

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 1, 2019

“Table Manners.”

Luke 14:1, 7-24

When I read and contemplated on the selected Scripture for today, I thought, “what about a sermon on manners: table manners, communion table manners?” What attitudes and behaviors do we need to bring to the Lord’s Supper? Now there are no clear guidelines in Scripture on the right way or wrong way to take communion. Different churches—they even call them different “communions”—take communion in different ways. And that’s okay. Some have the Sacrament weekly, others monthly. Some take communion at the altar rail, others receive it in the pews, some by intinction, some with wine, some with grape juice, some with wafers, some with loaves of bread, some with bread cubes.

I don’t think the details of Communion are critically important. But it seems to me, our attitude is. In fact, it seems to me Jesus dropped a few hints about attitudes in this morning’s Scripture. There we see Jesus attending a dinner himself. Jesus was so fascinating that even his enemies would invite him to dinner. Although sometimes, as on this occasion, his enemies were also trying to trip him up.

In this chapter, Jesus tells several stories about suppers. I see implications in each story for our reception of the Lord’s Supper. One, the parable of the Great Feast, stresses the importance of attending when invited. A rich man invites lots of people to a feast. In those days, dinner parties were big events. They could go on for a week. No expense was spared.

The servants were sent out with invitations to the society of the year. Yet excuses were all they brought back. Some of the excuses were quite lame. One man said he had just bought a piece of land. Now, he had to go see it. Don’t you think that’s suspicious? Who buys a piece of land without checking it out first? (In the Real Estate profession they call this “Sight Unseen”). Another man said he had just bought ten new oxen and had to test them. Suspicious again: who would make an expensive purchase, like a car, without test driving it first? A third man said he had to stay home with his new wife. Great idea, but totally out of character in that society. Sadly, in those days women were treated as possessions. It was the wife’s obligation to please her husband—almost never the other way around.

Jesus’ listeners must have laughed on hearing those excuses. But, then the host in the story didn’t laugh. He got understandably angry. No one likes to be taken for granted. But remember, the host in the story represents God! When Jesus first told the parable, the ones receiving the invitations were the Pharisees. They didn’t respond. Today, the ones receiving the invitations are us! We are each invited to God’s banquet feast, the Lord’s Supper. Do we recognize the wonder of that invitation? Do we accept it with Joy? Do we sense the wonder of God’s invitation to communion and receive it joyfully? Gratitude is part of good table manners. This morning, can we thank God in our hearts for the blessing of being invited to the Lord’s Supper?

Another parable in our Scripture reading is the parable of places at the table. This parable points out the danger of thinking too much of ourselves as we come to the table. One of the guests at a wedding feast sits down boldly at the best place. The host comes along and tells the guest to take a lower place, somewhere “below the salt.” It’s a humiliating and embarrassing moment for the guest.

Jesus’ point is: “Those who make too much of themselves will be humbled. But those who humble themselves before God and each other will be lifted up.” (v.11, paraphrased). Good manners at the communion table also include not thinking too much of ourselves.

I like the story historians tell about the funeral of Charlemagne or as we called him, ‘Karl the Great’ (742-814). Those of you who don’t know of him, he ruled much of Western Europe from 768 – 814. According to historians, he was the greatest Christian ruler of the middle ages. After his death a mighty funeral procession left his castle for the cathedral in Aix or Aachen. When the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop, who barred the cathedral door.

“Who comes?” the bishop asked, as was the custom. “Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire,” proclaimed the Emperor’s proud herald. “Him I know not,” the bishop replied. “Who comes?” The herald, a bit shaken, replied, “Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth.” “Him I know not,” the bishop said again. “Who comes?” The herald completely crushed, responded, “Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ.” To which the bishop, Christ’s representative, responded, “Enter! Receive Christ’s gift of life.”

The point, of course, is that in God’s eyes, we are all equally needy. Charlemagne, Mother Teresa, you and me. None of us will ever be “good enough” to force entrance into the presence of God.

That reminds me of the definition of “nervous” I once heard. Do you know what “nervous” is? “Nervous” is standing in line at the Pearly Gates behind Mother Teresa, and hearing Saint Peter say to Mother Teresa, “I’m sorry, dear, you haven’t done enough.”

A good story! But with a truth. As we come to the Lord’s Table, we’re all sinners in need of salvation, beggars needing bread. We are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Maybe not literally poor, crippled, lame, and blind, but spiritually poor, crippled, lame, and blind. Yet God graciously includes us as guests at God’s Table. Good communion table manners include coming to the table without thinking too much of ourselves.

Finally, good communion table manners include coming without looking down on any other guest, for all of us are God’s equally beloved guests. Part of good table manners is extending graciousness to the other guests. As we have been forgiven and welcomed by God, let us forgive and welcome each other. The Apostle Paul advises us to “examine ourselves” before we receive Communion (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Have we received God’s invitation with joy? Do we recognize ourselves in our neediness? Are we open to the other guests? These are good “Table Manners.”