*Grace, peace and mercy are yours from the Triune God. Amen.*

About a month ago there was an anecdotal story making its way around the internet, on religion blogs and social media sites, about the new pastor of a mega church who reportedly dressed up as a homeless man and showed up at his new congregation the day he was to be introduced. According to the story, the disguised pastor was shunned by the congregation and made to sit in the back. When it came time to introduce the new pastor, everyone was stunned to find that the unfortunate “homeless” man was actually their new leader, who recited a passage of scripture that urged Christians to help the unfortunate, the poor, hungry, needy and so on, among them as Jesus would do. It turns out that this story is the stuff of internet folklore, neither this pastor nor his mega church actually exist, but it has been used time and time again as a lesson on hospitality. The moral of the story is that we should always be welcoming and gracious because the Bible commands us to welcome and host those who are in need. Which would be well and good if we were capable of following through on that command all of the time. We believe that we already know the moral of the story in today’s Gospel. We know that we are called to welcome the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind into our communities. We know that Jesus commands us to be welcoming hosts. We know how hard it is. How uncomfortable it can be. And we have all heard this preached a time or two before.

It’s one thing to think about being the gracious host who extends the hospitality. We are comfortable in this role. Those of us who live in the Midwest have refined this to an art. When someone brings us a casserole or a Tupperware filled with cookies, we feel compelled to return the dish with some baked goods of our own. We keep track of the weddings to which we have been invited in order to invite those same people to our children’s weddings a decade later. We thank one another for thank you cards. We have agreed upon these mutually unspoken expectations of hospitality. We see ourselves in the role of the host because then we can CHOOSE to be gracious. Hospitality becomes another thing that we do in order to be good. It makes us “nice people.” We get to see ourselves as humble, gracious hosts. And whether or not we are willing to say it out loud, we, like the host of the wedding banquet in today’s Gospel parable, expect that our invitation will be returned…that our kindness will be reciprocated…that we will get something back for the effort that we put in to our hospitality.

How many of our social interactions are built upon creating relationships that might be beneficial for professional networking, or amassing friends so that we might be well-liked, or even just creating a favorable image for ourselves in the eyes of others? And doesn’t Jesus drive right at the heart of this issue when he tells his host, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.” He goes on to say, “And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” When Jesus speaks these words, he is speaking to us. We view the hospitable acts we do for others as a way to advance our own social standing. And if we get to be humble while doing it, even better!

What does it mean to be humble? To have humility? Culturally, we appear to have defined humility as a something that we do by always putting others first and by thinking less of ourselves. Humility itself can become destructive and yet another means by which we convince ourselves we are unworthy. It can become a way that we lose sight of our identity as beloved children of God. By being humble, by showing humility, we hope that we will be seen as good people. We use humility as another way of earning our place of honor at the table. We are gambling on the idea that our own actions might redeem us.

We instinctively place ourselves in the role of host. We are comfortable there. It is something entirely different to be the one who is hosted. Think about when you were shown abundant hospitality. Has a friend ever come over to your house in a blizzard to jumpstart your car? How about a late night ride from the airport? Or the friend or family member who spent a day with your children so that you might have some time off? How does that feel? I imagine you want to attempt to pay back that person in some way or another as soon as possible. It is humbling to receive such overwhelming hospitality. It is even unsettling. We want to feel like we are deserving of the hospitality that is extended to us. We have been taught since we were children that “There is no such thing as a free lunch” and we are suspicious that someone might want something from us. And in the midst of all of this over-thinking, a simple act of generosity becomes another way in which we are bound up. Another way in which we calculate what is right and what is wrong. Another thing we think that we should be doing better.

We, like the guests at the wedding feast in the parable in today’s Gospel, view our social exchanges as currency for securing our place at the table. In society. In the kingdom. If we somehow talk to the right people, reciprocate these invitations, and do all the appropriate and nice things, we will be secure.

But what if humility is not what we think it is? What if humility is not an action that we do or something that we might become, but rather, it is a willingness to receive?

What if we are the ones who are being extravagantly hosted? This feels uncomfortable. We feel vulnerable. As if we are not good enough. What if instead of seeing ourselves as the host who is gracious enough to invite these less-than-perfect people to a banquet, we are actually the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind being invited by the most gracious host of all, God?

Brothers and sisters, in today’s Gospel text Jesus is not talking about throwing a festive luncheon. He is talking about the kingdom of God. He is talking about throwing wide open the doors of heaven to invite in the tax collectors, and sinners, and all the broken people. WE are those people. In today’s Gospel reading we hear about a God who doesn’t play by the rules of our world. We have a God who came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to break the bonds of sin and death and poverty and all those walls that we put between ourselves and others. Those who are perceived to be “less than” are exalted, and those who exalt themselves in this world will tumble down from their positions of power. Our place in the kingdom of God is not dependent on what we do or what we have or who we know. It is solely dependent on the fact that we are beloved children of God. Yes, we are to be gracious hosts to our neighbor. But we are also extravagantly hosted. God neither expects nor demands anything in return from us. There is nothing that we can do that is good enough to deserve this blessing, and there is nothing that we can do that is bad enough for it to be taken away. And this promise changes everything. We are free.

At the bottom of the social ladder Jesus invites all of us in to eat. To share in a meal with God and with one another. And we do not have to wait for our time in a far away heaven to share in this meal. We do this every week when we partake in the Eucharist. We bring all the broken, messy, painful parts of ourselves to the table. We are accepted, we are called by name. This is pure gift. Come and receive.