



**“Tables Turned”**

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Luke 14:1, 7–14***

Where did you learn etiquette, even basic table manners? Did you learn etiquette from your family, “charm school,” prom preparations, wedding planning, or maybe a combination of these experiences and more?

Like most people, I learned table manners at home from my parents, and then learned more about social etiquette, particularly around formal occasions, from helping my grandmothers host tea parties for their church and social groups and special holiday meals, from preparing for prom and family weddings, and from on-the-job training as a pastor.

Experiences likely vary for us and are determined, in part, by our social location. I remember, for example, asking a colleague once who grew up in a wealthy family in New York City, how he learned proper etiquette, especially etiquette associated with formal occasions.

My colleague explained that he had spent numerous Saturday mornings dressed in a suit and tie on the top floor of an up-scale department store, where he had received dance instruction and participated in etiquette classes. After each class, he said, his mother picked him up and took him to lunch at a nice restaurant, where he was expected to demonstrate some mastery of the subject.

My colleague remembered that those lessons seemed dreadful at the time, but that he had become grateful over the years for having learned those lessons at an early age.

The days are long past since dance lessons and etiquette classes were the norm for adolescents in our culture. So nowadays the younger generations learn social etiquette through “crash courses” associated with school proms and formal weddings.

Fortunately there’s help for those who are on tight deadlines. I’ve counseled more than a few bridal couples to check out *Emily Post* from the local library or request an etiquette book for an engagement gift. In more recent years, shorter versions of these sorts of resources, such as “groom’s guides” have become available to help demystify etiquette for our post-Victorian generations.

I often explain, particularly to younger couples, that the degree to which traditional etiquette is followed anymore depends on the taste of the hosts. Reading *Emily Post* doesn’t require that one follow it. But if young couples study these guides, they will at least know what their parents and grandparents are fussing about.

Like the editors of modern etiquette guides, and the now ubiquitous groom's guides, Jesus was hip to the fact that his disciples needed some etiquette lessons, and that they could quickly be overwhelmed by details; so rather than offering them the *Emily Post* version of etiquette (which is thick enough to stop a door), he offered a series of brief lessons—particularly on table etiquette—which Luke nicely collected in chapter 14.

The difference between a groom's guide and Jesus' guide to etiquette is that the former was designed for grooms preparing for weddings, and the latter was developed for all of Jesus' followers and for all occasions, both formal and informal.

In Jesus' day, food was sometimes scarce and people who were marginalized were often barred from banquets and limited in their access to raise, harvest, and prepare food. So having enough to eat and being included in meals were major concerns for most people—practically and theologically—and the lessons that Jesus taught were about far more than which fork to use and when.

Think, for example, about how many significant events in Jesus' life were set within the context of a meal:

- The Feeding of the Five Thousand was the miracle when Jesus' followers were inspired to share what they had with others so that everyone had enough to eat.
- The Parable of the Great Banquet was Jesus' image of heaven on earth, where everyone was invited and welcome.
- The Dinner at Martha's was that meal where Jesus affirmed Mary's hunger for spiritual and theological nourishment, and where she received it.
- The Last Supper was the occasion when Jesus reinterpreted the Passover meal and taught his followers the new commandment—that we love one another.
- And, the first Sunday brunch in our tradition was grounded in Jesus' followers' experience of the risen Christ in the breaking of bread at Emmaus.

Each of these meals that either occurred during Jesus' life, or that he envisioned about the future amplified the table talk and etiquette lessons that he imparted in the teachings.

Like a modern groom's guide, Jesus' guide to everyday etiquette emphasizes particular behaviors that he expected of his followers, but they are about much more than ceremony. They point to something deeper. For example, today's reading offers instruction about seating at banquets, but the lesson was about more than figuring out the seating chart.

The disciples, according to Luke, had for some time been posturing and positioning themselves seeking places of honor as Jesus' popularity grew. But now the tables were turned, as he challenged the disciples' value systems, and encouraged them to seek the lowest seat at the banquet. Why the lowest?

Certainly Jesus walked the talk of humility, but taking the lowest seat was about more than teaching the value of humility for its own sake. I suspect that Jesus was pushing his followers to learn something from those with whom they did not normally associate, and that in learning this something new, they/we would become more whole and holy people.

### III

Think about your own life for a moment. Think about those occasions when you have learned something new: something that really mattered about yourself, about other people, or about life in general. I suspect that some, if not much, of that learning was derived from experiences outside of your normative routine, maybe outside of your home culture, or maybe even outside of your “comfort zone.”

To prompt your reflection about what some of those learning experiences may have been for you—when the tables were turned and you were in more humble circumstances—I’ll share a few illustrations from my own experience.

I remember thinking as a youth, for example, that I knew a lot about food and food production having grown up in a farming family in Iowa. But my knowledge of these and my theological understandings of the gospel were stretched and challenged by the following:

- Picking asparagus with migrant laborers when I was in high school;
- Volunteering at the Special Olympics when I was in college;
- Teaching kids from a wealthy suburban church how to make Toll House cookies when I was in seminary;
- Salvaging food that grocery stores had thrown out and cooking meals for homeless women in Boston, and;
- Being invited to Christmas dinner by a rabbi colleague of mine, the Christmas that Stephanie was in Indonesia

I also remember learning a lot about hospitality from my grandmothers as a child, but perhaps learning even more as a young adult from nearly complete strangers. For example:

- I remember being hosted by the night manager at a no-name motel on the Mass Turnpike during my first year in seminary, when my car broke down on the way back to school from Christmas break. The manager gave me a room even though I didn’t have a major credit card, and conned her boyfriend into opening the auto parts store that he managed on New Year’s Day, and replacing the alternator on my old Honda in sub-zero weather, so that I could get back to seminary.
- I remember, too, the hospitality of rural villagers in the Philippines, who hosted the college group that I advised in the late 1980s. The students and I went to build schools and doctors offices on two remote islands. At most one or two villager shared a common language with us. Few of us knew each other’s first names, and yet our hosts brought us food twice a day, even though we weren’t sure that they had food enough to feed their own families.
- I also remember the hospitality of the Muslim school teachers with whom Stephanie shared a home in Indonesia in the early 1990s. Their names were Bu Ulfa and Bu Yun. They quickly realized that I did not have the gastric fortitude that Stephanie did, and that I could not enjoy much of the food that was cheap and readily available at food stands in the village; so they spent their precious spare time cooking special meals for me that I could eat without needing to discharge a fire extinguisher.

These are just a few examples of my experiences where the tables have been turned and I have learned more about Jesus’ idea of faithful etiquette and, more importantly, about his vision of God’s Kingdom. I wonder what you may have learned in your life when the tables were turned, and how those experiences may have deepened your sense of the Kingdom of God come on earth?

#### IV

Furthermore, I wonder what opportunities may lay ahead for us today, or this week, by trying out a new venue at meal time or another time, and what we may learn from these experiences in the future.

Earlier this morning, Liz, Susan, and I invited you to rearrange yourselves in the worship, and to open up the possibility of new insights and perspectives as you met people who you may not know as well, and possibly experience worship as you may not have ever experienced it before.

At the end of the service today, instead of our usual custom of going out the doors and on to coffee hour or other things, everyone is invited to come forward to the chancel for an all-church photograph.

What if we continued this practice of trying out a new venue? What if we dared to continue to rearrange ourselves at coffee hour? Yes, even coffee hour. Many of us sit with the same people—not just in worship, but in coffee hour—Sunday after Sunday. Certainly it is a blessing to worship with our families and to have the opportunity to be with our friends, but what if once in a while, or even for just this Sunday, we dared to sit somewhere new? I wonder what we'd learn. I wonder if we would experience a taste of the Kingdom come on earth.

I wonder too, in light of the pathetic amount of Islamaphobia that is churning in our country and in other parts of the world these days, if we as Christians could demonstrate some acts of solidarity with our Muslim sisters and brothers this coming week, month, or even year?

As a counter to those who suggest that the Q'uran be burned, perhaps we could commit to buying a copy and reading a page or two this week, or even the whole book over the course of the next year.

As a counter to those who claim that our nation is going to hell in a hand-basket on account of the Islamic Center being constructed in Lower Manhattan, perhaps we could sign a petition in support of this project, or challenge people in our circles that perpetuate Islamaphobia, or actually visit an Islamic center or a mosque.

Through these and other acts of solidarity with our Muslim sisters and brothers, we could illustrate our deeply held belief that being good Christians includes affirming the beliefs and values of those who do not share our faith.

#### V

Through these and many other occasions where the tables are turned, we have an opportunity to demonstrate some mastery of the etiquette that Jesus taught, and to experience God's Kingdom coming on earth. Through these and other table-turning experiences, God is glorified, we are blessed, and the world is made whole. This is the good news of the Gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.