

Jesus was a rather rude dinner guest. At a Sabbath meal he criticizes the host for inviting the well-healed. As the guest of honor, he criticizes the other guests who are jockeying for seats of honor. Mary would have been appalled by his manners. When she was with him, water became wine; when he was on his own, wine became vinegar.

The early church took Jesus' criticism of the host to heart. Church historians say that, by the fourth century, the church at Rome was feeding as many as twenty thousand of that city's poor.

On Sunday, the church celebrated the Lord's Supper, eucharist, as the culmination of its worship. Immediately afterward the people gathered for a communal meal in which all were invited to partake. These great meals served both to feed the hungry and as an opportunity to share the gospel.

A inner city congregation became concerned about the plight of the homeless. They began a soup kitchen that operated three days a week. Soon, they were feeding over 60 people for lunch.

On every other Sunday, it was this congregation's custom to share a meal after church. Someone asked, "Why don't we invite the people we feed during the week to eat with us on Sunday?"

A debate ensued. Someone opened the Bible and read today's gospel. Immediately, another person moved they have a meal after church every Sunday and invite everyone to join in, particularly the people who showed up during the week. The motion passed.

I wonder what motivated them to invite the homeless and hungry to join them for lunch on Sundays? Was it a desire to meet a need? Or was it a desire to be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous, knowing the homeless couldn't return the favor? Or, some mixture the two? Our motives are rarely pure.

As long as the hungry are fed, does motive matter? Is the taste or nutritional value of the food affected by motive? How is table fellowship affected by motive? Can we, do we ever, act for the well-being of others, especially those most in need, without wanting something in return, not even recognition or appreciation?

It appears Jesus criticizes the motives of both his host and his dinner companions only to bless those same motives when transposed into another key. What is the difference, in terms of motive, between inviting only guests who can repay your hospitality next week, or guests who can repay your hospitality only in the resurrection of the righteous?

While Jesus inferred the motive of his host, the motive of the other guests was obvious. As Jesus watched the scramble for seats of honor, he warned *If you exalt yourself you will be humbled, so humble yourself and you will be exalted*. In either case, the motive remains the same: to be exalted.

Thomas Merton observed there is a hunger for humility that is nothing else but a hunger for admiration turned inside out. It is the desire to be admired by the angels.

A rabbi, overcome with a sense of humility before God's magnificent creation, threw himself down before the holy ark (altar) and cried, "I am nobody! I am nobody!"

The cantor, observing the rabbi from the rear of the synagogue, was moved by the rabbi's humility and devotion. He joined the rabbi at the altar crying out, "I am nobody! I am nobody!"

The custodian, sweeping the floors of the hall, heard the cries of these two religious men, and, similarly moved by their devotion, joined them at the altar, crying "I am nobody! I am nobody!"

The cantor turned to the rabbi, pointed to the custodian and remarked "Look who thinks he is nobody!"

Can we ever escape the incessant comparisons with others in order to know who we are? Must we scramble for seats of honor, take "selfies with Jesus" and post them on Instagram, to be validated? How many honors, awards, trophies, plaques, diplomas, Emmys, Grammys, Oscars, Tonys, do we need to validate our worth?

The normal understanding of humility involves a passive self-deprecation in which any sense of self-worth or value is diminished. Humility has a more profound meaning, says John O'Donohue. "Humility" is a derivative the Latin word "humus," meaning "of the earth."

Humility is the art of being open and receptive to the inner wisdom of your clay. Clay is not interested in any form of hierarchy. Under the convenient guise of not being noticed and being lowest ground, it operates a vast sacramentality of growth which nourishes and sustains all of life.

Humility educates your spirit in the art of inner hospitality. You slowly learn to lose your defensiveness. You enter more deeply into the wisdom of your clay, your humus nature. You become surer about who you are, and you no longer need to force either image or identity. Humility brings a new creativity.