



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“Table Manners”
Luke 14:1-13**

Will Sparks September 1, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen,

I have a vague memory of a conversation my Dad used to have with people when he was still active teaching high school. Dad taught social studies and history for 32 year in Penticton, and he was one of those teachers that students come back to the school years later to talk to. You know the kind. Well, somewhere in my memory is a time when Dad had met someone for the first time and they asked him what he did for a living. “ Oh, I’m a teacher.” Really. What do you teach? “Manners.” He would get a laugh with that one, but you know he wasn’t completely joking. Yes, he had important topics in politics and geography and history that he cared a lot about and wanted to inspire learning in his kids about too, but at a more basic level, at a deeper root of things, he was teaching manners, how we treat each other, who sits with whom at which tables and why. That is politics, that is the stuff history is made of, and it is also manners- the complex cultural rules and customs we follow that shape how we treat each other. If you look at the manners of a society, you will learn a lot about what they care about and how they treat each other. The personal and the political merge.

Remember that legendary story of the waitress in the Yukon who served the Duke of Edinburgh on a visit many years ago. The waitress, having done a beautiful job of serving the local cuisine had a delightful momentary lapse of table etiquette when clearing away the main course dishes said what she would say to all the locals, “Keep your fork Duke, there’s pie”. We laugh because there is something delightful about popping the bubble of pretentiousness that royalty can have, but her manners were messing with relationships, power, and place.

Jesus is a guest in the house of a religious leader and is commenting to those around him on table manners. You see, Jesus lived in a highly structured hierarchical social order. This was a class system in which there were virtual untouchables and the priestly class, and many classes in between- much like the caste system in India and Nepal today. There was also strong distinctions between men and women, and between the married and the unmarried. There existed and economic hierarchy in which the destitute had literally nothing, and a large mega-farmer, and many levels in between. So if you found yourself an untouchable, poverty stricken, unmarried woman, you would be considered an expendable, the human dregs.

The Hebrew Bible has a lot to say about caring for such people. The prophets voice rings loud and clear calling for justice and mercy. The law calls for an equalizing every seven and fifty years. Jesus drew on this tradition as he taught his meal etiquette. At the Jesus meal, everybody was equal. When you go out and there are places of honour and places of shame, turn things upside down. Place yourself in the place of shame. Start from there. And if you host a meal yourself, invite those who constantly occupy the places of shame. Bring in everybody. Practice a different set of table manners that breaks the social bondage.

What Jesus did around the table is a clear reflection of what he dreamed would become a reality in the whole society- that the rigid, imprisoning social and economic and religious structures and rules would be broken leaving room for what he called the kingdom of God. He was teaching them an ethic around the table, that they could practice in their homes, their synagogues, their work places that could then grow like leaven, or like a mustard seed. He had an

ingenious strategy for social change. Change the way people eat together and you will change the way they relate in the rest of life. If we can tear down the walls around the table, they will not be able to stand in the world. Change the table manners and you will change the manners of the community. If the tax collector and the Pharisee eat from the same loaf and the same cup, if they serve each other around the table, when the time comes for one to serve the other in the world, it will be so dissonant, so disturbing that they will not be able to live with it.

And that is where communion came from. It was and continues to be a primary place of Christian formation, a place where we learn how to be Christian together. As we are around the table, so we are called to be in the world, and our meal begins with an invitation. You have heard me say it many times but today I want us to linger over it. I say something like, “This is God’s table. It does not belong to you or me, it belongs to God. And God’s ways are the ways that govern this table. So all God’s people are welcome here.”

Now that may sound like just a good open kind of welcome, but it is more than that. You see people have said to me, this feels like a departure from the past. For example, if I am not baptized, can I take communion. Well we have debated that and there would be people in the church who would likely say no. This is a Christian meal, feeds us in our faith. It is the ritual for the Christian community. But I would say, it is not up to you or me or even our church to decide how faith will be nurtured here. That is a mystery too deep for us to manage. All God’s people, baptized or not, ought to be welcome here. That’s God’s etiquette.

“What about if there are non-Christians among us? Is this not a Christian meal?” Yes, it is a Christian meal, and as such we don’t draw lines based on creed or nationality or race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or anything. So if there are Sikhs among us, or Jews or Buddhists, or Hindus, or anyone else, what better expression of our Christian faith could there be than to welcome them to God’s table.

“Well what about the days or the weeks when I feel like I have really betrayed God, when I have screwed up, said things I shouldn’t have said, done things I shouldn’t have done, and I don’t feel worthy to take communion? Jesus once said, before you make your offering at the temple, go make things right with your brother or sister. Then come to the temple that your offering might have integrity.” I know what that feels like. And integrity matters. Those relationships matter. Making things right matters. But still I ask, would God reject you, or is the time when you are struggling with fear, shame, brokenness perhaps the very time when God would say to you, come child, come join the crowd of sinners, come to my table, because I love you, and maybe as you look into your brother or sister’s eyes and hear the words, the bread of life, the cup of blessing given for you, you might find forgiveness and healing.

“Ah but what about when there has been a fight in the church and the very person that I’m still angry with is there.” MMMhmm. There are times when communion is particularly difficult, but what we bring is our basic humanity before God, and here we are greeted by the grace and mercy of God. And our arguments become a whisper in the resounding chorus of God’s love and forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus believed that the practice of the table could spread and become the practice of the world. If we could allow ourselves to experience the equality, the openness, the grace and forgiveness of feeding and being fed at God’s table, then our lives, our relationships, our world could heal. We would not be able to resist attempting that grace and forgiveness and equality in our homes, our church, our work places, and indeed in our public policy, our politics.

So, today, may this table, God’s table, become for us a place of healing, a place of forgiveness, and a place from which we are inspired to live out the ethic of God in the world. Amen.