An old story is told about someone who is searching for the meaning of life who wanders into the hut of a holy hermit in a forest. The hermit offers his guest tea and keeps pouring tea into the cup until it is overflowing. The guest watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. “Stop! The cup is full. No more will go in.” And then the hermit replied, “Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions, preconceptions, and ideas. How can I teach you unless you first empty your cup?”

That is a wonderful story about humility, which is esteemed by many religious traditions. Dante in The Divine Comedy thought of humility as the most important virtue. Humility is radical dependence upon and trust in God.

Yet in practice we don’t see humility as a primary virtue today. We want to be noticed. Think of people on reality shows and American Idol. We read books about successful people. Who would watch a reality show entitled dancing with the hermits instead of the stars? We love success, status and prestige. We follow a pecking order and seek to use it to our advantage just like those guests choosing the seats of honor at the Pharisee’s banquet in our Gospel lesson from Luke for this morning.

As I thought of the Gospel lesson for this morning I also kept thinking of school. I thought of the cafeteria, the locker room, and the school bus. You see, in today’s Gospel lesson Jesus takes on the social code of his day. Jesus lives in an honor and shame culture where status counts quite highly. One of the key places where status is displayed happens at mealtime. Guests of honor were seated close to the host, while those of lesser importance sat farther away. And those who weren’t invited at all weren’t considered to be important. To be invited to a better position at the table of your host was not just an honor. It could mean a tangible benefit to your business as well.

Jesus is therefore touching upon matters of great importance. He first gives good advice. Don’t think too highly of yourself. Be modest. Better to situate yourself in a lower position and be invited higher than to place yourself ahead of others and be asked to go to the rear.
Jesus’ second observation is directed to those giving the banquet. And it sounded fairly ridiculous. He told the hosts not to invite people in a position to give you anything but to invite those who couldn’t give you anything in return. That sounded like utter nonsense. In and honor and shame culture you see, inviting people to a banquet, whether family, friends, or business associates, put them in your debt and made a claim on them to return this favor to you. I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine. Why on earth would Jesus urge them to waste an opportunity by inviting those who can do nothing for you? It’s crazy.

Except that it is the kingdom of God. This is the way God wants us to treat each other. It is the way God treats us….creating us, giving us what we need to flourish, caring for us, forgiving us, saving us…..even though we are unworthy and really can’t do anything in return except to share what we have been given with others. And that is what God wants. This is the life of God’s kingdom, and it stands in stark contrast to the honor and shame system of our world.

Do you remember how important the pecking order was in school? How important it was to sit with the right folks at lunch? How it felt to have someone invite you to a party? The clear social demarcations of various groups from band, sports teams, techies, or whatever? How important it was to wear the right clothing?

Humility means far more than just welcoming others appropriately as good manners. It is to remind us that God has given us all good things for no good reason. It is to remind us that God invites us to do the same for others. It is an invitation to take our faith seriously enough to live and act differently. Because our faith is important only to the degree that it helps us navigate the daily decisions and situations that attend our lives.

When I talk to our youth group for my first session with them this September I want to ask some pointed questions. What would it be like to invite one of the unpopular or uncool kids to sit with your group? What would it be like to reach out to someone very different from you? What would it be like to defend someone who is being bullied? What would it be like to post on Facebook something kind about someone who rarely gets noticed? What would it be like to invite someone to an activity who usually doesn’t get invited? What would it be like to tweet something about the importance of looking out for others? And if
someone asks you why you’re doing this, wouldn’t it be neat to say it’s because you think it’s what God wants?

Jesus invites all of us to be children of the light and live differently in our homes, schools, churches, and workplaces. He invites us to fashion and nurture a different kind of community. This community is founded not upon status but grace and not on a scratch our back mentality but upon what God has already done for all of us.

That is one of the important legacies of Martin Luther King’s March on Washington. Christians are to honor the least among us, the poor, the marginalized, the outcast. At God’s table there is no need to jockey for position because all are equally welcome.

The character of our guest list has everything to do with whether or not we are being Christ’s church. Any table where Jesus is present is a table where all are welcome. It is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet where God cares for all and all we can do is give thanks. We are ultimately all dependent upon God and interdependent upon each other. And that admission is an example of true humility.