

# “Table Manners”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 1, 2019*

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 14:1-14

This marks the third time in Luke’s gospel that Jesus accepts a dinner invitation from a Pharisee. Jesus had a complicated relationship with this group of serious religious adherents. Some Pharisees felt that Jesus should have a more distant relationship with ‘sinners and tax collectors’ that did not involve sharing meals and foot washing. Other Pharisees were concerned about Jesus washing his hands before meals, and healing people on the Sabbath, and allowing his disciples to harvest and prepare food on the Sabbath. And yet, the Pharisees were also amazed that Jesus could heal and forgive sins; and so – despite the fact that Jesus spoke, looked, and acted differently from them – the Pharisees keep inviting him to their tables.

Arriving early this time, Jesus sits and watches as his fellow guests scramble for seats of honor around the table. If you imagine the scene, the guests all know their place in the pecking order, yet they jostle and maybe even shove each other, feigning dignity while still fighting for the most prestigious spots closest to the host.

After observing this drama for a while, Jesus speaks up with a short parable about table manners, saying: “when you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor...But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place.” As fascinating as some of Luke’s parables are – the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, for example – this particular one seems rather everyday and ordinary. Most parables are told in the third person with interesting plots and colorful characters. This one, by contrast, is told in the second person singular and in a way that seems designed to help you – the reader – recognize what is typical and common among us.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus says, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” But this humble posture is not just for the guests. Jesus next tells the hosts, “when you give a luncheon or 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. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...”

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<sup>1</sup> David Jacobson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Don't exalt myself? Don't insist on the place I deserve, or the recognition I deserve? Don't network, don't schmooze, don't brown nose? Open up my home and my heart to people who can do nothing for me? People I can't show off to, earn favors from, or impress?

These may seem like shallow questions and concerns. But the world in which we live does not have much use for humility. We do not get into college or land a job with humility; instead, we have to brag about all that we know and have done; citing our accomplishments and awards. Whether in entertainment, politics, sports or even religion, our western culture show admirations for the loudest, the biggest, and the greatest. Whether we recognize it or not, the world knows us for idolizing the superlative – what would happen if we could break away from our obsession with being ‘best?’<sup>2</sup>

Jesus didn't stop with merely offering advice about social etiquette. He also tells his listeners – the Pharisees who invited him – not to take into account the social payoff or reward of their invitations and hospitality. They should not invite to lunch or dinner those who already respect them, or have something to give back in return, but rather to invite the unseen and the undesirable. Jesus expects both hosts and guests to stop counting the costs, benefits, and rewards of our actions and live, instead, from a sense of abundance and blessing.

If you think about it, we spend a lot of our lives counting. Whether we are tracking the amount in our bank accounts or the opinions of our neighbors, it seems that we are continually calculating to see whether there is enough: enough time, money, prestige, recognition...you name it. We often don't think that there is enough; and the world around us – particularly through the advertising we are relentlessly subjected to – tells us that there isn't.

But what if there was enough and even more than enough to go around? What difference would that make to our own peace of mind and in the way that we chose to treat others? What if we saw other people not as competitors for scarce resources, but as partners – even as brothers and sisters – commissioned by God to share the riches of God's goodness and grace.?<sup>3</sup>

In the ancient world, tables were the places where relationships were built, and where customs and traditions were passed on, and where teachers and philosophers could impart their wisdom. A Near Eastern proverb declares: 'I saw them eating and I knew who they were,' and this was not necessarily about one's distinct way of

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<sup>2</sup> Luke A. Powery, "The Welcome Table"

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, "Freedom to Stop Counting"

chewing food or keeping their vegetables separate from the meat on their plate. Instead, your eating company said something about you *and* your company.<sup>4</sup>

So why should our table manners show humility? Because Jesus insists on it; and because *this is who God is*, the Great Reverser of our priorities and values. God knows that the game of who is *in* and who is *out* – our anxious scramble to be recognized as best – will lead to nothing but more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, and more hatred. Thus, God’s envisioned kingdom is not one of scarcity, it is one of abundance where all are already loved, already accepted, always welcome.

It is interesting to note in these stories Jesus tells about table gatherings – luncheons and dinners and wedding banquets – the focus is not on what kind of food is served, but instead on the relationships of those who gather at the tables. While we might focus on invitation lists or seating charts or menus, God’s concern is about how we treat one another, and that – in the end – the table belongs not to the host or to the guest, but to God who abundantly provides the many blessings that we receive.

When we gather – as we are invited to do this morning – at the Lord’s Table, it is an act of protest against the culture of competition and upward mobility that constantly surrounds us. There is nothing easy or straightforward about participating in this protest; it requires hard work over a long period of time for us to move from a mindset of scarcity to one of abundance. To eat and drink with God and one another at the Table is to live in tension with all the pecking orders that define our workplaces, our schools, our politics, and our churches. It can sometimes be uncomfortable or even tiring to participate in such a protest. But it’s what we are called to do – to humble ourselves rather than seek to be exalted, and to place our hope in a kingdom that is radically different from the one we know.

Like the tables around which we gather, God’s kingdom is about relationships; and the freedom to live without worrying about what others think and calculating our place in the pecking order; and instead simply be kind to those around us, especially those who are not often the recipients of kindness. Jesus knew that true blessing resides in our ability to offer blessings to others with the way we welcome, value and include them. In our workplaces and schools, in the places we volunteer and recreate and worship, we can help to usher in God’s anticipated realm of abundance and blessing. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> Debie Thomas, “Table Manners”