

Thomas Wheeler, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, told this story on himself. He said that while he and his wife were out driving he noticed they were low on gas. So he pulled off at the first exit and came to this dumpy little gas station with one pump. There was only one man working the place, so he asked the man to fill it up while he headed to the restroom. Returning, he saw his wife talking and smiling at the gas station attendant. When they saw him looking at them, the station attendant walked away and pretended as if nothing had happened. Wheeler paid the man and he and his wife pulled out of that seedy little station. As they drove down the road, he asked his wife if she knew the attendant. Well, she admitted she did know him. In fact, she had known him very well. For, it seems that they not only had gone to high school together, but they dated seriously for about a year. Well, Wheeler couldn't help bragging a little and said, "Boy were you lucky I came along. Because, if you'd married him, you'd be the wife of a gas station attendant instead of the wife of a Chief Executive Officer." His wife replied, "My dear, if I had married him, he'd be the Chief Executive Officer and you'd be the gas station attendant."

That is a classic example of the "put-down" - a style of humor that used to remind someone who thinks too highly of themselves that they really are not a superior being. It probably has something to do with the class structure of their society, but the British seem to be the masters of this art form.

A great British stage and screen actress was a stickler for good manners. She once invited a younger

actress to a dinner party at her home. But the young lady never appeared. She didn't even bother to offer an excuse or make an apology. She just didn't show up. Several days later the actress and the young lady met by chance in public. Embarrassed, the younger lady began, "I believe I was invited to your house last Thursday evening for dinner." To which great actress responded coolly, "Yes, I believe you were. Were you there?" That's a put-down.

Then there is a famous exchange between Winston Churchill and Lady Astor. Lady Astor did not like Winston Churchill, so one day she said to him, "If I were your wife, I'd put poison in your tea." Churchill said, "If I were your husband, I'd drink it."

One day George Bernard Shaw sent two tickets to his latest play opening in London to Churchill with this note, "Here are two tickets for the opening night of my new play, one for you and one for a friend, if you have one." Churchill sent them back with this note, "I cannot attend opening night. Send me two tickets for the next night, if there is one."

Though they aren't as clever and witty as the Brits, our politicians endlessly engage in put-downs in the hopes of elevating their own status with the voters. And after a while it just becomes tiresome. If you have to work so hard to tell people you are honest and caring and important, then you probably aren't. Isn't there a better way for people to relate to one another? There is, though you probably won't spot it among politicians.

Robert Coles, a psychiatrist, writes a lot of books, teaches at Harvard. He wrote a book about Dorothy Day. In the book there is this anecdote.

Dorothy Day, as you may know, is that famous Catholic social worker, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement and is being considered for canonization as a saint.

When Coles was a medical student at Harvard, he volunteered to work at the Catholic Worker. He was a Harvard graduate. He was in medical school. He was going to be a psychiatrist. In our society, that is about as high a status as you can get. He knew that. He was really proud of it. He was also proud that as this person with all these credentials, he was volunteering to help the poor. It was the kind of thing people would sit up and take notice of.

He arrived at the premises of the Catholic Worker. He asked to see Dorothy Day. The person said that she was in the kitchen. He went into the kitchen, saw her sitting at a table, talking to someone. He had enough medical training to recognize that the man that she was talking to was addicted to some dangerous substance. He was disheveled. He was obviously a homeless street person. She was sitting at table with him, listening intently to what he had to say. Now I want you to keep in mind Jesus' parable of the banquet and the seats at the table, and where you are supposed to be at that banquet.

She is at table with this street person, giving him her full attention. So she didn't notice Coles come in the room. He stood beside the door, waited for her to finish. When she finished the conversation she stood up. That is when she noticed Coles. She asked, "Do you want to speak to one of us?"

He was astounded. Dorothy Day was famous. This man with her was a nobody. He's a derelict and she asks, "You wanted to speak to one of us?" Coles had never seen anything like this before: Humility that can identify with another person so completely as to remove all distinctions between them. It cut through all of the boundaries, all the categories that society sets up to separate us from one another. There were just two people, brother and sister, the sister concerned about the brother.

It changed his life. He said he learned more in one moment than he did in four years at Harvard. He saw in one moment what it means to humble yourself as our Lord did, "who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, and took on the form of a servant."

And that is the point of the gospel story. How can you be of service to your brother or sister, when you are consumed with promoting your own success. Mother Teresa was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?" She thought about the question and gave her interviewer a puzzled look, and said, "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love. This is the only success that really counts."

So the gospel is not saying we can't throw a dinner party for our friends. But it is important for the followers of Jesus to remember that kindness to people who can repay us in kind is not service. The model, where I do for you and then you owe me and I'll collect later, cannot be regarded as pure loving service that Christ asks of us.

Pleasing God means helping those who have absolutely no way of paying us back; that is the act of service that prepares us to enter the kingdom of God.

People who aren't focused on their own success and need for validation, rarely have to worry about the attack of the put-down. Granted that is not the way our society works but as Christians the gospel calls us to be counter-cultural, to not get caught up in the unhealthy ways of the world around us. Or as comedienne Lily Tomlin once said, "The trouble with the rat-race is that even if you win, you're still a rat."