

It was a cold January morning. The sweatshirt, baseball cap, frayed blue jeans violinist played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes at an underground Metro subway station in Washington, D.C. In those 45 minutes about a thousand people passed by him, all well dressed for their executive level jobs in the various government agencies. A middle aged man stopped momentarily, then hurried on as he glanced at his wristwatch; clearly he was already late. A woman hurried by and dropped in a dollar tip. A mother accompanied by her 3 year old son also stopped. The child was transfixed by the music. He wanted to stay longer, but his mother pushed hard and with the child trailing behind her moved on even as the child still looked at the violinist. In the 45 minutes the violinist played only six people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 people in all gave him a tip. The take for the morning: \$32. When he finished playing no one applauded, and the noise of a busy subway station resumed.

No one knew but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston with the average seat price being \$100.

Today's gospel story places Jesus in the home of one of the leading Pharisees at a dinner party. In the culture of Jesus' day meals were very powerful means of communication. Meals affirmed and gave legitimacy to a person's role and status in the community. That Jesus was invited to dine at one of the leading religious and civil leaders of the community's home indicates that the host accepted Jesus as a social equal. But what looks like a social event is really a trap. Luke tells us that the host and his guests "watched" Jesus closely. The word Luke employs implies "hostile observation." Every move Jesus made; what and how he ate; who he conversed with; where he reclined at table; everything was observed and noted. Custom would have demanded that Jesus host a similar gathering as repayment. In many ways not much has changed in terms of social etiquette today.

Imagine the surprise of the host and guests when Jesus turns social convention upside down and advises people to “take the lowest place at table” rather than playing on their “rank”. Even more disturbing is his admonition that rather than just inviting their usual social acquaintances when hosting a similar dinner they ought to invite the “poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind—in short those who are seen or treated as “outcasts”! Meals in Luke’s gospel are templates for understanding the Church’s practice of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. In each Mass Jesus, who humbled himself in taking on our human nature, continues to empty himself as he offers us his person under the appearances of ordinary bread and wine. For Jesus, the Eucharist, and thus the Church, are to model God’s relationship to every human being. Like God, the Eucharist and the Church are to be a table open to everyone. The truly humble person as spoken about in today’s first reading and by Jesus in the gospel, is the one who recognizes that whatever one’s possessions or rank, it is a gift from God to be generously and lovingly shared; not a birthright to be hoarded and a means to “lord it over” others.

Once upon a time, the Zen masters teach, wealthy donors invited Master Ikkyu to a banquet. The master arrived dressed in beggar’s robes. His host, not recognizing him in this garb, hustled him away saying: “We cannot have you here at the doorstep. We are expecting the famous Master Ikkyu any moment.” The master went home, changed into his ceremonial robe of purple brocade, and again presented himself at his host’s doorstep where he was received with great respect and ushered into the banquet room. There he took off his stiff robe, sat it upright at the dinner table and said, “I presume that it is my robe you have invited since when I first arrived without it a little while ago, you showed me away.”

Today’s scriptures call us to freshen our eyes, to see all the gifts of the human community clearly. Education, wealth or authority do not give us the right to snub the needs of the simple. We are to call one another by titles of love and respect. We are to care for the needs of others regardless of our rank or station.