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About 25 years ago Thomas Wheeler, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, told a story about he and his wife going for a drive one day. He was getting low on gas so he pulled off at the first exit in a rural area that had a dumpy little gas station with one pump. There was only one man working the place, so he asked the man to fill it up while he checked the oil. When he closed the hood he saw his wife talking with the station attendant. When they got back in the car he asked his wife if she knew the attendant. She said she did indeed know him as they had gone to high school together and in fact had dated seriously for about a year. Well, Wheeler couldn't help bragging a little and said, "Boy were you lucky I came along. Because if you'd married him you'd be the wife of a gas station attendant instead of the wife of a Chief Executive Officer." His wife replied, "My dear, if I had married him, he'd be the Chief Executive Officer and you'd be the gas station attendant."

In the gospel this morning we find that Jesus also lived in a culture where status was pretty much everything. And one of the key places where status was displayed was mealtime. Guests of honor were seated close to the host, while those of lesser importance sat further away. And those who weren't invited, obviously, didn't matter at all. Status was important ... and it could be fragile. To be invited to a better position at the table of an important host wasn't simply an honor, it could also have tangible benefits to your business pursuits as well. Similarly, to be invited to a lower position could affect all dimensions of your life.

Jesus, therefore, is touching on matters of great importance as he makes two sets of interesting and inter-related comments. In the first he gives what seems to be good advice -- don't think too highly of yourself. Be modest, be humble. Better to start from a lower position and be invited higher than place yourself ahead of others and asked to move lower.

The second commentary Jesus offers, however, is not addressed to those attending a banquet but to those giving it, and it moves beyond good advice to something that might have sounded to his audience as fairly ridiculous: don't invite those in a position to do something for you, but rather invite those who cannot give you anything in return.

In an honor-and-shame culture, status - who you are, is everything. Favors, debts, honor -- it's all about where you stand with the rest of the population. So, inviting persons to a banquet -- whether family, friends, or business associates -- puts them in your debt and makes a claim on them to return this favor to you. It's an "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" kind of world and meals are a great way to scratch someone's back. This is why Jesus' "advice" probably sounded so ludicrous. Why on earth waste an opportunity for social commerce by inviting those who have nothing to give you, who can do nothing for you, and who typically mean nothing to you? It's crazy.

But isn't the status game, isn't the game of what can I get from this person, what can this person do for me, what we do too today? Doesn't this start even when we're in school? Do you remember how obvious the pecking order was at school? How important it was to sit with the right folks at lunch? How much it meant to you to have someone invite you to a party or even just save you a seat at lunch? The clear social demarcations of the various groups from the jocks, the popular ones, band, nerds, or whatever was clearly defined. Our schools very much operate on a status system.

It doesn't end with school. It happens in the work place and at every organization you can probably think of. It happens just about everywhere. Don't we judge our worth and the worth of others based on size, weight, zip code, academic accomplishments, or professional titles? Jesus in this passage invites not just his first-century hearers but also us his twenty-first century followers to live differently, to break the rules of "what have you done for me lately?", and to value others not because of what they can do for you but because they are -- we each are! -- children of God.

And this is where humility comes in. The word is related to *humor* and to the root *humus*-- which means close to the earth. It is also related to the word *human*, which is literally "from the earth." To have humility then is to be down to earth. Humility is not thinking that you are worthless but seeing oneself in the proper perspective--which is alongside everyone else. Humility understands that we are all part of the human family. So, humility is seeing all of us being on an equal footing before God. It means seeing yourself and all people in the proper perspective. This is what Jesus calls the kingdom of God.

You see God is the Great Reverser of our priorities, our hierarchies, and our values. God knows there is no end to the miserable human game of who is "in" and who is "out," and God in God's wisdom knows that our anxious scramble for greatness will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation. Jesus insists that God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity; it is one of abundance, where all are already welcome, already loved, already known, and already cherished. The currency of that kingdom is humility, not arrogance; generosity, not stinginess; hospitality, not fear. The table at the center of that kingdom has so many seats — all of them premier seats, all of them first-class seats, all of them honorable seats — that we don't have to scramble and exhaust ourselves to secure a good spot.

This ties perfectly in with the lesson from Hebrews and being hospitable to everyone because you never know when you are entertaining angels unaware. The picture on today's bulletin is a perfect illustration of this. The boat is filled with immigrants of all nationalities and cultures thrown together in a boat and the sculptor, Timothy Schmalz says, you can't look at it without seeing yourself in the boat. This is what humility is. This is what hospitality is. This is what the kingdom of God looks like. Seeing yourself and others in the same boat.

Psychiatrist Robert Coles who has written a lot of book and teaches at Harvard wrote a book about Dorothy Day the famous Catholic social worker who founded the Catholic Worker. When Coles was a medical student at Harvard, he volunteered to work at the Catholic Worker. His credentials were impeccable, the kind that made people sit up and take notice of him and he indeed thought highly of himself too.

On his first day of volunteering he arrived at the building housing the Catholic Worker and asked to see Dorothy Day. He was told she was in the kitchen and he went in and saw her sitting at a table, talking to someone. He could tell that the man she was talking to was addicted to some kind of substance. He was disheveled and appeared to be a homeless street person. Dorothy Day was sitting at a table with him, listening intently to what he had to say.

She didn't notice Coles had come in the room until she finished the conversation with the man and stood up. When she noticed him she asked, "Do you want to speak to one of us?"

Coles was astounded. Dorothy Day is famous. This man with her is a nobody. He's a derelict and she's asking him which one he wants to talk too. Coles had never seen anything like this before.

Humility that can identify with another person so completely as to remove all distinctions between them cuts through all of the boundaries, all the categories that society sets up to separate us from one another. There were just two people at that table, with one being concerned about the other.

Robert Coles said that it changed his life. He said he learned more in one moment than he did in his entire educational endeavors. He saw in one moment what it means to humble yourself as Jesus did. Humility comes when we see everyone as a part of the human family. If we truly see all people of equal worth before God, if we understand all people to be part of the human family, then we can't help but be caring and compassionate toward other family members.

This is what the kind of humility Jesus calls us to. This is the humility that encourages us to invite everyone to share in the banquet of life. May we be a people of humility and may we always be a community where all are welcome, all are valued, all are important. And Jesus says, "You will be blessed." Amen