

Sermon for World Communion Sunday 2017 – “Table Manners”

October 1, 2017 – 26th Sunday in OT, Year A - Text: 1st Corinthians 11:17-26

Westwood First Presbyterian Church, Rev. Jeff Colarossi

“Get your elbows off the table!

“Wait until everyone is served before you start eating!

“Use your napkin – not your sleeve!

“Don’t talk with your mouth full!

Am I starting to sound like anyone’s mom? Or whoever it was that taught you good table manners? What were some of the rules at your dinner table growing up? Did you have to be home at 6 o’clock sharp? Did you have to have hands washed and ready for dinner? Were you expected to help set the table for your family meal? Were you expected to wait until everyone was finished eating before you left the table? My mom had a rule that there be no singing at the dinner table, and to this day, I’m not sure if it’s because she wanted a calm, quiet meal with the family or because dad was such an awful singer. Anyway, let me ask a question...What are meals like in your home? Is Sunday dinner different than a regular weekday meal? How? Do you sit at the table (as opposed to in front of the TV)? Or do you use the good china? Do you dress a little nicer? Do you say “please” and “thank you” more frequently?

Personally, I’d say that table manners make a big difference in your dining experience. And I’d also say that nothing can make you feel more out of place than to go to someone’s home for a meal and realize that everyone around you is following a completely different set of rules than you are. Has that ever happened to you? Talk about awkward!

Such was the problem, and I’m putting it very mildly, in the church in Corinth. Like any concerned mother trying to teach her children good table manners Paul had a few things to say to the church in Corinth about **their** table manners. He wasn’t very happy, and again, I’m putting it mildly, with the abuses he’d been told about at the Lord’s Table. The Corinthian believers had taken this communal meal, a meal in which the vitally important remembrance of Jesus’ Last Supper takes place, and they’d messed things up. Royally! Paul was so disturbed about the reports he’d heard that he doesn’t beat around the bush. He uses a harsh reprimand. He accuses them of showing contempt for the church of God, and humiliating those who have nothing! Yikes!

You see, for the earliest Christians, communion was done quite differently than the way we do it today. Remember, they were most likely meeting in homes not in established church buildings. And who was more likely to own a large home? Large enough to host a larger group? Probably the wealthier among them. Many scholars believe that originally the ritual observance of the Lord’s Supper included a full meal, which likely only the wealthier could afford. I’m guessing that pot luck dinners hadn’t caught on yet. The observance of the communion meal started with breaking bread together, remembering the way Christ broke bread with the disciples at the Last Supper. Next, they’d eat a full meal and afterward they’d share in the ritual of the cup, drinking from it as Christ’s disciples did. Eating together was an important way to form a

community especially since both Jews and Gentiles had gathered. Harsh adherence to Jewish dietary laws had been relaxed.

This was done in the name of table fellowship and, more importantly, relationship with one another. In most places this was a beautiful way of being together, a beautiful way to observe and remember the meal that Christ shared with His beloved followers. However, the Corinthians as I said had made a real mess of it. It seems that some were coming **early** to the meal, those who were wealthier and could afford to come and go as they pleased. Others, usually poorer folks, would come later. By the time that the latecomers got there most, if not all, of the food was gone. The early birds were stuffed and drunk. Not exactly what a meal in God's Kingdom should look like. And Paul wasn't shy in reminding them! It would seem that Paul understood beyond the significance of the sacrament itself. He understood the importance of eating in that it was a way of being together, a way of forming a closer-knit community. Eating was vitally important to Jesus. He shows this in His dining with others, with tax collectors and sinners. He shows us that all people should have a place at the table. Jesus even reserved a special place at the table, a place of honor for those who did not regularly receive it. Jesus gave priority seating to the poor and the disabled, those who weren't considered ideal dinner guests. When Paul planted that church he taught them this. He helped them understand the Lord's teachings, especially the ones about what it meant to gather around a table as a reminder of the Last Supper, the meal the Lord had shared with those first disciples. He passed along to the Corinthians what he'd received from the Lord himself. He'd shown them how to celebrate the sacrament together. But, it seemed that the moment Paul left they'd forgotten all He'd taught them. We're so like them sometimes. We can hear a message about how to treat each other and then go right out into the world and do the opposite.

Here's the thing, how we act on our faith is vitally important. Table manners in God's Kingdom are of utmost importance. Gathering at the Lord's Table is **the** most important thing we do together as a people of God. The table is the place where we become the body of Christ. Everything in our worship service sets the stage. But God's table manners, strictly speaking, aren't about manners as such. They aren't about what to do or what not to do. They're not about prescribing a particular way of doing things. No, they're about honoring Jesus. They're about remembering what He did for the entire world! They're about becoming part of the ever-unfolding story! They're about welcoming people to His table and inviting them into the story! Realizing all this, any wonder Paul was upset with the Corinthians bad table manners? So much so that he made a point of reminding them what the meal is about when he shares with them what we've come to know as "the words of institution." The words that I will say in just a few moments. He reminded them why they do this, why it was and remains vitally important. Paul reminded them that..."**As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup... "You proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."** He reminds them that this is the **same** meal that Jesus shared, and in sharing it together, we not only enter into God's shared covenant, **past** and **present**. We also proclaim that Christ's coming is our common **future**.

I think it goes without saying that sharing communion together isn't a ritual that we participate in just for the sake of ritual. It's a deeply meaningful, intimate time with Christ **each** and **every** time we celebrate it. It probably also goes without saying that each of us thinks about the sacrament in a different way coming as many of us do from

different traditions. Many find that participating in the Lord's Supper gives them an opportunity to recommit to Christ. Many reflect on the blessings they have been given. Many find that it strengthens them on their journey.

Whatever it is you believe about the sacrament, whatever you get out of it, whatever your background, I encourage everyone this day, this World Communion Sunday a day we gather around the Lord's Table with brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, I want to encourage everyone to gather with purpose and intentionality. Don't just go through the motions. Don't allow it to become an empty ritual. Regardless of who you are, what you've done or failed to do, come to the Lord's Table. Come knowing, as it says in the bulletin, using words taken directly from our Book of Order, that "all are invited to Christ's table. "Remembering that access is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving, enabled by the very act of which the sacrament reminds us."

Something occurred to me earlier this week. It occurred to me that on World Communion Sunday, a day when Christians everywhere participate in this sacred meal, it's probably safe to say that someone will be doing so for the first time and for that reason, the sacrament will likely have deep meaning. I think it's also safe to say that someone will be doing this in a part of the world where it isn't entirely safe to be a Christian. A place where it is downright dangerous! I can guarantee you he/she isn't just going through the motions. So, what about us? What about **our** table manners?

Brothers and sisters, at some point between now and the end of the service, maybe as you prepare to receive the elements of the bread and cup, maybe in that moment after you partake of them, take a moment and reflect on the meaning of the sacrament, on what an incredible gift it is that you are a beloved child of God. So much so that Christ gave His life for you to secure a place at the table for you. A place for each and every one of us! My prayer is simple. I offer it silently each and every time we gather around the Lord's Table. My prayer is this, that we would remember that when do this Christ is with us, that we would acknowledge that He himself stands at the head of the table and extends the invitation to each of you, that we would act as if what we do here might just save the world. Because, through the power of God's Holy Spirit it can, and it will!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.