Sunday, September 3, 1989
A LESSON IN HUMILITY
Luke 14:7-14

Jesus was a frequent guest at dinner parties. As the Gospel of Luke shows in the passage just read, Jesus used these occasions as opportunities for teaching. One day, when he was present for dinner at the home of a prominent leader in the community, he noted how some of the guests immediately and almost without thinking went to the seats of honor, those nearest the host and hostess or what we today might call, in a large banquet, the head table or table number one. These particular guests simply assumed that since there were no name cards at the seats, the places of honor were for them. If not for them, for whom? A quick look around the room convinced 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 guests fend for themselves.

The seating of guests at parties can be a problem, especially when most of the people present think they are celebrities and more deserving of honor than other guests. According to news reports a few weeks ago, Malcolm Forbes solved the problem at his 70th birthday party held in Morocco by putting all the guests' names in a box, then drawing them out and seating guests accordingly. Some of the people there didn't like that idea at all. There was no pecking order.

We know how status-conscious most of us are, how bent we are on getting the proper recognition, and how hurt our dignity feels when we think some deserved recognition is denied us and given to someone else. Similarly, have you noticed how upset people get over God's goodness to people they think don't deserve it? Some of the most serious squabbles I know of have been caused by persons thinking they were left out or overlooked, or shoved out of some place of honor.

Seeing such actions and attitudes gave Jesus the setting and occasion for the parable we are considering today. I'm sure that he told this little story with a smile. "When you're invited to a dinner party, don't 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 have thought of as being less important than you. Your host or hostess might be forced to say to you in front of everyone else, 'I'm afraid that you are going to have to give up your seat for this guest.' And with considerable embarrassment, you will have to sit in the lowest place. No," said Jesus, "It is better when you are invited to go and take your seat in an inconspicuous place so that when your host or hostess arranges the seating, you might be the one who will be pleasantly surprised. She might say to you, 'Come now, my friend, we have a much better seat for you.'"

Then Jesus added the punchline, "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

This parable from Jesus speaks to us on at least two levels.

First, on our human level, in our day-to-day relationships, there is a great deal of simple, practical, and helpful advice in the story. It is a good lesson in humility. In the story, Jesus pokes fun at our silliness for thinking we deserve, automatically, the most honored spot. Perhaps some of you listening 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 hostess wanted to place in a more honored seat than you. Jesus pokes fun at us for paying so much attention to whether or not we think we get the recognition we deserve. Our society places too much value on celebrity status anyway.
I like what Henry Kissinger said about being a celebrity: “The nice thing about being a celebrity is that when you bore people, they think it is their fault.”

What is it in our human nature that causes us to want to exalt ourselves? To want to be served rather than to serve? Why do we want to see ourselves as being superior to someone else? Is it because we lack inner self-esteem? Is our excess pride a cover for a lack of self-worth?

There are many who try to make up for their lack of self-esteem by surrounding themselves with products that will let others know how important they are. That’s because they know that there is a tendency among us to evaluate others by outward symbols — the kind of automobile one drives, whether or not one wears “designer” clothes, and being seen in the places where so-called important people gather.

None of us are completely immune from this kind of value system. It’s built into our culture. How much money one makes or has becomes the highest value of all.

My guess is that the American dream in the ghettos and slums of our cities is not all that different from the American dream on campus. When recently asked the same question concerning their philosophy of life, a majority of the college students sampled answered, “Making money.” That’s why people sell drugs — to make money.

Since 1967, the ratio of those students who aspire to building a meaningful philosophy of life to those who want to make a lot of money has shifted from 70-30 in favor of philosophy to 70-30 in favor of simply making as much money as possible.

According to the Gospel, only one thing distinguishes the pushers and dealers in our cities and towns from their light-fingered brothers on Wall Street. The odds for the dealers and pushers are better for making it into God’s Kingdom. According to Jesus, the bagman in Harlem is greater in the Kingdom than the bagman on Wall Street or in Washington. The reason is simple. He has fewer pretensions to virtue.

And that’s exactly what Jesus was talking about in this parable, our pretensions to being virtuous, to thinking of ourselves as being better than others.

In his life and teachings, Jesus reversed our usually accepted standards and values. His parables are designed to shock the smugness out of us — parties thrown for prodigal children, prostitutes having precedence in the Kingdom over moguls, the humble being exalted, and the exalted humbled. The meek inheriting the earth.

In our fiercely competitive culture, with its intensified social stratification and its passion for wealth and prestige, note the contrast of the sayings of Jesus—"Whoever would be great among you must 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, be number one, he or she 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 those

who are first will always be first or that those who are at the head tables in our earthly banquets will be at the head table in God's heavenly banquets. "Not so," said Jesus.

What gives added weight to these teachings of Jesus is his own character. He was utterly indifferent to any person's economic or social or political position. He treated rich and poor alike. He attached no importance to social registers or to political power.

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 to God even unto death. And yet all through his life, he dwarfed everyone around him; in moral stature, he towered head and shoulders above all his contemporaries.

So, at one level, this parable is to help us laugh at some of our own silly pretensions in human relationships. It is a lesson in humility.

However, the story also speaks to us on a second level, for it is much more than a simple lesson in table etiquette or the folly of status-seeking or celebrity worship.
At its deepest meaning, the parable gives us insight into the nature of God's creation and God's relationship to us, and the way in which God's community operates.

The parable reminds us that there is no place for our kind of pride in our status or for thinking of ourselves as superior or inferior in the community of God. For in that Community, God will seat people as God knows they deserve. And the Bible reminds us that "God's ways are not our ways."

In this parable and in many others, Jesus reminds us that, from God's point of view, many of us will 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 lower end of the table whom we expected to see at the top.

And the main point that Jesus makes here and in many other places is that the truly humble are always surprised that they are asked to move to the head of the table. They say, "Who? Me?" Those with true humility aren't aware of the fact. They are surprised by any honor. They do their good deeds out of faithfulness and do not expect any recognition or "Thank Yous."

Jesus illustrated this fact in another parable. He said that one day God will say to some people, "Come O Blessed Ones, 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 in prison and you visited me."

But, said Jesus, these people will be surprised by it all. They will ask, "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 and in prison and visit you?" And the Lord will say to them, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

The truly humble and good people, according to God's point of view, are those who are surprised at being called good; surprised that anyone would think they did anything out of the ordinary. They are not those who keep reminding us, in one way or another, how good and humble they are.

Sometimes we see little glimpses of humble people simply doing what needs to be done, and then we are seeing God's Community at work. Here's what one person observed. She wrote in a letter to the editor of a St. Louis newspaper:

"A crippled white woman boarded the bus in midtown. There was no vacant seat. A young black woman rose immediately and offered the crippled woman her seat. An elderly white man who had been sitting next to the black woman got up, thanked her for her courtesy, and offered her his seat. A young white boy sitting beside his mother jumped to his feet and offered the elderly man his seat. When the crippled white woman left the bus in a predominantly black neighborhood, another black woman who got off ahead of her turned and helped her to the curb."

What is the source of such humility and goodness? It's all part of seeing ourselves in the right perspective. It's a gift from God. It's our true nature. It's not a matter of "ought to" or "have to." When we are humble because we think we ought to be, then we get people who are proud of their humility.

And do not make the mistake of equating a poor self-image or putting oneself down with humility. Jesus never meant that we are to belittle ourselves or our worth as children of God.

We do need to be honest enough to admit our own weaknesses and to admit that we do not know it all. Sir Isaac Newton, one of the great scientists in his time, said when he was an old man, "I am as a child on the seashore picking up a pebble here and a shell there, but the great ocean of truth lies before me." He did not condemn himself for not knowing more than he did. But he had a sense of perspective about himself and God's creation. James Michener said at age 77, "If you live long enough, people think you are brighter than you are." Again, a sense of perspective.

Here's a humbling thought to help you in having the right perspective—"Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have lived on earth have died away, and no stars will wink out in tribute if we in our folly soon join them."

It also helps to remember that there is no such thing as a self-made human being. Jesus always 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.

So, if we see ourselves even dimly against the vast backdrop of God's creation, and if we see ourselves correctly in relation to all other persons who have equal value in God's eyes as we do, then no one will need to tell us not to rush for the seats of honor in God's community. God loves us no matter where we find ourselves sitting. Amen.