

Table Manners

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

9/2/07

Luke 14:1 (NRSV)

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

Luke 14:7-14 (NRSV)

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. [8] "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; [9] and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. [10] But 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. [11] For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

[12] He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. [13] But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. [14] And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

MIND YOUR MANNERS

Did you know that there is a lady who makes her living traveling around the country doing nothing but teaching a course entitled, "Table Manners for Executives"? The course is just what the title implies. She teaches up and coming executives which fork to use first and precisely how to place that cloth napkin.

This is just what I've always wanted to know. But, apparently in the corporate world good manners are an important part of doing business. This corporate trainer wrote,

"Companies find that one of the most important attributes for an executive is the ability to eat like an executive. One of the primary ways that companies decide who can cut it at the head office and who can't is on the basis of how that person behaves at a table."

I find the idea of someone being chosen for a certain corporate position on

account of their table manners to be at the same time a bit amusing and a bit frightening.

And yet I must admit that I wouldn't want to eat with someone whose table manners are atrocious. Something as simple as how we behave at the table can affect everything from our friends to our job prospects.

So, to quote my mom, sit up straight, chew with your mouth shut and keep your elbows off the table! My mom had a full time job for many years just trying to get me to do that!

TABLE MANNERS FOR CHRISTIANS

But, did you know that there is also a prescribed set of table manners for those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ? I'm not kidding. There are many stories in the New Testament about feasts and coming to table.

And these passages all teach a consistent message. How we come to the table says a lot about our spiritual maturity.

So, what does Miss Manners have to say about Christian table fellowship? Well, first of all a certain protocol must be observed. Who sits where is very important.

Did you know that there's a person who works at the White House, the Chief of Protocol, whose sole function it is to worry about who sits where at state dinners? If that person puts somebody in the wrong seat we could have an international incident on our hands!

So, who sits at the head table? Perhaps the pastor and the elders need to be seated at the head table with Jesus. And then at table two we could have others in the church who have proved their worth by working hard. Perhaps we would have distinguished Sunday school teachers or faithful choir members or leaders of the Presbyterian women.

We're not in Kansas any more boys and girls. We're in God's kingdom. And, according to Jesus things are done a bit differently here. In fact the rules of the world are turned on their head.

Instead of jockeying for position to obtain the seat of honor, Jesus teaches us to humble ourselves. Instead of struggling to gain the first seat, we become a servant of all.

Instead of using the table as a way to make business contacts and further our own kingdom, we use the table as an opportunity to glorify God and promote his kingdom. Instead of trying to achieve success by climbing over others, Jesus suggests that we please God by voluntarily deferring to others, voluntarily taking the lowest seat and giving to those who are unable to pay us back in any way.

COMING TO THE TABLE IN POLITICS

I think there's a reason the image of a banquet, a meal with invited guests is so important in the New Testament. Nowhere are social boundaries so rigorously enforced than at the dinner table.

This is the season when those political fundraisers are starting to kick into full swing. Usually these take the form of huge banquets at which the candidate speaks. Now, whom do they invite to these important meals?

Do they invite those who can't repay them? I don't think so.

These are a thousand dollar a plate black tie dinners. In order to get in you need to have connections as well as money. That's the way power works in our society.

If you want to get elected you have to spend time with those who have the financial means to further your career. It's just a fact of political life.

BEGGARS ALL

But, Jesus suggested a different strategy. He said,

“When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

(Luke 14:12-13)

The world we live in is so filled with this idea of needing to be a winner, the idea that our place at the table is assured by our own hard work and righteousness. We think that we have earned our place at the table.

But, suppose that's a false view of who we are? Suppose we're not the hard working, righteous people that we say we are? Suppose that we are in many ways poor, crippled, lame and blind?

That is the truth. That's the truth about all of us, the hard truth that we find hard to accept. We would rather jockey for position at the table.

But, the Bible teaches us that we are in fact all beggars when it comes to God's kingdom. We come to God's table without hope save in the grace of our Lord and Savior. We always come to God's table with hands that are empty.

In many churches this is the way that communion is received. The members come forward, kneel at an altar rail and open their hands so that the communion wafer may be placed in them.

This is symbolic of how all of us must come to the Lord's Table.

We may be able, accomplished people. We may have many things that we cling to and love. But, when we come to the Lord's Table our hands are empty. We have nothing to commend us. We only have the hope that God will give us what we need.

And God does give us what we need. God fills our empty hands with the bread of life. God gives us an abundance that is not based upon achievement but upon grace.

I once heard someone describe evangelism as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. I like that description because it doesn't put one person over another person in a haughty or arrogant way. There's none of this “I have it but you don't mentality.” Instead, out of a deep sense of gratitude and love for God's grace we invite others, all others to come to the meal that God provides.

THE FIRST CLASS TICKET

In the old west (as many of us know from watching many westerns) the primary mode of transportation was the stagecoach. The stagecoach carried only six passengers. But, did you know that just like modern airlines there were different classes of tickets?

The distinction between first, second or third class tickets had nothing to do with the quality of your seat or food service. The different classes of tickets were sold on the basis of what was expected of a passenger if the stagecoach got into some kind of trouble ... like for instance, getting bogged down in some mud or going up an incline that was too steep to negotiate.

Those with a first class ticket never had to do anything. They could remain in the stagecoach no matter what happened. The second class ticket holder might be required to get out and walk until the stagecoach made it through whatever difficulty it was experiencing.

But, the third class ticket holder was not only required to get out if there was a problem, he also had to help the stagecoach driver remedy the problem. He had to get down in the mud and get the wheel out of the rut or help push the coach up the hill. I guess you might say that this was the old west's form of sweat equity. Needless to say, this was the least prestigious of all the tickets.

I think many of us use a stagecoach mentality when looking at life. We equate first class as being exempt from serving others.

FIRST CLASS SERVANT

But, Jesus turns that "stagecoach mentality" on its head. For Jesus first class was not having everything done for you. First class was a willingness to take the role of a servant. First class was a willingness to wait upon others.

Do you remember the story of the Last Supper? In John's account there was an awkward silence that had settled over the group that night. You see the disciples needed to wash their feet before they reclined around the table that night. Usually this menial job fell to the one who had the third class ticket, the one who was the least in the group.

But, on this night no one wanted to take that role. They were busy arguing about who would be the greatest when the kingdom came.

Have you ever been in a situation where everyone is mad and proud and no one wants to give an inch? I have. In situations like that I'm in no mood to serve anyone. I would say, "If they want their dirty feet washed, let them do it themselves."

But, Jesus didn't do that. The man with the first class ticket, the Son of God the one who really was the greatest took the role of a servant. He didn't do it out of weakness. He did it out of strength.

In John's gospel we read that Jesus, knowing that he came from God and was going to God, got up from the table, laid aside his garment, wrapped himself in a towel, and proceeded to deal with the dirt. Despite their protests Jesus did what the others would not do.

When he emerged, he had made a decision. He was convinced that this was the right person for the house. He decided to accept her offer.

The buyer was so happy that she cried. The seller saw her gratitude, and he cried too. The real estate agent said that she wrote the contract and thought to herself, "He can now create a new life for himself, and she can create a new life for herself and her family."

But, the agent also thought that this was more than just a real estate transaction that day. It was, in her words, divine intervention.

I am not about to argue with her evaluation. It is divine intervention when we no longer feel the need to hold on to the past and the places that we call sacred. It is divine intervention when we are called to acts of generosity that others might consider foolish.

But, when the Spirit moves us to do something “foolish” like this we are overwhelmed with joy and gratitude. In service and giving to others, we find hope, eternal hope.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this day, I remind you that there are no restrictions. There is no reserved seating. It’s a come as you are affair. How does that old hymn put it? Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me.

There is room for all in God’s kingdom. There is room for the poor, the blind, and the crippled. And I think that pretty much includes all of us in one way or another. We are not the independent powerful people that we would like to be. We too are broken, blind and crippled by life.

But, in our weakness, in our broken and blind state, we can come together and eat this meal. And something amazing happens.

Tears are replaced with joy and gratitude. And we can see a salvation, a resurrection that offers hope for this life and for the life to come.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

Carrollyn & Frank Allen
carrollynandfrank@earthlink.net