

“Mind your manners”
Luke 14:1, 7-14
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Introduction

I heard it when I was growing up. Didn't you? I was getting ready to go to a birthday party, or to a friend's house. The last thing I heard at the door as I was leaving was this: Mind your manners!

I knew what it meant. It meant that I should behave myself at the party in ways I was taught at home. It meant that I should act in ways that would not embarrass myself, hurt other people, or bring disgrace on our family. Manners were important because values were important. The way we behaved toward other people showed our values. If we valued family, friends, and our relationship to others, we would act in ways that were respectful, courteous, and mannerly.

In the Good News for today from Luke, Jesus is the dinner guest in the house of a religious leader. Jesus interrupts the party to do some teaching about values and manners. He teaches about values belonging to the kingdom of God and says to all in the house: Mind your manners!

Scripture

Scene 1 – The Pharisees watch Jesus

Trivial things reveal true character

Have you ever felt like you were being watched? What about when you met your girl friend's or boyfriend's parents for the first time? What about when you went for a meal with a prospective employer? The Pharisee leader invites Jesus to a meal, the other

Pharisees have their eyes on Jesus, and he knows it. They are watching him quietly and without movement, like a snake watches a mouse before pouncing on it. Like a praying mantis watches a moth. The legalistic Pharisees are watching for him to slip up. To make a mistake. To breach social or religious etiquette. They want to embarrass him. Some of them might quietly agree with Jesus. But they themselves are embarrassed that they did not come up with these new ideas of his. They are overwhelmed with the sheer volume of his new teachings. They feel like they opened their mouth at a fire hydrant, and just cannot swallow it all. So they want to embarrass Jesus. They want to point out inconsistencies in what he is preaching. Both inconsistencies with their perception of religious doctrine, and internal inconsistencies with his prior teachings. It has become a game. The Pharisees think, “Let’s see if we can embarrass Jesus using the very teachings he is trying to cram down our throats.”

We are all watchers but few of us are seers. Many of us watch the birds fly, but it is the Wright brothers who see that their wings are curved on the upper surface, enabling us to fly, too. Many see the lowly peanut plant, but Dr. George Washington Carver sees in it a host of products and derivatives that have blessed our lives. Many biologists watch mold form in the culture dish, but Alexander Fleming sees penicillin and an advance in human health results. The Pharisees closely watch Jesus but they cannot see his meaning. They cannot see the issues as Jesus sees them, so they oppose him instead of joining him. They are so hung up on rules, laws and ceremonies, that they miss the point. So they feel they need to fight him instead of support him.

Scene 2 – Jesus admonishes the host

God’s kingdom is a social system without reciprocity

A new church in Brentwood throws open its doors. They welcome not just all ETHNIC minorities, but also all AGE groups. 30% in Brentwood are under 20, 30% are 20-40, 30% are 40-70, and 10% are over 70. So over half the people in Brentwood are under age 40. The church provides spiritual shelter not just for the worker bees and those who have paid their dues, but also for those children who can never pay them back. The church does not discriminate. Because it does not favor friends, relatives, and rich neighbors, the church grows in both Spirit and in numbers. Jesus tells the Pharisees 2000 years ago, and tells us today, that when we provide shelter for children and others who cannot pay us back, we will be blessed.

There is a minister who has a favorite slogan that he often repeats in his sermons. He says, "The church is not like a country club; it's more like a hospital." That's what Jesus is saying here when he admonishes, "... do not invite your friends ... or your rich neighbors ... invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind...." You and I are not in the church to impress one another or to win power struggles. We are here to minister to one another in our weaknesses. We are here to be hospitable.

Scene 3 – Jesus admonishes the guests

There is no seat more favored than another

Jesus tells us the kingdom exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. I believe the point is not a polar reversal. The kingdom is not where the North Pole becomes the South Pole and vice versa. I believe the point is we are all equal in God's eyes. The point is the poles flatten out and join together over the same table.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, Jesus tells us we're all sinners in need of salvation, beggars needing bread. We are "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Yet God graciously includes us as guests at his Table. Good communion table manners include coming to the table without thinking too much of ourselves. Good communion table manners include coming without looking down on any other guest, for all of us are God's equally beloved guests. There are no places more honorable than others. The Lord's Supper today is a foretaste of God's Banquet Feast.

When God is throwing a party, you never know who will be there or whom you will sit next to. The accountant will be seated next to the panhandler he always passed on his way to work. The storeowner will be next to the person he just fired, and the doctor will be put next to the woman who just sued him for malpractice. Rush Limbaugh may be beside Dick Gephart. A prostitute will sit next to the Pope. All the "right" people will be there -- that is everyone who responds to God's invitation ... and there are plenty of seats next to Jesus.

At God's Banquet Feast, everyone will get along famously. And at that Banquet Feast, you and I may well find ourselves seated next to, and engaging in conversation with, people we presently can't stand (or who can't stand us). But the old anger, hurt, and grudges will be gone, and reconciliation will come. At God's Table, the barriers that keep people apart -- rich/poor, upper class/lower class, black/white, Republican/Democrat, gay/straight, friend/foe, the dividing walls of hostility will come smashing down. The crash will be greater than the fall of the Berlin Wall. God's Banquet Feast will be the most remarkable party ever thrown!

Conclusion

Jesus tells us to mind our manners. The accountant will sit next to the panhandler he always passed on his way to work. The storeowner will be next to the person he just fired, and the doctor will be next to the woman who just sued him for malpractice.

Jesus tells us to mind our manners. We keep an open mind. We give others the benefit of the doubt. In so doing, we join, instead of oppose those with whom we disagree or do not understand.

Jesus tells us to mind our manners. He tells us the church is not just a building. It is an assembly of people with a common cause. But this assembly is not a country club. Not a country club which limits its members to those who look like us. A church is an assembly which is open to all including the elderly, but also to children, and moves in a direction which embodies Jesus. A direction which ushers in God's kingdom. Not our direction. God's direction.

You and I are not in the church to impress one another or to win power struggles. We are here to minister to one another in our weaknesses. We are here to be hospitable. The Good News in Luke for today is the table manners which usher in God's kingdom. Not our kingdom. God's kingdom.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say