Dr. Hugh Hamilton

Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL

September 1, 2019

**TABLE MANNERS**

Luke 14:1,7-14 Psalm 84

A woman in the church I served in Tennessee came into my office to complain about newcomers sitting in “her” pew. Edna was pleased that new people were visiting the church and that young families were joining our church, but…they were sitting in “her” pew. She had married into the Walker family in the 1940’s and the Walker family had sat in that pew since the 1920’s! There was a plaque on the wall adjacent to that pew acknowledging the Walker family for their gift of cushions in the pews of the sanctuary. That was the Walker pew, but during her recent vacation, some newcomers had arrived and taken up residence in her pew, so she had to move back one pew.

Again, she knew we should welcome people and be excited with new members, but couldn’t they sit somewhere else? And wouldn’t I ask them to move? She waffled back and forth – glad to have them, but they’re sitting in “her” pew! Finally, and I can only attribute it to divine inspiration, I suggested that Miss Edna arrive earlier than the newcomers next Sunday, sit in her pew, introduce herself and welcome them to the Walker pew. Tell them about the Walker family, how she married into the family as a young bride, and had sat there all these years, and how glad she would be if they would join her sitting in the Walker pew. The suggestion worked, she and they hit if off, and for years, they sat together in *that pew.*

***Changing seats can be hard.* I thought about asking you all to change seats today,** to move around to a place where you rarely, if ever sit. To invite you on my right to move to my left; those on my left to move to the right; those at the back – to move to the front; Choir members to come sit in the pews. **I considered doing it;** **but decided not.** Some of you would enjoy changing things up; others would resent me asking you to move, you would pout and not hear the rest of my sermon. But your discomfort would provide a great entry into our scripture reading

Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 14, contains three stories in a row about “eating at table” which is a strong metaphor for salvation. In ancient times eating at table was a sign of accept-ance, a symbol of suitability and of social importance.

***AT TABLE* 1: Healing.** In the first “at table” story in verses 1-6, Jesus heals a man with dropsy, an internal disease that produces swollen limbs, making it had to walk. The Pharisees are testing Jesus to see if he will heal on the Sabbath, which they considered against the Law. In healing the man with dropsy, Jesus demonstrates mercy, not law, as the hallmark of God’s kingdom.

***At Table* 2: Seating Order:** In the second “at table” story, verses 7-14, Jesus reprimands the dinner party guests who came in first and grabbed the best seats next to the host. Why do you think you deserve to be first in line, to have the best seat, the best of everything, as if you’re better than others or more important than your classmates? You’re not here because you deserve it, but only because you’re invited. You’re going to be embarrassed if the host asks someone else to sit by him and he asks you to move down the table. Instead, take a seat farther down the table, and if the hosts asks you to move up, you can smile and say “excuse me, excuse me,” as you make your way toward the front and pass by your friends. Humility and thankfulness are good manners; they’re also good theology -- salvation is only by God’s gracious gift and by our humble acceptance.

How often we seek honors and titles and run for top positions in order to be seen with the popular crowd at school and to signal to the rest of the world that we have arrived! We tell ourselves that unless we call attention to ourselves and our work, unless we signal our importance and sit where we can be seen, folks won’t know how important we are and where we rank in God’s kingdom! It’s as if we don’t trust that God does not forget us or that our contributions to God’s work on earth count for something.

In contrast, the Psalmist says that he would rather be a lowly door keeper at the temple, a menial servant, even a beggar at the door to the temple, looked down upon by other people, but close to God, than to dwell as a rich person in tents of wickedness. Closeness to God is more important than social status. We peg people by their socioeconomic level in society. We choose friends by their status and popularity – and what they can do for us – we equate our status and place in society by how much we have and recognition by others. How different it is with God! God measures status differently and saves a place for us at his table, in his kingdom, regardless of how big or little a place we have in the world.

True stature comes NOT from telling yourself how important you are and strutting around like a peacock, but by how much you serve others, by how willing you are to humble yourself for the good of others.

***AT TABLE 3*: Rif-Raff.** The third “At Table” story in verses 15-24, makes it clear that everyone is invited to Christ’s table. Imagine how shocked the host was when Jesus asked, “Where are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind?” I can imagine the host stammering to justify his guest list; “Uh, well, there’s not room enough to fit *everyone* in here. Besides, it’s the Sabbath – and you know the law, those people are unclean. They’re not allowed at table with us.” Smooth move – appeal to the law to justify your choices; present yourself as an obedient, spiritual, good host! Heads bob around the table in agreement: “Right! Right! Yeah, he’s right!

But then, Jesus turns the table on us. In God’s kingdom, *“all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those and the humble shall be exalted.”* God’s kingdom operates by grace, not by law. In our culture we invite to our banquets people we think deserving and who can pay us back some day. We hope to earn favors, get something back from our good graces. In Jesus kingdom, however, he eats with those who are NOT deserving and who CANNOT repay him.

Jesus does what he what he demands from us. After all, Jesus left his place of honor in heaven and humbled himself on earth, humbled himself even unto death on the cross for our forgiveness and salvation, whereupon God exalted him and gave him the name above all names (Phil. 2:5-11).

In our world it’s movie stars and athletes and celebrities and tycoons and the beautiful that get top billing and privilege and honor. But in Jesus’ kingdom it’s the humble, the unknown, the unpopular, the poor, the rejected, the neglected, the sinners, who get invited into God’s house for the banquet. Posturing ourselves, jostling for seats, or trying harder will not get us to into that kingdom. God does not invite us because of our status or our goodness. We are here only because of God’s Amazing Grace, and our humble willingness to accept his invitation. We come to the Lord’s table not by any merit of our own, with no ability to ever repay our host. We come at his invitation, so that he may fill us with his goodness, that we may be filled and satisfied.

Jesus instructs us to invite the poor, the lame, the blind, the needy, the rejected;

to go out into the highways and byways and invite to those we overlook and ignore.

…to invite the table those different from us

…to invite those we begrudge and refuse to forgive

…to invite those who are not popular, not favored, not gorgeous

…to accept and invite everyone, without regard to what we gain from them.

One woman actually did that. In his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace,* Phillip Yancey tells about a woman in Boston about to be married. She and her wealthy fiancé booked the Hyatt Hotel in Boston for their wedding reception and ordered the best of everything: the reception banquet alone cost $13,000. Shortly before the wedding, her fiancé broke off the engagement. The banquet costs were prepaid, so the bride could only get back 10 percent, or $1,300. Then she had a crazy idea. Why not have the banquet anyway, not as a wedding reception, but as a free party for the poor?

You see, ten years earlier, she has lost her job and had to live ion the streets. So, she sent invitations to the homeless shelters and nursing homes of Boston and all types of folks came.

While an orchestra played, waiters in tuxedos served *boneless chicken* (“in honor of the groom,” she said!), hors d’ouerves, cake, and champagne to bag ladies, addicts and old folks propped up by canes and walkers. The Hyatt hosted a party like they had never had before or since! (Yancey, 48-49).

How amazing! How like Jesus!

At this table we are all equal before God,

sinners in need of salvation,

beggars in need of bread,

equally needy, equally sinful, but equally loved and forgiven.

equally welcomed to the table just as are we.

At God’s table, in God’s house, everyone has a place,

and everyone has something to offer!

You may be only the doorman, but you are **God’s doorman!**

And your service pleases God!

I rejoice that you and your friends and your family find God in this place ...

and that God finds you in this place, at this table.

God created you, God knows you by name, God saved you,

God is in your life, in this place and in any place that you will ever go!

God is always with you, to deliver you!

God will never forget you, never forsake you, never fail you!

Come to his table, for all is ready and you are invited.

Open your heart to him and cast your burdens upon him, for he cares for you.

Know that you are part of the family,

Pray that others will also come as well – no matter who they are,

no matter what other says about them, no matter their status or popularity,

that they may come and receive the life that Jesus gives to all who would receive it.

Amen.

Sources

Fairchild, Richard J. “The Table of the Lord” <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-or22su.php>

Hamilton, Hugh. “I’d Rather Be…” Trinity Presbyterian Church-Pensacola, FL, August 29, 2004.

Rattee, Mike. *“How Unfair!”* Preaching/Word & Witness, Sept 2, 2007, Vol.07:5

Yancey, Phillip. *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

\09-01-19 Table Manners.doc