

Table Manners

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

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by

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Over 50 years ago when Christian Herter was campaigning for reelection as Governor of Massachusetts, he arrived late for a fund raiser. He had skipped lunch and was famished. In the food line, the server gave the governor a large piece of chicken. He said, "I'm very hungry. May I please have another piece of chicken?" The lady serving replied, "No, I'm sorry. We have only a limited amount of food and we want to feed everyone, so I've been given orders, only one piece of chicken per person." The governor repeated, "I'm starving." Again, he was told, "Only one piece of chicken per person." With his nagging hunger, the governor decided to bring the **full** weight of his office to bear. He said, "Madam do you know who **I** am? I am governor of this state!" Without skipping a beat, she shot right back, "Sir, do you know who I am? I'm the lady in charge of this chicken. Move along."

The same question the lady server and Governor Herter asked each other is the same question posed to us in today's Gospel, Do **we** know who we are? Apparently it was not a Hebrew custom to put little cards written with the name of the dinner guests at each of their places at table. Rather in an almost Darwinian survival of the fittest strategy, the guests chose their own places and came early enough to occupy the best positions. The Pharisees sought places of honor as a reward for keeping the Jewish laws, so as to receive fawning praise from the other invited guests. Ominously the passage begins that Jesus knew he was being carefully observed. Instead, Jesus turns the tables around by **watching** the guests and host and holding up a mirror so **they** could see themselves as **he** saw them. Jesus views these establishment type people who think they have all the right credentials, as caught up in games of hypocrisy and social posturing, both establishing and safeguarding their positions and improving their status by clawing their way to "success" by their own bootstraps. They cultivate the right connections, getting ahead by being acceptable to people above them, while keeping a safe distance from people they perceived as lower than themselves, building their reputations snobbishly at the cost of someone else, usually by putting down and hurting other people. Lady Astor, an aristocrat, after a heated debate with her political enemy, Winston Churchill, prime minister of England during World War II, blurted out of exasperation, in a famous exchange with Churchill, "If I were your wife, I'd put poison in your tea," to which Churchill replied, "If I were your husband, I'd drink it." It is this kind of poisonous oneupmanship and the use of hospitality for self-serving purposes, as well as social arrangements creating imbalance, manipulation, and competition, that Jesus was critiquing. Many commentators often cite this passage as Jesus' teaching on humility. Humility is one of these words that once had a positive connotation but now has been falsely corrupted to mean feeling badly about yourself or thinking of yourself as inferior

to others, like a human door mat. Certainly this is **not** the definition suggested here by Jesus who regards humility as a question of identity, calling us to turn our lives over to God and recognize that **who** we are and **all** we do derives ultimately from God. Jesus challenges us to see ourselves as God sees us, allowing us to make a realistic assessment of ourselves without illusion or pretense at being something we are **not**, freeing us to be our **true** selves. A humble person doesn't have to wear a mask or put on a false smile to win the favor and approval of others. Humility is about believing deep inside yourself that you are of **priceless** worth with an intrinsic value to God, that you're **already** somebody by grace, so you **don't** have to prove your merit anymore, especially at someone else's expense. True humility frees us from preoccupation **with** ourselves, whereas a low self opinion tends to focus our attention **on** ourselves. Twelve step programs based on AA spirituality have a slogan saying, humility is not thinking **less** of yourself. It is thinking of yourself **less**, or as Catholic theologian Richard John Neuhaus wryly observed, "If you were half as important as you thought you are, you would be twice as important as you **really** are." Jesus is daring us to discard the self-seeking rules of this world, to reject the need to jockey so as to come out on top of the heap, and **alternatively** adopt the self-giving manners of God's kingdom or reign, because it is **God's** respect we should seek, not that of other people. He implies it is God **alone** who gives us identity, honor, and position, such that Jesus came to do away with status, and any other social barrier that gets in the way of our relationship with God and our neighbors, so we can **lift** others up, rather than tear them to shreds. The problem is that if we are preoccupied with our own self-importance, there is no space left for God to fill us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is showing us that if we can empty ourselves of these false ideas of success and other worldly distractions, with God's grace, we can make room for humility. Humility then opens up a vacancy within, so God's spirit can flow unencumbered in and through us. We can then avoid the attitude Muhammed Ali once had when as heavyweight boxing champion of the world, he was about to take off on a flight when the flight attendant reminded him to fasten his seatbelt. He smarted off saying, "*Superman doesn't need a seat belt.*" The attendant replied, "*Superman doesn't need an airplane either.*" Ali put on his seat belt.

When Jesus suggests that hosts invite the poor, sick, marginalized and every other "**loser**" in town to their dinners, it seems preposterous ... Martha Stewart's etiquette nightmare. Jesus is **not** the guest likely to receive the Miss Congeniality award. But Jesus is saying that since we are **all** in need of God's mercy and forgiveness, we are **all** alike, so we are to embrace **all** God's people as equals before God. Why are **we** any more worthy to come before God than one of society's **so-called** rejects? About 15 years ago on a British Airways flight from Johannesburg, an aristocratic, middle-aged white South African lady had found herself sitting next to a black worker. She called the flight attendant over to complain about her seating. "What seems to be the problem, Ma'am?" asked the attendant. "Can't you see?" she said, "You've seated me next to a --- and she used a derogatory racial slur I won't repeat. I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat!" The flight attendant calmed the woman down and said, "The flight is very full today but I'll go and check to see if we have any seats available in business or first class." A few minutes later the flight attendant returned with good news, saying, "Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full and so is business. However, we do have **one** seat in first class. For this kind of upgrade, I had to get

permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was **outrageous** that anyone should be forced to sit next to such an **obnoxious** person.” With that, she turned to the black man and said, “**Sir**, if you’d like to collect your things, I have a first class seat ready for you.” The surrounding passengers then stood and gave a standing ovation while the man walked to the front of the plane. In the reign of God, competition and discrimination are converted into compassion. True humility cuts through all the boundaries and categories society sets up to separate us from one another. There is no need for false distinctions between people or power grabbing because the only power considered valuable is service to the **powerless** practiced with the lavish hospitality and inclusiveness of God’s love, modeled for us by Jesus. Jesus reveals to us that God is the type of host who once the inviting starts, doesn’t know **when** to quit, inviting **anyone** who will come. We are invited to God’s banquet **only** as a result of God’s great love and as God’s free gift, so we in turn can be luxurious with our generosity towards others as God has been to **us**. Thus heaven will be a party with people we wouldn’t be caught **dead** with on a Saturday night, because **we** don’t get to choose who we hang out with, as **God** is doing the inviting, not **us**. In our Gospel, Jesus is simply laying out the good manners which we can follow so as to prepare ourselves to feel more at **home** in the reign of God and enjoy the party once we get there, a come as you are party, warts and all! By encouraging us to invite marginalized people into our lives we can surrender conventional attachments, such as being repaid in kind, enhancing our prestige, or doing everything on the basis of debit and credit, fussing about **who** owes **what** to whom, as if life was just an IRS audit. Instead we can concentrate on bringing the **excluded** into the circle of full community so the whole concept of outcast or outsider becomes meaningless and all people, regardless of who they are or what they have done, become our sisters and brothers. With Jesus calling us to **downward** mobility, we soon realize that the poorest and **most** forsaken at the table are as worthy, as we are. Since **we** don’t deserve God’s goodness we will set no conditions nor require anything that would put others in our debt, as there is no quid pro quo with God. God could care less about stuffy, righteous types with mile-long lists of good works and wants us to understand we are **all** forgiven sinners, failures if you will, who are to live by faithfulness in love and trust in Jesus. On his way to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus is setting forth death and lostness, not life and success, as the means of salvation.

At the Eucharistic feast of which we are about to partake, **God** is the host and **who** can repay God? In God’s reign, hosts and guests sit at table **equally** together including the have **nots** and all outsiders, so none of God’s children are excluded from care and concern, just as Jesus gladly sat down at table with anyone. To give without expecting a return is to act like God who as ultimate patron has been compassionate and wildly extravagant with grace to us. The only way to come to God’s table is with open hands and hearts, because there **is** enough grace and chicken for everybody. There are no second class citizens in the reign of God. **Do** we know **who** we are? We are loved and sustained by God. We follow Jesus who humbled himself, so **all** could be saved and exalted, enabling us to give generously of ourselves and our resources, take risks and remain secure, welcome status reversals, and live without fear. And we are invited as equal honored guests to the heavenly banquet. That’s **who** we are and it is **more** than enough. Now move along!