

Luke 14:1,7-14  
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“Kingdom Etiquette”

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One day Jesus walks into a restaurant and says, “table for 26 please.” The hostess does a quick head count and says, “Sir, including you I only count 13 people here, will there be more joining you?” “No,” Jesus replies, “but it is sort of my thing to have all of us sit on the same side of the table.” Today I want to talk with you about Jesus’ table etiquette.

Many complain that we are losing fine etiquette in our society. They suggest, now more than ever, the need for etiquette books. They remember insights from authors like Emily Post and Dear Abby who provided definitive words of social guidance for society.

Today a quick search of the word “etiquette” on google play books reveals some interesting titles, of course there is... “Etiquette for Dummies,” and “Good Manners for people who sometimes say (*bad words*),” and “Dude that’s Rude.” For kids there are titles like, “Voices are not for yelling,” and “Tails are not for pulling.” The last one I’ll list could have been written by comedian Jeff Foxworthy, “White Trash Etiquette: Definitive Guide to Upscale Trailer Park Manners.”

Today we see Jesus gathering at the home of a prestigious Pharisee for a formal dinner. In antiquity there was an established seating order at dinners such as this, and the pecking order was serious business: Priests nearest the head of the table, then Levites, then other people according to rank. If people sat in the wrong seat, then, when someone of higher rank came along the host had the uncomfortable job of demoting them in front of everyone else.

This sort of pecking order still plays a role in society today. For example, parties in Washington DC are actually rated by who is invited to attend them. A party labeled “Hostess C” may only have a few congressional representatives in attendance. A party rated “Hostess B” is likely to have a number of powerful senators in attendance. And a party rated “Hostess A” will be a place to hob nob with actual members of the President’s cabinet.

In our story Jesus provides a way to save face at these dinners. He says, “when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “friend you need to move up higher.” First, Jesus is giving us a lesson on humbleness and humility.

For too long the church has misunderstood humbleness as meaning that we gifted and grace-filled followers of Christ have to make ourselves small and believe that we are nothing. This can result in a misguided dash to the far end of the table so we can show just exactly how humble we are. The problem is to say, “I am nothing,” is to focus as much attention on “myself” as it is to say, “I am the bomb, I am all-important.” Neither of these is faithful humbleness.

Faithful humbleness before God calls us to praise and proclaim the greatness of God who is overall and in all, and then boldly offer our gifts, hospitality, and our lives in service of the all-knowing, ever-present, mighty One.

But a focus on seating order in this story may miss Jesus' bigger point. The New Testament Greek word for "hospitality" translates into English as, "Love of a stranger."

This is why Jesus goes one giant step further, "And when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends 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 lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed..." This is a call to hospitality shaped by the Kingdom of God.

Can you imagine planning that meal? It might take someone of Rachel Ray's expertise! No foods with hard textures for we don't know the conditions of the guests' teeth and gums. Nothing too spicy because you don't know the health of their digestive system. No fried or greasy foods because we don't want to trigger any heart problems. You can see the monumental menu issues that would need to be worked out. Then do we offer a gluten free option? A vegan option? And so on...

Jesus' call to hospitality reminds me of the words Emma Lazarus inscribed on the statue of Liberty, 'give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the hopeless, the tempest tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.'

I might suggest that Jesus' surprising guest list is his way of lifting a lamp beside the doors to God's heavenly banquet. He is giving us a peek into heaven where status and position in society mean nothing. We might imagine that even at the Priest's house on this day... Jesus may not end up sitting at the main formal dining table. He may end up at the card table in the basement. The one for the kids, or the guests from the other side of the tracks. He is probably sitting with the rowdy crowd. They are singing and telling stories, and laughing and crying until tears roll down their cheeks.

The ones at the dining table, who think they know the proper way to dine, are outraged at what is going on in the basement.

Preacher Frederick Buechner tells us, "communion is going on. The deaf are buttering the bread for the blind. The leper goes to get more strawberry shortcake for the lame. The poor toast the broken-hearted with fine wine.

And finally it is time to go home. Jesus stands up and the crowd in the basement falls in line behind him. They are having a ball, the times of their lives, and they will follow Jesus on and on because anywhere he goes there is a feast. And there is room at the table, nobody cares where anyone sits, everyone shares in God's abundance."

God's banquet in the eternal kingdom really does beat a party in Washington DC, even if it is marked, "Hostess A"

Amen