

PENTECOST XII Proper 17 Sept. 1, 2019 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen. \_\_\_\_\_

There are many meals described in Luke's gospel. Jesus was entertained very frequently, because he was naturally invited into the homes of his followers. Thus, he could speak with some authority on the role of both guests and hosts. But the one thing we can be certain of is this: Jesus here is *not* offering advice on proper etiquette. Rather, he is talking about God's kingdom where different rules and standards apply. And we know that "the language of parable *typically* frames a story which helps us understand God's reign." After all, giving up what we are used to doing and taking up new attitudes and practices is difficult, but it conforms with what we would look for in God's expectations of us.

I think it can be helpful to know something about how hospitality was practiced in the first century. To begin with, of course, local conditions shaped values. Travel was challenging in that part of the world, especially at night. You were at the mercy of others, frequently strangers. So, hospitality came to be "viewed as a central virtue and practice and even one of the great pillars of morality. It tended to be "rigorously observed and usually associated with caring for the needs of strangers." In Hebrew culture, it was even expressed through the Law itself. For example, there were strict rules about leaving gleanings of crops in the field for the hungry, and a triennial tithe (or 10%) supported both resident aliens and the poor. Thus, the Jews had developed a "formalized, communal provision for strangers" which grew out of their experience as aliens in the land of Egypt prior to the Exodus. It was fundamental to their whole way of life.

To be more specific, however, let me say a bit about formal dinner parties in antiquity. It was in this way that "an elite family proclaimed and maintained elite status." If you were on the guest list, you were seen as already accepted as part of an elite culture. Important people needed to be acknowledged in this way, and there were rules about reciprocation. But in the passage from Luke's gospel, Jesus provides instructions which "conflict with this social function of dinners." Although it could be a source of honor for someone to give charity to the poor, it was quite another matter "to invite them to a social function in place of family and rich neighbors and in their place honoring the poor." We see this clearly in

Jesus's message: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

The setting for this parable is a dinner on the Sabbath with some leading Pharisees. It would have been "a formal affair with a set itinerary and a strict code of etiquette." What Jesus observed there was the guests scrambling for places of honor at the table. And he rebuked them, saying that when you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, you should not recline at table in the place of honor because you might be caught in the act, reprimanded and thus shamed in front of your friends. The contrast between this kind of behavior and the ideal Jesus is proposing is stark: go and take the lowest place because when the host finds you there and asks you to move up to a higher place, you will be honored at having been congratulated on your modesty, and this will grant you the esteem you would not have been given had you taken the higher place without having authority to occupy it.

Of course, this sounds very much like solid advice on good table manners which is fine, except that it does not exactly explain why 2,000 years after the fact we are still reading these stories. But note that he goes on to tell the gathered guests that the best and only way to avoid embarrassment and entanglements with an honor code is to "invite the poor, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you." And that is a very tough thing to hear, even if it rests on high moral ground, particularly in any society that values status over nearly everything else. What Jesus is really saying is that "the tragedy of the human obsession with honor is that it ultimately alienates us from one another, and so takes us ever farther from the interpersonal communion in which (true) fulfillment rests."

If an addiction to honor leads to a kind of "solitary confinement," its opposite leads to a gathering...a festive multitude united in a common ecstasy for what lies beyond themselves." Our own Eucharist each Sunday is meant to lead us to that place.

Thus, from a theological point of view, "*table manners matter* because of what they disclose in the midst of our messy existence about God's good purposes and intentions" because they speak to the crux of the human experience and reveal what we value.

For Jesus, what was of concern was what he was observing on all sides: "the way in which people of his day were jostling for position in the eyes of God." Many seemed fixated on

pushing themselves forward, “to show how well they were keeping the law (and) to maintain their own purity.”

But when we examine the passage, what we find is Jesus associating with the wrong kind of people from the perspective of his hosts, the leading Pharisees of the time. He is “turning things upside down.” He issues a warning against pushing oneself forward in God’s eyes. It was “all too easy for the well-off and the legally trained to imagine that they were superior in God’s sight to the poor, to those without the opportunity to study, let alone practice the law.” So, his outlook was firmly grounded in his everyday experience of living in Palestine in the first third of the first century.

But we need to recall that Luke’s gospel was written many years after the events it describes. Perhaps 40 to 50 years after the fact. Which means that the gospel flows directly from the experience of the early church. Thus, in Luke’s lifetime, thousands of Gentiles had become followers of Jesus. In effect, they had “entered...into the dinner party prepared by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” and there were many of his Jewish followers who “found this difficult, if not impossible, to understand or approve. They were anxious to keep their honored position as God’s chosen ones ---- at the top of the table. They were “unable to grasp God’s great design to stand the world on its head” ---- to make a reality of his promise to Abraham that he and his offspring would bring a great blessing to all the world, that this was God’s overarching plan.

I said a moment ago that following the advice of Jesus from this parable is difficult, that it rubs against the grain, so let me end there by elaborating a bit more on what I mean. When we hear Jesus say the things he says here, our immediate response is to ask “why should I do that?’ And the answer, which can seem as difficult as the advice itself, is that this is what God asks of us. He is the God of reversals, the God who turns our world upside down, who questions all of our assumptions, the one who tries to alter our priorities because he knows that there is no end to the game of *one-upmanship* that grows out of a culture focused on honor at the expense of other values.

It can only lead to “more anxiety, more suspicion, more loneliness, more hatred, and more devastation” when God’s kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity but a kingdom of plenty and, indeed, of abundance. That is what God wishes for us, a life of peace and fulfillment

in the company of our families and neighbors in keeping with the plan he revealed in the act of Creation.

In the words of the Psalmist:

Sing with joy to God our strength

And raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt

And said: "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."

And yet my people did not hear my voice,

And Israel would not obey me.

So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their hearts,

To follow their own devices.

Oh, that my people would listen to me!

That Israel would walk in my ways!

I should soon subdue their enemies

And turn my hand against their foes.

Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,

And their punishment would last forever.

But Israel would I feed with the finest wheat

And satisfy him with honey from the rock.

*Amen.*

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