In the time of our Lord, your place card at a dinner party revealed far more than just your name. Unlike our fast food culture, dining in the first century was an evening’s worth of glamour, cuisine, entertainment, and prestige all wrapped up on a table cloth! Where you sat – or more accurately, where you reclined – and who reclined next to you, and how close you were to the host and a guest of honor, was a sign of who you were. In a word, your place at a first century table had everything to do with status.

We know from all four Gospels that our Lord spent much of his public time sharing meals with all kinds of people, in every possible setting. He literally traveled from house to house, host to host, embracing meal times as opportunities to eat, and yes, to teach. Having a meal with Jesus was, quite frankly, more than simply sharing food.
His table time ended up becoming a living lesson on what it means to be human, gracious, hospitable, and real.

Luke recalls one such moment when Jesus was reclining at the table of a leading religious leader in some small town between Galilee and Jerusalem. He was, no doubt, the guest of honor. All eyes were surely on him, watching his every move. What the people in that home did not realize, however, was how our Lord was watching them. Like children vying for recognition, he watched the other guests as they found their paces at the table. After a lull in the pre-dinner conversation, he made a telling observation.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet,” he said, “do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host.” Where did he come up with that? Jesus simply gave definition to a tendency found in all of us; a self-serving habit to want the best for ourselves: the best seats, the best food, the highest recognition. All of us – truth be told –
have egos whine (or scream?) for attention. And therein is our problem, and our shame.

In one of those wonderful teachable moments, Jesus continued with a good word for all of us: “When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.” I’m willing to bet that the room got very quiet at this point in the conversation! “For all who exalt themselves,” he said, “will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” What is God saying to us in this fascinating story lifted out of the first century and dropped in our 21st century laps?

Without question, it surely reminds us that all of us long to find our place in this world. Finding our place is not just an issue at the dinner table, but rather a longing, a desire, a craving – (yes that’s the word) – we have to know where we belong and in so doing better define who we are. This need to find our place in the world starts with our first
breath at birth. Are we the oldest or youngest in the family? Perhaps we are an only child or in the middle. Some may be a twin or a triplet. This need to find our place never leaves us. Whether it’s on the ball field as a child hoping we’ll be picked for the “best” team, or a pledge in a sorority, or a job applicant looking for that plum position out of college or graduate school. This longing for our place, to know where we belong, and with whom we will make the human journey, stays with us all our lives. The good news in Jesus Christ tells us we all belong here, in this life, in family, in community, in church, in God’s world.

But that’s not all this shows us, is it? The story tells us powerfully that this longing to find our place in this world can only be met by knowing who we are. Do you see it in the story? The dinner guests rushing to get the best places at the table did not know who they were. They could not see themselves in the mirror and realize that, at least for that occasion, they were not the guests of honor. That did not mean they would never be the guests of honor at some dinner in the future. Surely their time would come. But it wasn’t then, and it wasn’t there.
None of us have a chance of finding our place in this world if we first do not face the realities of who we are. Not everyone has the beauty of a princess or the bearing of a king. Few have the athletic ability of a professional football player or the talent of a celebrated artist. But all of us have gifts unique to the person God made us to be. Sad indeed is the person who spends their entire life craving some other place or some other time or some other body or some other talent, while all that time missing all the fun of being the beautiful person God created them to be.

Jesus finished his lesson that evening by giving wise counsel. He said that when we throw a party, resist the temptation to invite the people who know. Rather, he said, give a banquet for “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Then, he said, “You will be blessed because they cannot repay you.” Could it be that our Lord is suggesting that the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind know who they are, that they are not powerful or resume qualified! It is in that knowing,
Jesus says, that causes them to respond to invitations of grace with great joy, unbridled gratitude, and genuine acceptance.

Finally, we can only find our place in this world, knowing who we are, when we gratefully acknowledge who Jesus is. The lesson rightly reveals Jesus to be both observer and teacher, both guest and host. He not only attends the dinner as a guest, but he moves into the role of host, offering everyone the bread that really satisfies our deepest soul hunger. And at the same time, he reveals that shoving, pushy people, trying to be great can be blind to their own smallness.

When we acknowledge Jesus as Savior, Lord, and brother, we come to a freeing awareness of who we are and the depth of God’s love for us. For the very first time, we find our place as a person wonderfully created in God’s image. We find our place as a gifted, unique, beautiful human being. We find our place, held with eternal love, as a child of God. Such discoveries are only possible when we finally realize it is Jesus who alone is worthy of our life’s devotion. Such is the invitation
given us who dare follow Jesus on this road to Jerusalem and the cross.

It is the way of death into life, finding our place as followers of the risen Lord. Let’s come to the table, and find our place!