

KINGDOM ETIQUETTE

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Growing up, my Papa was a stickler for proper table manners. We had to sit up straight, no slouching/leaning against the table, complaining about what Mom had prepared for supper and definitely no elbows on the table. In fact, from time to time he used to threaten to put nails along the edge of the dinner table to keep our elbows where they belonged. We all sat in the same seats every night in order of age. The oldest sat beside Pop, the youngest in his or her highchair, the next two youngest sat on either side of Mom while the two oldest girls sat on either end of the table.

Whenever there were special guests for dinner, Mom and Pop sat at opposite ends of our extended dining room table. The most senior female guest sat to Papa's left, while the highest-ranking male to my Mom's left. The remainder of the adults appropriately alternated between male and female. There was usually enough room for the older of my siblings to sit with the adults, but the youngest were usually relegated to the card table in the family room. We were expected to remain on our best behavior even with no adult seated with us. Papa just had to "look" at us if we ever became too boisterous.

Jesus also had some very specific kingdom dining etiquette for both the host and guests as we see in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. "When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don't take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host." To the host, Jesus admonishes, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind."

In looking at this passage, I knew there had to be more going on here than what seems to simply be re-arranging table seating at a wedding. In my studies this week I came across a most interesting interpretation of the Biblical text by the Rev. Dr. Emilie Maureen Townes, an African American Christian social ethicist and theologian, currently serving as Dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Dean Townes begins by sharing a saying she heard many times from her Grandmother, "Chile, I just want to be a blessing to others." Townes recalls hearing this statement from her Grandmother at the tender young age of 3. She had no clue what her Grandmother meant other than this was a good way to be. As she grew in maturity, though, she began to understand that Blessing was something that, Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit did on a regular basis to good little boys and girls who shared their toys, minded their elders, and worked hard in school. (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, page 22).

Eventually, like me, Townes sought for the deeper meaning of this passage, recognizing that being "good" was much less about gaining spiritual brownie points and more about growing into a deeper relationship with God. In her words, "God asks us to live into our createdness through our everyday acts toward each other; in and through our relationship with God and creation." (Feasting, page 22). Jesus wants us to understand that our all-too-human drive to seek the best seat in the house or at the party will not mark genuine participation in God's mercy or

love. But Jesus does not stop with warning guests of the party, but then turns his attention to the party hosts. “Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, “When you host a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind.” (CEB) Jesus is cautioning the hosts the danger of falling victim to a bout of elitism by thinking of only inviting those who can return the favor.

I believe this type of behavior falls under the philosophy of, “If I treat someone well, they will return the favor.” “What goes around comes around.” And, “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” In other words, Jesus is perfectly clear about who should be invited: people who are the very fabric of God’s realm – the poor, the cripples, the lame, and the blind. “For Jesus, extending genuine hospitality to the least of these through acts of unselfish hospitality and kindness, can wash God’s blessing over and give us a sense of the great blessing that awaits us in the resurrection!” (Townes, Feasting, page 24).

Long ago Towne’s Grandmother was steering her in the right direction that it is better to be a blessing than seek a blessing. “Righteousness or right living encourages us to live our lives with honesty as we seek justice and sound moral principles and behaviors in the context of a community or the variety of communities to which we belong. Being a blessing, living righteousness in our daily lives, draws us into relationship with those who have less than we do, yet are the true representatives of God’s countless blessings in our lives and the lives of others. (Feasting, page 24).

In nutshell this account in the Gospel of Luke should lead you and I to find more and more ways to be a blessing rather than to seek blessings. The prayer of St. Francis says it best. If you know it, say it with me...

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

In closing, Sociologist and Baptist preacher, Tony Campolo has a wonderful Kingdom Etiquette story in his book Let Me Tell You a Story.

He tells of the time he is sitting at the counter of an all-night diner in Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning with a coffee and donut when in walks eight or nine provocative and noisy ladies of the night. Tony is quite uneasy but stays and cannot help but overhear their loud conversation. In Tony's words:

"I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine." Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do ya want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing "Happy Birthday?"

"Come on!" said the woman to her friend. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. Why should you give me a party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Hearing that conversation, Tony made a decision. After the women left, he asked the man behind the counter, "Do they come in here every night?" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me, does she come in every night?" "Yeah, that's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?" "Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her-right here-tomorrow night?"

A smile slowly crossed the man's face until his whole face lit up, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling his wife from the kitchen he told her about Tony's idea, and she said, "That's wonderful! Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody ever does anything nice and kind for her." So, the three of them made plans and Tony returned to the diner at 2:30 the next morning. Word must have gotten out about the party because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall to wall prostitutes and me!"

Then Agnes arrived with her "friend." Again from Tony, "When Agnes and her friend came in, everyone screamed Happy Birthday! Never in my life have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open; her legs seem to buckle a bit." The party people sang Happy Birthday and Agnes' eyes moistened, and when the birthday cake was carried out with all its candles she burst into tears.

Harry, the diner owner, told her to blow out the candles so he could cut the cake to share. But Agnes looked down at the cake, looked at the crowd, then looked at Harry and said, "Look Harry, is it all right with you if I keep the cake for a little while? I mean is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry responded, "Sure, it's your birthday, do what you want. You can even take it home if you want." "Can I?" she whispered in awe. "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and show it to my mother, okay? I'll be right back, I promise!"

As she left, Tony turned to the crowd and softly suggested, "What do you say we pray?" And there in that greasy diner surrounded by ladies of the evening Tony prayed for Agnes. He prayed for her salvation, that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her.

When he finished Harry said, “Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?”

It was one of those moments when the Holy Spirit gave me the perfect response, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at three-thirty in the morning!” After a moment Harry answered, “No you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I’d join it. I’d join a church like that!”

And, there, you have it. “Wouldn’t we all love to join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes?” Well friend, that’s the kind of church Jesus came to create. I don’t know how we have become so prim and proper, because anyone who reads the New Testament will discover a Jesus who loved to party with prostitutes and all kinds of left-out people. Jesus did not play lip service to the solemnly pious religious people of his time, He was all about those lonely people who usually did not get invited to parties, and they in turn, took to Him with excitement.

So, dear friends, this is the kind of party Jesus threw. He did not align himself with the rich and powerful; no, he went into the back alleys and sought the dregs of society. This is what Jesus means this morning when he teaches us all about Kingdom Etiquette. “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can’t repay you.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.