

“Table Etiquette”

In an article I read recently by New York Presbyterian Church pastor, Roger Gench, I was reminded that the things we do and say, the way we dress, our manner of speech, the places we go, the programs and movies we watch, even the way we eat, speak volumes about us. It seems rather unsettling to me that anthropologists might observe my eating habits and be able to dig into my psyche! I suppose what disturbs me all the more is that I had every opportunity in the world, perhaps more than many, to learn table etiquette. My mother received her education in home economics and taught Home Ec for years, both in the classroom and in our home. Not only did we sample some of the strangest dishes and eat fine, well-planned meals (I still long for macaroni and cheese!), but we were taught to sit properly, eat properly, and behave properly at the table. I am not sure what happened to all those years of “proper” training, but I’m sure the anthropologists would have a field day observing at the James family table!

Of course, I know pretty well how to behave at the table: I know it is not polite to eat with my elbows on the table, or to talk with food in my mouth. I know to use the knives, forks and spoons starting on the outside, working my way in, and to lay my napkin in my lap at the start of the meal, but I’m not so sure I would know what to do if there were several knives or many glasses! I decided to do a little online search of some etiquette manuals, and I found some very interesting information. I was amazed at the pages devoted just to napkin etiquette! Most of us know that we should wait for the host to signal the start of the meal by placing a napkin in his or her lap. We follow their lead, but once in our laps, they never go back on the table until the dinner is over. The signal for dinner’s conclusion is the host placing his or her napkin back on the table, and guests follow suit, but we never refold it or wad it up! A general rule of thumb I found quite helpful is “liquids to the right and solids to the left”. Knife and fork at four o’clock when finished, or is it five? The dessert fork points to the right and the spoon to the left, but the fish fork is placed on the right. All other forks to the left. And what does one do with the service plate? And how do we know when it is the service plate? And then there’s the finger bowl... Oh my! There is so much to remember. One could easily be lost!

Perhaps that’s what Jesus is helping with in our gospel story this morning. He’s the “Mr. Manners” of the ancient world and is only helping the guests to figure it out and the host to get it right. I’m sure each of us can recall a time when we were invited to someone’s home for dinner, and the guests were invited to have a seat while the host dashes back to the kitchen. If your gathering was like the ones I’ve attended, the guests all stand around the table trying to decide where to sit. There is a lot of idle, nervous conversation, while everyone waits for someone to make a move. No one wants to be the first to sit for fear of making improper assumptions or stepping on someone’s toes. But aren’t we relieved and quite pleased when the host finally returns and asks us to take the seat next to the host’s chair, or better, at the head of the table! And that is just what Jesus is warning about. It would be terribly embarrassing to take the seat of honor only to have the host ask you to move so a more distinguished guest could sit there. Chances would be great that the rest of the guests would already be seated and you would have to move to the lowest station. In front of everyone. How humiliating.

So Jesus, one of the guests at the dinner, is suggesting that he has a plan to avoid this awkward and embarrassing situation. Only thing is, the guests have already been seated. The distinguished guests have been seated in the places of honor.

That just seems incredibly rude, don’t you think, and awfully presumptuous? And if it isn’t enough that he insults the gathered dignitaries, he goes on to insult the host, “When you host a party, don’t keep inviting your rich friends and family members because they will just invite you to their parties to return the favor, and you

will be repaid for your hospitality.” Instead, Jesus suggests that the guest list should instead include clients from the Interfaith Hospitality Network, customers from Goodwill, recipients of free and reduced lunches, the cast-offs and low-life’s, the outcasts and the otherwise socially unacceptable. Good grief! Could he have possibly offended more people in one setting?

I’m thinking I’ll not be inviting Jesus to *my* next dinner party. And *only* because we know *who* and *what* he is would we want to pull him aside and say something like, “Come *on*, Jesus! You’re embarrassing yourself and acting a bit rude to our hosts here. Couldn’t you just chill out? Lighten up on the seating chart, and the critiques of the guest list, and please keep your elbows on the table! Let’s just enjoy ourselves here.”

Only thing is, Gench reminds us, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus attends a lot of dinners, and Luke tells us a lot about *who* Jesus is by *how* Jesus eats. For Luke, *who* Jesus is, is defined a lot by his table etiquette. At most of these dinners, the guests on the guest list are usually of questionable repute. Jesus is always associating with outcasts and sinners, and folks are always watching to see what happens. You remember the story of Zaacheaus, the hated tax collector who works for the Roman government. Because of his small stature, he climbs a tree to see if he can catch a glimpse of this Jesus he’s been hearing so much about. And just as Jesus makes his way past the tree, he stops and calls to Zaacheaus, “Come down here because I am going to have dinner at your house today!” And the people are surprised. So... what’s up with that? Jesus is having dinner with an embezzler, thief, turncoat, and all around nasty guy? I guess he did say, “I’ve come to redeem sinners,” but really! This guy?

And there’s the story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar. Here on earth, the rich man eats huge feasts and dines alone while Lazarus would like to have just the crumbs that fall under the table. He is denied. But when they die, we find out that the seating protocol in heaven is much different, reversed in fact. And God seems to have in mind that the fullness of table fellowship in the coming kingdom should be reflected in the way we dine every day. If we look through Luke’s lens, we discover that we have not fully realized what God has in mind for the church if there are still those with whom we won’t break bread or share what we have.

You may recall the story of the crowd who heard Jesus was near and they went out to see him, but they found him in a deserted place and it was getting late. The disciples wanted to send them into the villages so they could get a meal, but instead, Jesus told them (the disciples) to give them something to eat. There was little food available, and yet they all ate and were filled, all 5000 of them. It seems the guest list drawn up by God includes all who would come to the table, and if we just share what we have, then there will be enough, and in this we have a glimpse, a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven.

Gordon Lathrop was one of the theologians I read for my class this summer at Columbia Seminary. In his book, *Holy People: A Liturgical Theology* (p. 194), Lathrop suggests that the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, stands in stark contrast to an invitation-only meal where an RSVP is expected, where guests bring a suitable gift, and placards are used to mark an appropriate seat near others with whom you would feel comfortable or whose influence is sought, where napkins are folded properly and used only to gently blot the mouth when needed, where utensils are used from the outside in, used plates and silverware are removed after every course, where you don’t push a plate away after the meal but place the knife and fork at 4 o’clock, where a piece of silverware, once used, is never placed back on the tablecloth, nor is the spoon left in the cup. While these things are very useful in the appropriate places, the Eucharistic meal, says Lathrop, elegant in its own way, is also rude and ghastly in others—we use our hands, washed or otherwise, to serve the bread and the cup, and pass them to whomever comes to the table, regardless of social status, dress, ethnic background, life situation, gender, worthiness, or even attitude. We share it with each other and say gruesome things as we share them like, “the body of Christ broken for you,” or “the blood of Christ shed for you.” The meal we share is nothing but a little bread and a few drops of juice, mere morsels. We gather in a strange dining room, large and open with fixed seating and no napkins, yet we all come away filled and satisfied, like the 5000 on the hill that day so long ago. If I may quote preacher, Roger Gench,

...we've shared together in a common meal that fills us up because it promises forgiveness and healing on account of our profound belief that no less than the crucified and risen Christ is in our very midst. It is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a foreshadowing of kingdom, a remembrance of the manna in the wilderness where God supplies all our needs and prefigures the unconditional, unearned grace that can only be received as a gift. It's the highest good of our faith, a reminder that all of life comes from God and returns to God, and ultimately nothing is lost in God.¹²

When we employ the table etiquette of Jesus himself at this meal, we begin to know and to live the very kingdom of God. When we take this table etiquette into the world, into our daily lives, all are invited to share the feast we take from this place, the love and forgiveness of God in Christ, all are welcomed and honored, sinners and saints alike, fed and satisfied by the very love and grace of God.

Amen.

¹ I am indebted to Roger Gench, Theological Themes from Proper 17, September 2, 2007, in *Lectionary Homiletics*, XVIII, No 5.

² *Ibid*, p. 39.