

WGUMC September 1, 2019 Luke 14:1, 7-24
“Table Manners”

When I read advice columns, I often wonder: why the obsession with etiquette? To read Miss Manners is to realize that some people have way too much time on their hands to fuss about what to do with forks and spoons and napkins. But my personal favorites are the letters about wedding etiquette, especially the ones from brides asking for permission to be petty. How can we exclude those people we don't like from the guest list and still get them to send us a gift? Or, if we do invite them to the dinner, how can we get them to pay for it?

But we shouldn't be surprised to find that we obsess about table manners, because the Bible does, too. The reason for this is that the way we eat says a lot about how we live and who we are. There are a lot of stories in the New Testament that take place around a real or metaphorical table. Jesus uses mealtimes to teach people about the kingdom of God. That's what happens at the feeding of the 5,000 (the only story that appears in all four

Gospels) and again at the Last Supper or the first communion, however you want to look at it.

Here in the Gospel of Luke we have three more stories that teach us table manners for the kingdom of God. The stories highlight three things that we need to bring to God's table: humility, charity, and honesty.

The first story is about finding your seat at the table, your place in life. We are taught from early on that we have to get there first and take the best. Life is a ladder and we want to get to that top rung, even though many a politician, CEO, sports and movie star have shown us that it's a long, long way to fall. Too much religion is a program for self-promotion. And we can't wait to progress far enough and get high enough so we can float above our problems rather than have to get down in the dirt and deal with them. But that isn't the religion of Jesus. He didn't climb any social or spiritual ladder. He descended them. Christ said, "I am coming down to your level. You've got to meet me there, so I can lift you up to mine."

That coming down and getting closer to the ground of our lives is what Jesus means when he tells us to take the lowest seat at the table. Call it “humility,” though don’t confuse it with low self-esteem. In fact, it is the opposite. Humility is feeling so grounded in who we really are and how much God loves us that we aren’t threatened by anyone else nor do we try to be anyone else. We can let God be God. Then it’s not hard to take the lowest place at the table, for in comparison to God, we know that all the seats are the same. We are all loved just the same. So let’s bring humility to the table.

But in addition to humility, we need charity. If life were a dinner party, we would have to send out invitations for people to be our friends and to sit at the table of our lives. There is the temptation to calculate what those friends are able to do for us and how those relationships are going to benefit us. That’s how it works at most of the tables of our world.

But not at Jesus' table. Jesus tells us a second story and gives a second lesson in table manners. He says, "Don't invite just the ones who are able to repay you, because if they repay you, they cannot repay you. The ones who can't repay you are the ones who can take your greed and turn it into grace. Then you will be blessed because your repayment will not come until the resurrection of the righteous.

Author, professor, pastor Tony Campolo used to tell a story about being jetlagged in Hawaii on a speaking engagement. He ended up walking the streets in the middle of the night because he couldn't sleep. So he was eating a doughnut at an all-night diner when he walked two ladies of the evening. He overheard one tell the other that her birthday was the next day and that she was really feeling depressed. When they left, Tony asked the cook if the one lady was a regular, and he answered, "She comes in every night." So Tony and the cook planned a party. The same time the next night everything was ready—the streamers, the balloons, the cake—and

sure enough, in walked the birthday girl with tears of joy in her eyes. Tony, ever the pastor, invited everyone to pray. When the prayer was over, one of the people in the diner called out to him, “What kind of church do you belong to?” Tony answered, “The kind of church that would throw a birthday party for a prostitute at 2 in the morning!” That’s the church of Jesus. Are you a member?

Think about who sits around your table. If everyone who has a seat in your life and a place in your heart is able to repay you, who is going to repair you? Who is going to turn your greed into grace, your pride into compassion? We have to think about who is missing from our table and then decide when we are going to invite them in for dinner.

We are a bit shy about inviting strangers into our hearts, let alone our dining rooms. But eating together is a really good way to get past the labels and get to know people. Jesus said, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And until we invite them,

they are just that, labels. But when we invite them, they become real people, and so do we.

That's why you should come to the Labor Day picnic tomorrow and get to know some of our youth. They are at that critical age when they can't escape labels. Teenagers probably assume that we don't think they are real people. The same is true for the women of Village House who are sleeping at Stone Church for the month of September. Thursday through Sunday, they will be invited to spend the day at Woodhaven.

Breaking bread with teenagers and homeless strangers—these are acts of charity, not pity. In Latin, the word is *caritas*, which means “love.” And we have to have it because it is love that sets the table in our hearts and in heaven.

So, we come to God's table with humility and with charity, but we also have to come with honesty. And that part is scary. In our third story, I suspect that's why so many of the guests invited to the great dinner made excuses for why they couldn't come. They

were afraid that when they approached God's table in all honesty, they were going to experience intense feelings of vulnerability. Each of them must have been thinking, "If I have to leave my pride, my prejudice, my pettiness at the door, if all I can bring to the table is me, I am going to feel naked and, frankly, I'm not sure I want that much intimacy."

We may never have had this honest a relationship with another person, but it's the only kind of relationship we can have with God. The real you. The real me. Total honesty. Deep intimacy. That's all that God wants from any of us and from all of us. That's why God keeps sending out servants to bring in more and more of us. And here we come, the good and the bad, all mixed together. No table manners? No worries. Christ is a patient teacher. The One who knows us will grow us and give us all the humility, charity and honesty we need. This is one banquet that doesn't need a bouncer.

Love has set the table, and there are so many delicious dishes here: justice baked in mercy; faith piled high with hope; joy served a

la mode. Pass the peace! The only ones who won't get a seat at the table, the only ones who won't get to feast on God's love, are the ones who don't know they are hungry yet. It can take a lifetime to identify that hunger, which is why there is no "RSVP by Sunday" on the invitation. This is a free offer with no expiration date, so I have to ask you, "Why wait?" The kingdom is a party; it's already started. To be sure, there are folks there that you will be very surprised to see and even more surprised to learn that they are saving a place for you. Won't you come, too?