

“Table Manners”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

We love people who can laugh at themselves. Former governor and senator, Fritz Hollings, is still remembered in the Carolinas for that. He once began a speech at a conference by admitting that he had just flunked a lie detector test. “It happened,” he said, “when I answered the very first test question with, ‘In my humble opinion...’.”

We do love a person with a sense of humor. That’s one reason so many people were irresistibly drawn to love Jesus. Jesus had a terrific sense of humor. He made puns. He used hyperbole; extreme exaggeration. He kept people off-guard with his unique perspective on life. The prophet Isaiah may have described the coming Messiah as a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” And, some Christians have taken that text to suggest that Jesus was somber all the time.

But that’s absurd! Would the people have so gladly flocked to hear him if he had been a gloomy, depressing personality? John the Baptist, of course, baptized multitudes, but nobody ever said they “enjoyed” hearing him. On the other hand, people enjoyed hearing Jesus. Catching Jesus’ humor will help us catch the richness of his teachings. If we can imagine Jesus with a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eye when he says some of the things he says, his teachings come alive.

For instance, look at our lesson this morning from the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. What sour, sorrowful, melancholic religious leader is going to give advice to his followers like this: “When you are invited to a wedding feast,” he says,” do not sit down in a place of honor. Suppose a more prestigious person than you is invited? Then the host of the wedding feast will come to you and ask you to move down. That will be most embarrassing for you. Let me give you a better strategy. When you go to a wedding feast, sit in the lowliest place in the

room. Then when the host spots you, he will invite you to move up. Then you can have a modest smile on your face as you say, 'Excuse me, excuse me,' as you make your way toward the front. You will be honored in front of all your friends."

What kind of advice is that for a spiritual leader to give to his followers? There's nothing obviously theological about it. Nothing awe-inspiring. It's practical. It's humorous. It's lighthearted. Folks are sitting around grinning at the freshness of Jesus' insight; in sharp contrast with the practice of the chief leaders of the day. Then Jesus drives his point home. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Now Jesus turns to his host and says, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your family or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

In his unique, joyous way, Jesus' "Table Manners" give us some practical lessons for living life this morning. And, the first lesson is this: Stature is not measured by how much we gain, but by how much we give. How many multi-millionaires and billionaires has America produced over the past two centuries? I'm not sure if there's an exact figure, but it's in the thousands. Of those, how many can you name? Most of them are long gone and forgotten. All their toys have been given to others. Somebody else lives in their magnificent homes. Everything they worked so hard to accomplish has passed to dust. Except for the few who learned that stature is measured by what is given, and not by what is gained.

Those we do remember. But, would Carnegie, or Vanderbilt, or Rockefeller, or Stanford be remembered by so many if they had not endowed so many public buildings, libraries, universities, and churches?

And, a century from now, whose names will live on and still be esteemed after all the antics of our current crop of the richly famous are over? Perhaps, Bill Gates? He is already better known in some far-flung places of this planet for his philanthropy than his part in the invention of the personal computer. Most of the names remembered, though, will probably not be the rich, but will rather be names much like Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., Perhaps, the name of Jonas Salk, who could have been a multi-millionaire many times over, but refused to take out a patent on his polio vaccine so that it could be given to the world for free, will be among those names. They will be the names among us who have given more to the world than they have received.

Is anyone among us still unconvinced? We all know it's true; even if we sometimes forget it. We have some problems in our nation and world that cannot be solved until more people in every strata of society are at least as concerned with giving as with gaining. That's the first lesson we can draw from Jesus' "Table Manners."

And, here's the other: True stature is not measured by position and pretention, but by humility. One of the world's great musical treasures is violinist Pinchas Zukerman. Though well known around the world for his brilliant performances, he is even better known among the young for his masterclasses. One day he was conducting a masterclass with a group of young artists who had come to the Aspen Music Festival. The young artists were being observed by a large audience of their peers and by distinguished teachers, performers, and conductors. The atmosphere was electric. To each of the talented performers, after their own recitals, Zukerman would offer friendly advice and encouragement. He discussed their playing in detail, and would pick up his own violin to demonstrate finer points of technique and interpretation that they could use in their performances. Finally, there came the turn of a young musician who performed brilliantly. When the

applause subsided, Zukerman complimented the young artist. Then he walked over to his Stradivarius, caressed it, tucked it under his chin, and paused a long moment. Then, without playing a note or uttering a word, he placed it back in its case and sat down. He was admitting to the student, in front of everyone, that he, the master, could not have done it better himself. Suddenly, wild applause broke out in every corner of the auditorium. It was deafening. The audience was applauding in recognition of a master, who could pay so gracious a compliment to a student.

We all know it's true. The person who is constantly puffing himself or herself up is, at heart, a very insecure and fear-filled person. Such a person is deathly afraid that he or she really does not measure up. The greater the emptiness on the inside, the greater the need to look important on the outside. The more unsure we are about our own self-worth, the more we need the envy of others, to lord ourselves over others. But, it's a false life. True stature is not measured by our position or pretention, but by our humility.

One man who took Jesus seriously this way, was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi said that his whole life had been much influenced by the Gospels of the Bible, and was deeply touched by the life of Christ. He decided that his own life would be lived after the pattern of Jesus' life. He was a true disciple of Jesus, if not a self-proclaimed Christian. As he once remarked, "I might have become a Christian had it not been for Christians!"

Gandhi led the masses by identifying with them and sharing in their circumstances. A part of Gandhi's greatness was that not even the untouchables of India were beneath him, nor were they made to feel uneasy in his presence. Other Indian dignitaries, usually of high caste themselves as Gandhi was, were no more willing to associate with untouchables than with lepers. Gandhi not only lived and marched with

the untouchables, he gave them a new dignity and a new name: he called them Harijans, "The people of God." It was mostly among these people that Mother Teresa would later live and serve. Don't you wish that she and her Sisters of Poverty had been the Christians that Gandhi had known? Real stature, true greatness is measured not by position and pretention, but by humility. That's the other lesson to draw from Jesus' "Table Manners", this morning.

In the same way as Gandhi gave the lowest a new dignity and name, Jesus has given you and me a new dignity and a new name. Such dignity does not come from what we have. It comes by who we are in his eyes; we who are called by his name. Now we are to go out and serve; giving others that same respect and dignity. Follow Jesus' example. Be as concerned about giving as about gaining. Exalt others instead of self, and trust reputations to God. These are Jesus' "Table Manners"; lessons for living at the table of life.