

When I was in the third grade, I went to finishing school. I learned the proper way to make introductions. I studied the essential elements of a good thank-you note. I practiced how to stand, how to sit, how to curtsy (can't say that was very useful). I memorized how to set the table with fancy silverware, like oyster forks and butter knives, and on and on. My 8-year-old mind couldn't fathom why I needed to know all this stuff. Every week on the way to class I'd whine about it to my mother as I fussed with my skirt and pushed my lacy party socks down as far as I could. And every week my mother would patiently explain, "Good manners make other people feel important. It's a matter of etiquette."

A matter of etiquette. I don't think my mom got the idea that I should go to finishing school from Jesus, but she may as well have. Jesus was a firm believer in proper etiquette. He saw true good manners as putting others first, respecting all as equal, being gracious and inviting at all times. Read anywhere in the gospels and you can see Jesus putting these principles into practice. He dines with prostitutes and beggars. He makes time for children. He touches the untouchable and notices people who don't have status or power or prestige. He makes other people feel important. In Jesus' eyes there are no differences of class or age or gender. There are just God's children. And all of God's children are worthy of his time and attention. It's a matter of etiquette.

The problem was, back in Jesus' time not all folks were seen as worthy of time and attention. Women had second-class status. Slavery was accepted. And among free men, there was a strong sense of social ranking, between classes and even amongst one's peers. One of the primary ways this played itself out was around the dinner table. Sitting in the place of honor at a meal established one as the most important person in the room. To be seated far away from the host was like being relegated to the kids' table at

Thanksgiving. No one wanted that. So one day as Jesus watched the guests jockey for position around the table, he took the opportunity to point out that seizing the best seat didn't automatically make you the most important. Indeed, as pride goes before a fall (Prov. 16:18) trying to prove your social worth might backfire if you got bumped for someone else. "Everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled," he said, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now, humility may be a sign of good manners today, but it wasn't seen as a virtue in Greco-Roman culture. Yet time and time again in the gospels we see that God's kingdom is a topsy-turvy kingdom. A teenage peasant girl is chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. An impoverished widow is hailed as the model of generosity. The meek, the poor, the sorrowful are called blessed. In God's kingdom, the lowly will be raised up and the haughty will be put down. As guests in that kingdom, we need to take care to treat others with respect and dignity to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. That's a matter of etiquette – and it's the way of God's love.

But Jesus doesn't just shake up the social order with his parable. He turns directly to the host and turns the first-century system of hospitality on its head, too. One of the unwritten rules of the day was that you took care of people who came into your home. They didn't have Best Westerns or Applebees back then. Travelers depended on the hospitality of others. If someone came by, you invited them in and treated them well -- because you never knew when you might be in need of a good meal or place to stay.

And for Jesus, that was the problem. People tended to take care of folks in their own social class, people who could reciprocate the gesture. But true hospitality isn't about what you might get out of it. *When you give a luncheon or banquet, he says, don't just invite folks who you know will return the favor.* Jesus implies that if that's all you do, your

hospitality is all about you. Instead, he tells them to *go out and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, anyone who cannot repay you*. He expects his followers to cross those social boundaries, and help those who can't help themselves.

If you remember anything from the past few weeks, it's that Jesus has little patience for people who try to appear one way but act another. If that's his standard of etiquette, I know of at least one person in this room who deserves his label of hypocrite. It goes to anyone who says "please" and "thank you" when they're in the right company, but can't bring themselves to meet the eyes of the man holding the sign by the side of the road. It goes to anyone who holds the door open for another at church but who looks right through the immigrant struggling to read the signs at the DMV. It goes to anyone who waves goodbye as they pull out of the driveway but then mutters curses at drivers who cut them off at the freeway. It goes to anyone who'd write out a check for the food shelf, but who'd never dream of asking the family who patronizes it to come over for supper.

Proper etiquette in the kingdom of God isn't just watching or even helping from a distance. It's opening up your home, your very self, to whomever might need your attention. It's treating the person you're with as though they were the most important person on the planet. It's sitting down to share the meal, not just serve it, so you can truly get to know who you're eating with. And in so doing, "you just might find yourself entertaining angels unawares."

When I was in college one of my heroes was Katharine Graham, the publisher of the Washington Post. Growing up, she'd been taught that women were intellectually inferior to men. So when she became publisher after her husband died in 1963, she was terrified that she couldn't command the respect the position deserved. Yet over time Graham learned to combine guts with grace, generosity with razor-sharp business

instincts. When she died, Post columnist Richard Cohen told a story that exemplifies her humility. Cohen wrote:

“It was a beastly July Sunday in 1999. A tent had been erected in the Post’s parking lot. It was for a company party, given for people whose names you never hear – the people who take the classified ads or deliver the paper or clean the building. In the heat, I saw Katharine Graham plodding towards the party. She was old by then, and walking was difficult. She pushed her way up the ramp, moving in a laborious fashion. She had a farm in Virginia, a house in Georgetown, an apartment in New York, and, most significantly that hideously hot day, a place on the water in Martha’s Vineyard. Yet here she was, plowing through the muggy heat to a party for people you never heard of. And all the while, smiling with the dignity that made those people feel as if there was no place more important that she could have been that day.”

If you think about it, this is exactly what Jesus modeled for us. Whether he was with powerful leaders or powerless lepers, he gave them his full attention. He didn’t boast or brag or throw his weight around. He knelt to wash feet and stooped to heal wounds. He even offered his very self up as bread and wine so that we might be fed. When we come into his presence, we are the poor, the lame, the blind invited to the banquet. But with gracious manners Jesus never once lets on that we are undeserving of his hospitality. He says, “Come. Take this seat here, at my right hand. Give me your whatever is weighing you down. Let me serve you.” His love isn’t a gift with strings attached. Our love isn’t to be either. It’s a matter of etiquette ... a matter of discipleship ... when we share that humble love it brings God’s topsy-turvy kingdom a little bit closer. Amen.