Sunday, May 3, 1992
IT'S BETTER TO BE SURPRISED
Luke 14:1,7-14

The other day, I was going through some of the books in my library, and I came across four books that I had forgotten about. The first was entitled The Book of Insults, Ancient and Modern. The second book, a sequel, was The Second Book of Insults. The third book was called The Last Word: Put-Downs, Insults, Squelches, Compliments, Rejoinders, Epigrams, Epitaphs of Famous People, and the fourth book on the same general subject was 2000 More Insults. That's more than anyone needs!

One reason books like these are so interesting and have become bestsellers is that all of us have been in situations where someone made a comment to us, and we regretted that we didn't have a clever reply.

Another reason books on this subject are so popular is that we've all known people who were pompous or "puffed up," as the Bible says, and we wish we could say something that would deflate, embarrass, or humble them.

Winston Churchill was one of the masters of put-downs and quick rejoinders. He once said of his fellow politician, Clement Attlee, "A modest little man with much to be modest about." In a similar vein, Thomas Reed, when he was Speaker of the House, described the members of Congress: "They never open their mouths without subtracting from the sum of human knowledge."

But back to Churchill, undoubtedly one of the best in this field. One evening, the British woman politician Bessie Braddock turned to Winston Churchill and said, "Winston, you're drunk." Churchill replied, "Bessie, you're ugly, and tomorrow morning I'll be sober."

Churchill and Lady Astor were notorious verbal sparring partners. On one occasion, when they were seated next to each other at dinner, arguing heatedly, Lady Astor turned on her adversary and said, "Winston, if you were my husband, I should flavor your coffee with poison." "Madam," retorted Sir Winston, "if I were your husband, I should drink it."

Like Churchill, George Bernard Shaw was seldom caught with his defenses down. He was a thin man in stature. One day, he was speaking with a rather portly newspaper tycoon who said to Shaw: "The trouble with you, Shaw, is that you look as if there were a famine in the land." Shaw replied, "The trouble with you, Northcliffe, is that you look as if you were the cause of it."

Or consider this put-down by Samuel Johnson. Upon returning a manuscript he had been asked to read, he said to the expectant author, "Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good."

Even though we do not like to be insulted or embarrassed, most of us have difficulty resisting the temptation to put down others, especially those who seem to give the impression of being better than others.

Maybe that's the reason insults remain the source of so much humor. Comedians like Don Rickles have made entire careers out of insulting other people. What makes them so popular? We seem to enjoy seeing others put down.

Perhaps that's because we human beings are so concerned with our status. We worry about our position, what other people think about us. Is someone getting ahead of us? How come that person was invited, and I wasn't? We're always wondering whether or not we are acceptable to those we consider above us, and we want to keep a safe distance from those we consider to be lower. That's why institutions and especially governments employ chiefs of protocol so that when state dinners or other official affairs are held, no one will be seated in a place that is above or beneath their status and be embarrassed.

Religious people are not immune from this disease. It's widespread. Status consciousness, snobbery — it goes under many names. Some people use their religion as a means of elevating themselves and putting others down. They use their religion to say, "I'm better than you." Jesus condemned that characteristic of the religious more severely and more frequently than anything else.

There's a story in the Gospel of Luke about this issue. One day, when Jesus was the guest at the home of a prominent leader in the community, a man who moved in the right circles in that town, he possibly invited some of his friends to come for dinner to see firsthand what this teacher from Nazareth was really like. Jesus was something of a celebrity by now.

Many people had heard of his preaching, and the rumor was that he was also a healer. It was a splendid affair in a fancy home overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

After the dinner, the host asked Jesus to say a few words, and Jesus never missed a teaching opportunity. He began his speech by saying, "I noticed that many of you had difficulty in finding the right place to sit. Some of you automatically assumed the places of honor were for you, those nearest the host and hostess at the head of the table. And then I noticed that others thought they should be in the places of honor and were upset that those seats were already taken by people they considered of lower status."

We all know that the seating of guests at an important dinner can be a problem, especially when many of the people attending consider themselves celebrities and more deserving of honor than others. Some years ago, when Malcolm Forbes was still alive and gave a lavish 70th birthday party to which all the so-called important people were invited, he solved the problem by putting all the names of the guests in a box and then drawing them out and seating them accordingly. Some of the people there didn't like the idea. 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 in dignity we are when we think some deserved recognition is denied us and given to someone else.

Perhaps you've also noticed how upset some of us get over God's goodness to people we think don't deserve it.

What advice did Jesus give? Listen to the parable that Jesus told in that after-dinner speech. He said, "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 will then be forced to say to you in front of everyone else, 'Please take a seat at the foot of the table; the seat you have is reserved for someone else.' And with considerable embarrassment, you will have to sit in the lowest place."

“The best thing to do,” said Jesus, “is to take a seat at the foot of the table so that when your host or hostess comes, you might be asked to move up higher; then you will be honored in the presence of all who are there.”

And then Jesus added the punch line, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus was reminding those dinner guests and us that life in this world and in God’s Kingdom is filled with surprises, and it’s better to be surprised with honor than to be surprised by being humbled and embarrassed. All this jockeying for position, this conspicuous consumption, this overachievement, this accumulation of righteousness — none of that is going to count. What counts in God’s kingdom is humility. Those who take the lowest seats at God’s banquet will be moved up higher. And those who rush in, confident of their status, demanding the best seats, may be asked kindly to move over to the table near the kitchen door.

In the parable, Jesus pokes fun at our silliness for thinking we automatically deserve the most honored seat and for paying so much attention to whether or not we are getting the recognition we deserve. Our society places too much value on celebrity status anyway. I’ve mentioned in other sermons that 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’s their fault.”

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

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

What’s hard for us to hear, and I’m including myself, is that 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 God’s Kingdom over the high and mighty, 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 teachings of Jesus: “Whoever would be great among you must be the servant of all.” “Many that are last shall be 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, and 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 the teachings of Jesus is his own character. He was utterly indifferent to any person’s economic, 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.

At a deeper level, this story about not rushing to the head table 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 false pride in our status or for thinking of ourselves as superior or inferior. In God's community, God will seat people according to God's standards, and the Bible reminds us over and over again that God's ways are not our ways.

At God's banquet, many of us will be surprised. We are going to meet people who have been assigned places by God that we would never have dreamed of; and we are going to find others at the lower end of the table that we might have expected to see somewhere else.

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, surprised at being called good, surprised that God or anyone else would think they did anything out of the ordinary. They do their good deeds out of faithfulness and are surprised by any recognition or "thank yous."

What's 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. And it takes practice.

So the next time you are tempted to say something that will call attention to you at the expense of someone else, try to remember that you don't need to do that anymore. You know who you are. You are a child of God. You are already somebody, by grace. You don't need to prove it anymore. Amen.