

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Table Manners

Luke 14:12-14

In the dark ages when I was growing up, our family sat down and shared dinner together. An archaic concept now, but pretty popular back then. We were expected not only to be at the dinner table, but also to use our best manners. My father was a stickler for cleaning your plate and for impeccable table manners. If you were not on your best behavior at the dinner table, my father would send you off to the kitchen to eat at the kitchen counter by yourself. Now as a little girl, I would dread the thought of getting sent to the kitchen. How horrible that would be – banished from the dinner table for a meal! Yet, my older brothers were sent to the kitchen now and again and they seemed to survive just fine. In fact, it got to the place that when one of my brothers was sent to the kitchen and the other one laughed, they were both gone from the table. Well just as you guessed, it finally happened, one of the boys was sent off to the kitchen and I was the one who laughed. For the first time in my life, I was banished to the kitchen. What I found was that in the kitchen, you could eat in any way you wanted. And as an added bonus, if it was a meal that included dreaded lima beans, you could bury them in the trash and no one would be the wiser. Dinner in the kitchen was not that bad, but not nearly as good as sitting with the entire family catching up on the events of the day.

As an adult it does now occur to me that my father was probably not nearly as worried about our table manners as he was delighted to have an occasional quiet meal with my mother while the kids were eating in the kitchen.

I cherish my memories of family dinners.

In a society where we are fast food fanatics, where meals are consumed in the car or on the run, the great tradition of family meals has drifted away. Many a meal these days is consumed in front of a television or computer screen. With that truth, it only makes sense to me that this meal, this sacred feast, is ever more precious. On this glorious day, the extended Christian family of God gathers to share a feast of grace. The invitation to the table is open to all. Fear not, no one will be sent to the kitchen today!

Jesus had been invited to dinner at the home of a prominent religious leader in his community. As the meal progressed the conversation began to focus on Jesus. Jesus took the opportunity to describe again for his listeners life in the kingdom of God. He told the story of a host planning a great banquet. Jesus asks the listeners at his table to think about the guest list. Instead of treating friends and relatives to a lavish meal, why not invite those who will never be an honored guest at a dinner party? Why not look beyond our normal range of vision and include those who live at the margins of society? Jesus continues the story and

tells of all those who will accept the invitation to the feast and then when the time comes find all sorts of excuses not to attend. However, the determined host then fills the home with those who will truly appreciate the gift of the meal.

This table is already set and you and I are invited as the honored guests of our host, Jesus Christ. However, we share this meal not only with the privileged of this nation, but also with the beloved people of God from all over the world. We have the free will to make excuses or explanations why we would rather not fully accept this gift of grace, but the gift is given even in the face of our excuses and we need only to embrace God's grace to bring transformation to our lives.

There are no restrictions at this table. There are no dress codes, no educational requirements, no expectations of social status. There is no need for a prior reservation for this meal. We are not asked to call in ahead and make sure there is a place waiting for us and for our family to the exclusion of another. Best of all, we will experience no rejection at this table, for God welcomes all who would be open to God's unconditional love and Jesus' unmerited grace.

John Dominic Crossan, a theologian and author shares these words about Jesus and his table manners. "He (Jesus) practiced an 'open table,' eating and drinking with those who were considered outside the pale." Crossan says that Jesus robs humankind of all protective privileges, entitlements, and ethnicities that segregate people into categories. The new vision that Jesus promotes is right relationships, community, liberation, justice and peace.

This was the radical nature of Jesus' table manners. This is the radical message concerning the kingdom of God for his own time and this continues to be a radical message of vision and hope for us this day. We are called not to perfection, but rather to live out the kingdom of God in our own time in our relationships and in our community with a vision of liberty, justice and peace for all.

There is an attempt in the contemporary American Christianity these days to place greater limits on God's grace and to increasingly define who is welcome at the table and who needs to be sent to the proverbial kitchen.

In that light, some very well known Christians have been in the news lately. Many were shocked by the words of Pope Benedict as he quoted a 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine emperor concerning Islam. What followed was even more conflict between Christians and Muslims. More recently, we heard this week of Jerry Falwell's words concerning his reference to Lucifer and Hillary Clinton.

The current trend of table manners in the Christian community focuses on who is excluded rather than who is included. Who is alienated, rather than embraced. As people of faith, we seem consumed by protecting the very grace that Jesus himself freely and openly offered to all. The table manners of many Christians have seriously diminished and at times are actually deplorable. In response to elevating our faith tradition, we find excusable the exclusion of those who are not like us, and even consider demonization of others as a viable

option. This is a moment to check our table manners. Bigotry, belittling, and demonization were not the ways of Jesus and are not the principles of the Kingdom that Jesus so passionately presented to us.

Anne Squire is a retired moderator of the United Church of Canada. She wrote an essay entitled, "Radical Inclusion" in which she states, and I quote, "Radical inclusion is the practice of including, in any community, those who are normally excluded. Jesus is the model of someone who lived and taught radical inclusion." Squire goes on to say that the Jesus who preached radical inclusion may threaten the walls that some Christians have built around their faith, and when someone threatens to breach those walls, they may become defensive of their current practice. "Today" she writes, "with a church in decline..., it would seem that we need to learn how to think the kingdom way of thinking and live the kingdom way of living. Every attempt to do so is an indication that the kingdom way is not a reduced vision of faith, but a fulfillment of the dream of Jesus for life in the kingdom now."

The table of grace is set all around the world today. People will gather in mud huts and grand cathedrals. The faithful will kneel in storefront churches and on sunlit hillsides. We share this feast today celebrating that we are never alone. We are the constant companions of Jesus Christ and the companions of millions of pilgrims of the Christian way. The beauty of this day, this high holy day, is that it is one of the few times when the Christian community stands unified and affirms grace.

The communion experience is both a personal, individual connection with the Divine and a corporate inclusive connective experience of community. It is an experience of grace localized and of grace powerful enough to move us beyond our singular agendas to expand our perspective to the margins of humanity. From this ancient sacrament, we become empowered to allow the love of God to inspire our words and actions to live a life of radical inclusiveness as we live out the kingdom now.

In August, I had a wonderful experience with United Methodist Clergywomen who gathered from all over the world. We spent four days together in Chicago. In the midst of one of the gatherings, Mary Ann Moman who works for the denomination shared a story from her childhood. She spoke of going to a Mennonite Church to worship with her grandparents when she was a little girl. The men and women would enter the church through different doors and would sit in a space that was divided by a wall that ran down the length of the room. Both sides of the church could see the worship leader, but the men and women could not see each other.

We know that there are walls that divide us. We have built up walls in relationships with friends and family. Many of us have been at odds with loved ones for years.

We have built up walls to separate us from political and ideological adversaries. You need to turn on the nightly news to underscore those divisions.

We have built up walls in hopes of protecting us from the needy, or the mentally ill and the poor.

We have used our faith to justify the walls that we build, yet our reality is that the kingdom of God is not focused on building walls up, but rather on breaking them down.

The poor and the rich are invited to this feast. The Pope and Jerry Falwell are honored guests as well as those they might seek to exclude. The law makers and the law breakers are invited as well. Those who are here legally and those who are in this nation illegally are the beloved guests of Jesus. Those who have lied and those who are as honest as Abe are welcomed guests. You and I and any others whom we might or might not welcome are invited to come to this table today and all are received with love and affection because grace abounds.

Mary Ann Moman finished her story about going to worship in the Mennonite church as a child by saying that when the service was over, the children would go outside to play and the women would put together a feast for the entire church while the men would turn that wall into a long dinner table.

What a perfect image for this day. I pray that we dance down the aisle to this communion table knowing that we are honored guests, invited, loved and embraced by the Divine. I pray that our spirit soars as we leave this table knowing that we are forgiven, blessed and empowered to be radically inclusive in the name of Jesus. For the grace we receive in this holy meal today is ours to hold dear. A grace great enough to heal our wounds and break down our walls. A grace great enough to guide our steps and to share with others. In the name of Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are blessed and need never fear of being sent to the kitchen.

It is that sense of gratitude, that sense of a spirit soaring that I pray you bring to this table today.

The New York Times bestseller, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul* is a memoir written by Tony Hendra. Father Joe is a Benedictine Monk and Tony visits him for over four decades. At one point, deep into the book, Tony is lost, desolate and visits Father Joe. Father Joe suggests that Tony participate in confession for the first time in decades. After a long, painful discourse, Father Joe responds with these words, "Tony dear, you will only be able to love when you understand how much you are loved. You are loved, dear, with a limitless...fathomless...all-embracing love."

This table is set with love and grace. I hope that you will dance down the aisle toward this bread and wine, toward this grace and unconditional love with absolute, unbridled joy!