE HAD CRACKED INTO THE PROCESS: AND WANGERIN WHISPERED TO HIMSELF--"EXCEPT GOD BE IN YOU."

A DOOR HAD OPENED IN THE UNIVERSE, AND THROUGH MY SON, AND IN MY FACE. THE GLORY OF GOD HAD BURST FROM A LITTLE CHILD. I WAS HUMBLED AND I WAS HEALED. AMEN.