



The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Table Manners

Sirach 10.12-18, Luke 14.1, 7-14

Russ Dean, August 29, 2004

“Sit up straight.” “Don’t talk when your mouth is full.” “Take your elbows off the table.” “Take your hat off at the table.” These instructions were burned into my head as a child. Now, I wasn’t raised on fine dining; growing up in a small town I seldom saw the inside of a restaurant, but as a Preacher’s Kid, I was an invited guest in enough homes that learning “Table Manners” was necessary. Though I have no interest in the proper way to lift my pinky finger when drinking tea, the fellowship of the table is such an important part of our lives together, whether in church or business, that knowing how to enjoy a meal around a table is a lesson, well-learned. I am grateful my parents taught me well.

I have probably shared this story before, but it bears repeating. Two years ago during that great ice storm, Amy and I were invited dinner. It was a church home in which everyone had good Table Manners. But we had been out all day, working with a chainsaw, and as evening fell we had had no means of cleaning up. I smelled of gasoline and chainsaw exhaust. There was a hint of freshly cut wood, and a few other aromas as well! But our guests were gracious, and it mattered not: “Join us. At our table.”

There was one, slight problem, however. We had not yet been here long enough for her to be as honest as she is now, but one hostess made it clear, in that wonderfully southern way, that the ball cap I was wearing would not be welcomed at the table. That was the etiquette in my childhood as well, but the etiquette is somewhat different in my

home now, for “hat head,” that mangled, greasy look of hair after a day under a cap, is to be avoided at Amy Dean’s table at all costs! After a day behind that saw, my hat was in much better shape than my head, and I found myself on the horns of one great pastoral dilemma: staring, alternately, at Sue Helt who said, “No hats,” and Amy Jacks Dean who insisted, just as politely, “No hat head.” You’ll just have to guess to which of those strong-willed women I deferred!

In the setting of today’s text, Jesus is at table. A guest of a prominent member of his community, Jesus has been observing the quiet jockeying for position going on around him, for in his day a well-understood social etiquette was followed. Seating was arranged such that the place closest to the host was always the seat of honor, and moving down and away from the host marked one’s progressively lower status.

As the meal was served, Jesus began telling a “story.” As a well-known teacher, no one could have missed the deeper truth, the biting criticism that his carefully told parable conveyed. His message would have cut strong enough just as a critique of a vain and shameless etiquette. But Jesus was interested in much more than eating without propping your elbows. And just as his message was sinking in and the ire was rising on the faces of the other guests, Jesus turned on the host, too! Alan Culpepper says, “Jesus is hardly the model guest.”¹ (I wonder if he ever got a second invitation!?)

The vanity of the social etiquette displayed there was intolerable to Jesus, for it was a simple but clear manifestation of the ranking of social status, of the pathetic grab for power and prestige, of the mentality of entitlement and the disenfranchised that such “power politics” meant to the poor and all others deemed outcast by such a cruel system.

¹ Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Luke”, p.286.

And we have learned nothing from him.

His offense would be just as great if Jesus were to dine with us today, for if we cannot hear in his message an implicit critique of our own lives and our life, together (as a people, a church, a nation), we simply are not listening.² His words still cut deep, for we are as vain, and as power hungry, and as segregated by that vanity and power as we have ever been.

Who dines at our table?

We are experiencing the largest gap separating the rich and the poor that our nation has ever known, and as our tax laws continue to favor the rich and punish the poor, that gap is ever growing. Please do not close your ears and tell your pastor he has no right to speak politics, for this is no political matter.³ It is a matter of dining with Jesus and learning his Table Manners. It is a matter of justice. The Christian community must speak for those for whom Jesus spoke, or we will prove that we have no part in him. That 40-million Americans, living in the most prosperous nation the world has ever known, live without access to basic health coverage is a justice issue. That the number of children living in extreme poverty in this country continues to rise, despite our hollow rhetoric to protect them, is, obviously, a political issue, with partisan implications, but more

² It is amazing to listen to Christian people read the Bible and recognize how many can only hear Jesus castigating “the wicked, hypocritical Pharisees.” In such a reading, they safeguard the “rightness” of the “Christian position.” (“The Pharisees got it all wrong; thank God, we’ve got it all right.”) I believe Jesus would be even more critical of Christian hypocrisy than he was of the established religion of his day – because of the further elitism and exclusivism of our readings.

³ Insist though I may that such statements are not meant as partisan indictments, it is amazing to me that many people simply cannot seem to hear outside their own political biases. This is clear to me by the comments made at the door following this sermon – those willing to identify themselves as Democrats were much more vocally supportive of the sermon. (A kind of “you tell ‘em, boy,” approach!) I believe that Jesus would criticize both of our political parties (right behind his criticism of the Church), and as a preacher, determined to hear as best I can his critique of our systems, I am seeking as sincerely as I know how to present his message, even in a campaign year, without a partisan bias. How effectively I maintain such a goal, though, seems to be determined by whether one perceives they are in line with my own partisan beliefs!

importantly, it is an issue for the followers of Jesus.⁴ The great polarity between the rich and the poor in our nation, alone is evidence that we are still jockeying for positions of power, and that Jesus' word is still needed: *the exalted will be humbled...*

Who dines at our table?

Despite the great strides that have been made, our nation is perhaps more racially segregated today than it has been for the last thirty years. That many of us are personally unaware of systemic racism is all the more evidence that it exists today. I cannot fathom that we are still so tainted by color that security guards routinely follow black shoppers through department stores, yet Ed tells us that this is a common experience for his own father, a man who has advanced degrees, and has earned his affluence in the medical industry.⁵ That Black Americans still experience such a different world at the local mall and in the grocery store and in the lending office at the bank is evidence that we still have not learned Jesus' Table Manners.

Who dines at our table?

I could continue this list of polarities of which Jesus' message is a critique: rich and poor, black and white, non-Christian and Christian, educated and non-educated, blue collar and white collar, gay and straight... but I will stop. I hope that I have offended you enough! If I have not, I fear that I have not adequately conveyed the conviction of his word. It is not enough to worship and call our selves followers, nor is it enough to serve

⁴ At the door Sunday, one of our active Republicans questioned my use of such statistics. I admit that this aspect of the sermon was not researched. (I offer no citations for such statistics.) The expressions "40 million" and "rising poverty" are anecdotal, hearsay, yet it is my belief that those expressions represent the situation in our country as it is. Perhaps I reveal my naiveté here, but I thought the debate between the parties was not whether there are, in fact, more people in poverty, but which party was to be blamed for such a problem!

⁵ I am grateful for Ed Stallworth, our Associate Pastor for Youth and Children, for increasing my awareness of the racial prejudice that still exists for many Americans in their everyday life.

and do so – for worship and service can be disguised attempts at vain recognition. Jesus says simply that God’s kingdom doesn’t work that way.

Often when I speak there is some metaphor at play. “Who dines at our table?” can be a way of asking a much larger question, which of course, I have been asking today. But for a moment, would you consider the very plain meaning of the question, please? “Who dines at our tables, literally?” If Jesus were really challenging us to simply invite the poor and the lame and the outcast, would we even know anyone to invite?

Who dines at our table?

I awoke early this morning with a vision. It was a vision of a huge banquet. There were hundreds of families, dining together in our cramped little Fellowship Hall. They were the families of this church and the families who have been served in our own Crisis Assistance Office. Barbara Franche had pulled out all of the stops and we were dining, you and I, with them, feasting together. In my vision, we were dining together, though most of them were black. We were dining together, though none of them could have afforded to pay for such a meal. We were dining together even though nearly every one of them were where they were because of some bad decision they had made.

In my vision, at every table, I could hear conversation. It was a conversation of people who were very different from each other, sharing together about their children, and the hopes they have for them, which is what happens around a table. They were talking about the worries they shared for the health of their aging parents, which is what happens when we share meals together. They were talking about their fears in this

troubling age we live, about way it used to be, and the dreams they had for the way it might be again, which is the kind of conversation that takes place when we fellowship and listen.

And in my vision, because of that conversation, the people around those tables realized that in the only ways that really matter, we were actually all just the same.

It was just a dream, though. Of course we could never afford to do something so foolish and extravagant.

But for the sake of the world, perhaps we need to adopt Jesus' Table Manners – and recognize that in our world we can no longer afford not to do so.⁶

May it be so!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Remind us of the lavish banquet
At which we dine, daily, O God,
And give us a sense of justice
for those who long to join us at the table.
Amen.

⁶ “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May God’s face shine upon you and may God be gracious to you. May God give you grace never to sell yourself short, grace to risk something big for something good, grace to remember that **the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love**. So may God take your lips and speak through them, may God take your minds and think through them, may God take your hearts, and set them on fire, through Jesus the Savior” (my emphasis). A benediction used by Dr. Stephen Shoemaker of Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC.