

August 29, 2010
Lectionary 22c
Luke 14:1, 7-14
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

WHERE ARE HIS MANNERS?

Didn't Jesus' parents teach him manners? Didn't they instill in him respect for others, especially someone who invites you into their home? Surely you don't tell the host that the food is bland, the conversation boring, or the other guests are dull.

Yet Jesus approaches the host, who just happens to be a religious leader, and criticizes his guest list for the dinner party underway at that moment! Jesus tells him: don't just invite people in your class, people who can repay the favor, and invite you back to their home—friends, family, rich neighbors. Instead, next time you give a banquet invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind. Folks who can't repay you. Folks on the margin. Folks that others look down upon. Jesus: where are your manners?

Certainly a benevolent idea, Jesus. But where are your manners? Wouldn't that nugget of truth be better shared with the disciples later? Did you have to offend your host by saying it to his face?

It seems Jesus is talking table etiquette. He also tells the parable about people scrambling to get the best seats, the places of honor, at a wedding banquet. I guess we take care of that chaos by assigning seats with little cards that you pick up when you arrive, telling us we'll be at table number 8. But Jesus says: practice humility and take the lowest place.

Where do we get our manners? What were you taught? Were you told to get your elbows off the table? Were you allowed to have the television on when you ate supper? What about chewing with your mouth open? Cleaning your plate? Feeding Fido under the table? Asking to be excused when you were done eating, or bored with adult conversation?

Before the internet, we consulted Emily Post or Miss Manners for appropriate social etiquette when throwing a dinner party or planning a wedding reception. Now you can go online, or buy books like *Etiquette for Dummies*.

Consider this statement: *Etiquette tells one which fork to use. Manners tells one what to do if your neighbor doesn't.* Another reason to question or say: Jesus, where are your manners?

A little background. We can't overstate the role of honor, shame, and social standing in Jesus' day. Meals gave legitimacy to one's social rank. You only ate with folks who were your equals. And you would never accept an invitation if you weren't able to reciprocate. It was all about: I do you a favor, you do me a favor.

Certainly we need to learn good manners, and table etiquette is a way of ordering our daily lives. But much of our social convention is about the pecking order in society. Keeping people in their place. At their heart they reveal our insecurities. We need to know where we stand—who is beneath us and above us.

Jesus will have none of this. In the reign of God everything is turned upside. Especially the ways we classify people. In the kingdom of God, the most honored are the poor, the outcast, the lowly, and those who don't hang on to their social status. The most honored are those who realize, that in the end, their wealth, their degrees, their good looks, are not what ultimately matters. We all live, we all die. Our worth comes from God alone.

Jesus' shocking manner is to turn social convention on its head. He challenges the status quo. And that gets him ... killed.

Nelson Mandela had a manner of leading that was also shocking and surprising. The movie *Invictus* tells the story of Mandela's desire to unify the white and black citizens of South Africa after years of apartheid. When he learns that a black sports commission wants to overturn a white national rugby team, Mandela asserts that such an action, just—right—as it might be, would ignite further racial tension. Mandela seeks a radical path of forgiveness and reconciliation instead. Even though the rugby team represents apartheid to black South Africans, Mandela seeks a path in which the former enemy is met with honor, respect, and courtesy. Mandela seeks to break down the wall between "us" and "them." And in his own way, overturns social convention.

There is a certain etiquette to the way we celebrate the eucharist, our weekly banquet. There is a way to set the table, receive the bread in your hand, receive the wine, say “amen” after you receive the elements.

But we also act as if the reign of God has come among us. And it has! Talk about counter-cultural manners! All are invited. Whether you can afford it or not. Whether you can repay the invitation or not. Whether you are dressed up or down. Whether you make six figures or you are homeless. All come forward, in the same line. And all get the same amount of bread, the same sip of wine.

In Benedictine communities, strangers are honored as Christ himself. Sounds like the reading from Hebrews: in showing hospitality to strangers, we may be entertaining angels and not knowing it.

In some cultures, a bow is a sign of honor and dignity bestowed on another person. In the liturgy we may bow as the cross passes, or as we approach the table.

What if we taught these manners? (Maybe in our imagination, maybe for real). To bow to one another as the sign of Christ among us. To bow toward strangers and guests who come into our midst. And to bow toward the homeless person and those who don't seem to fit in.

In a manner of speaking, that is the kingdom of God.