

I once heard a man talk about a time in his youth when he had been with an older man whom he admired greatly. At a luncheon, the waiter spilled some soup on the older man. The young man was impressed by the gracious way in which the man handled the incident and made the embarrassed waiter feel a bit better. He said, "I decided then and there that if that ever happened to me, I would handle it just as my hero had. But I have lived many years and no waiter has ever spilled soup on me. And I have come to realize that I have missed many opportunities to be gracious because I was waiting for the spilled soup." Isn't that so true? How often we focus on the details of a situation and miss the larger message we should be hearing! Well, we can have the same problem with the Gospel text we just heard. We can decide that we will always sit in the lowest seat and miss many other opportunities to practice humility.. And what would happen if we take this parable literally? We'd have a whole bunch of people battling for the lowest seat at a banquet and then sitting there expectantly, waiting to be called to a more prestigious seat. Jesus isn't talking here about a strategy for being recognized and called to a higher place, isn't it? This is a parable. Jesus is talking about the kind of attitude we should have toward life.

That's also true of the saying about hospitality. We all know how easy it is for hospitality to become a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." If I invite you to dinner, then you are expected to invite me. But Jesus says that we are to invite the people who can't return the favour. But notice. Jesus isn't telling us just to make sure those people get enough to eat. In that society, to eat with someone was to declare that your guest was your friend! In other words, Jesus is telling us to expand our circle of friends to include those who are less fortunate than we are. That, of course, requires us to push the boundaries of our comfort zone, for we are most comfortable with those who are like us, aren't we?

So what does that have to do with the gospel? Well, the gospel not only tells us of God's grace to us in Jesus, but also tells us that we are to reflect that same grace in our lives. In this passage, Jesus is calling us to recognize that everything we have is a gift from God. All my talents, all my abilities, all my wealth, all my prestige - whatever I have that is important to me is a gift from God. For example, I was blessed by the family in which I grew up. I was loved and was not abused. We were never poverty-stricken. I was encouraged in the things I wanted to do. My parents were always ready to help others who were in need. The family in which I was raised was definitely a gift from God. And, since those childhood experiences make it easier for me to be loving and encouraging and to reach out to others, my ability to do those things is also a gift from God. For those gifts I am grateful, and I should be. For when we recognize that the important things we have in life are gifts we have been given rather than accomplishments of our own, then gratitude is the natural outcome, isn't it? And that, I think, is what Jesus is doing here: he is calling us to have an attitude of gratitude. An attitude of gratitude - that's a catchy term, isn't it? Hopefully, it's one that's easy to remember. But what does it mean? What does it involve? Well, let's try to unpack that term a bit, make it more specific.

First of all, it helps us understand what humility is, for humility is often misunderstood. Some people think that humility means thinking that everyone else is better than you are, more deserving than you are, more competent than you are. I once heard a grandmother, whose grandchildren were very

smart, tell the parents that they shouldn't compliment their children lest they become proud. I think that's a false view of humility. Humility begins by recognizing that God has given you gifts. He has, you know. We all have gifts. That means that we all have value in God's sight and therefore should have value in our own eyes! There is a type of pride that is perfectly compatible with humility, a pride in honest achievement of any kind. For instance, I'm a good preacher. I know that because people have told me that my preaching has made a difference in their lives. One lady once told me that under my preaching she had come to realize, for the first time, that she had real value as a person. I'm proud of that. But at the same time I'm deeply grateful that God allowed me to help her, and I realize that it was really God working through me. So an attitude of gratitude means that we recognize our own self-value and self-worth, that we can hold our heads high as God's creatures and God's children.

Second, an attitude of gratitude makes it clear to us that we should not expect special treatment. Why not? Because we don't deserve special treatment. Think of the people who expect and demand special treatment - nobility, the wealthy, the famous. What are they really saying? I am better than other people because of my birth, or my bank account, or my press clippings, so I should get special treatment. But if all that we have, including our birth and the talents that enable us to accumulate wealth or achieve fame in some field, are all gifts from God, how can they make us better than others? Are some of God's gifts more important than others? No! Do some gifts make us more valuable than others? No! So humility means that while we don't consider ourselves unimportant or without value, neither do we consider ourselves better than other people. Certainly we may recognize that we have gifts which are useful and valuable and we may recognize the value of those gifts to ourselves and others, but that does not make us better or give us a right to expect or demand special treatment, does it?

Third, this attitude of gratitude should keep us from judgmentalism. We all have different gifts. My gifts may make it easy for me to do some things that are hard for you; that's no reason for me to judge you. Your gifts may make it easy for you to do some things that are hard for me; that's no reason for you to judge me. And that applies to people whose way of life is foreign to us. When I see someone who has succumbed to alcoholism, I have to ask myself, "What in his or her life was so terrible that made an alcoholic stupor seem preferable to facing reality?" And that can be a difficult question. I have several children in Alcoholics Anonymous, so you can imagine that I have asked that question often. I don't think I have an answer to it yet. But I have learned not to judge them and not to judge their parents. The road of their life journeys are different than mine, and consequently they have some gifts of ministry that I do not have. God's gifts to them are different than God's gifts to me, but we are all valued children of God, and we need to recognize that value in one another.

Fourth, this attitude of gratitude should keep us from having narrow boundaries. I said earlier that we are all most comfortable with people who are like us. You'd agree with that statement, wouldn't you? But when we realize that other people who differ from us have received different gifts from the same God who gave us our gifts, then we ought to realize that we can learn something from them. We ought to learn to push our comfort limits, to expand them. And every time we do that we are exposed to a new aspect of God's wonderful world. Every time we do that we grow a bit. Every time we do that we find new ways and new areas in which our gifts can be used. On the other hand, if we don't push our comfort boundaries and reach out to others who are different, our boundaries tend to move inward. We become less and less tolerant of small differences, more and more selective about

the people with whom we fellowship, and we become narrow persons. That's what God wants of us, is it? God wants us to grow, and growth always demands pushing beyond where we are. So when we're grateful to God for our gifts, we'll want to keep on learning new ways to use them and new areas in which they can be used.

Finally, this attitude of gratitude is essential to reflecting God's love in our lives. The gifts we have are expressions of God's love. When we use those gifts in a spirit of gratitude, we reflect that love of God in our actions. We are God's representatives in all that we do. And when you and I can use our gifts in harmony, our ability to reflect God's love grows exponentially. When we join together in the love of God, then our togetherness itself speaks of God's love. And when we unitedly use our varied gifts to accomplish more together than we could do apart, and when we do that in a spirit of gratitude to God for all his love to us, then God's love shines out like a lamp in the darkness.

So these few words of Jesus about how to act in social situations actually lead us deeply into ourselves. They call us to examine ourselves. Do we have an attitude of gratitude? What do our actions say? Let's ask God to give us, individually and as a congregation, an attitude of gratitude that will reflect God's love brightly in this world that needs so desperately to see it.

To God, the giver of every perfect gift, be praise and honour and glory forever and ever. Amen