

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—1Sep19
Lk. 18
“A-List”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

One of the best assistant sextons—or caretakers—that we ever had at our church was named Albert Massicot.

Albert could paint; he could move heavy furniture; he could fix things. He especially excelled at *cleaning*. He could clean anything—floors, curtains, upholstery—you name it, he could clean it.

Now I mention Albert because he wasn't famous. He didn't have a high-status job. His name didn't float around the Internet. And today's Gospel lesson is about how we judge a person's position in society.

In the Gospel, Jesus is invited to a Sabbath meal at the house of a prominent Pharisee. The Sabbath meals were the best meals of the week, and the Pharisees were prominent members of the Jewish community. So the dinner was a big deal!

As the guests began to arrive at the Pharisee's house, Jesus noted how they gravitated to the better seats at the dinner table.

But Christ advised his disciples that instead of naturally choosing the best places, they should seek out the *worst* ones. This strategy would avoid the embarrassing situation where a disciple chose a good seat for himself, and then his host asked him to give up that seat to someone else that the host wanted to honor more than him.

On the other hand, if a disciple took a seat out of the limelight, there is always the chance that the host will decide to recognize her by offering her one of the better places at the table.

Jesus extends this message further by suggesting to his disciples that when they entertain, they shouldn't just invite friends and neighbors who will later invite them back in return. Rather, Jesus said, they should “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

The general message of the lesson then is, as Jesus says: “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In other words: for God, there is *no* “*A-list*.” There are no guests who are especially desirable. Everyone is equally welcome at the Lord's table. And the best seats might even be given to modest folks who can't imagine that they would be so honored!

Now we are all familiar with Christ's thinking about the irrelevance of worldly status. We have long been taught that the welcome God offers to his Kingdom extends to everyone. This idea of welcoming has almost become a cliché.

But, cliché or not, it's easy to imagine occasions when we might forget Christ's teaching. Wouldn't it make a difference to you if the dinner guest you were expecting tonight wasn't your next-door neighbor but instead was *Meryl Streep*! How could the celebrity status of your guest not make a difference to you?

Even in the Church, there are A-lists. Think about when the Bishop of New York makes one of his rare visits to our church, like he did last spring. Don't we make a big fuss?

We put the bishop's name on the sign outside the church. We direct him to sit in the special chair or "cathedral" that our church has that only a bishop is allowed to sit in. Our Hospitality Committee provides special refreshments at the Coffee Hour. In other words, we treat the bishop differently from other visitors to our church.

And we don't only make judgements about high and low status to those who come to church. Tomorrow is Labor Day, a holiday that was established to celebrate American workers.

Now when we honor American laborers, we implicitly are honoring those we might not remember to honor. Labor Day isn't about recognizing the president of Apple Computers!

On this weekend, we should be thinking of workers who don't get much credit for their labors. People like our former assistant sexton, Albert. (Albert's funeral, by the way, drew a huge crowd of family and friends and acquaintances who came to honor him.)

Jesus invites us to expand our thinking about one's position in society. Jesus is teaching us not to worry about trying to associate with the grand people.

Notice, too, that Jesus is also suggesting that we should worry less about being on any A-list *ourselves!*

Jesus is asking us to want to be humble. For many of us, this is a huge step! While I myself feel the need to pray for humility every day, I can't say that it's a virtue that I actually *desire!*

If I go to a restaurant, I will still push for a good table. I will happily let other people sit by the kitchen!

Moreover, I will often judge people by their social status instead of by who they are as people. So as we ponder Christ's teachings about humility, then, it can be helpful to think about the people that we put on the "A-lists" that we have in our minds.

Not the celebrities. Rather, the family and friends we know personally. Or have known. The people whom we most admire--the folks that we would most want to spend our time with. Why do we value these people more than others?

There will be many different answers to this question. But, thinking of Christ's teaching, don't you especially value a certain form of *humility* in your friends?

You might have a friend, for example, who has plenty of personality—plenty of ego. You always know where she stands!

But when she is with you, she always defers to you and supports you in a way that only friends can do. She is never "in your face." She never pushes you when you don't want to be pushed. You want to give her the best seat at your table.

For that matter, Christ's advice is good for you, too. If you want to be on someone else's A-list, keep your ego in check. Defer to others and respect them, and you'll do better in the social world.

You can be "humble" in this sense without beating yourself up. Instead of competing for attention and applause, it's better not to try to make status points over others. It's more than enough to try to be the best friend you can be.

With this attitude, who knows? You may be asked to sit in the best seat.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.