

TABLE MANNERS

Mark 7:1-23

I remember the litany of do's and don'ts lectured to my two brothers and me at meal-times particularly by my mother. Wash your hands before you eat, say *please* and *thank-you*, don't eat with your arms on the table, don't talk with your mouth full, wait for others before you start eating, eat what's put in front of you, appreciate the work of those who made the meal, quit slurping your food, pass the plate gently, don't hog all the food, speak nicely at the table, smile, sit up straight, and on and on. It was hard work for my parents to try and civilize three little male savages to learn and appreciate table manners. I appreciate their efforts all the more as it was hard work to try and civilize three little female savages and for my wife to try and continue the work of civilizing one older male savage who doesn't always remember all that his mother taught him!

Table manners are important. Meal-time is important. It is the time when family and friends gather together to socialize and be in community. How we interact and treat one another at the table says a lot about the kind and quality of community we share.

In the 7th Chapter of the Gospel of Mark we find Jesus and the Pharisees getting into an argument about table manners. On one level the argument is about one of the most basic things my mother tried to teach me: *wash your hands!* And it's kind of surprising to see Jesus on the opposite side from my mother in this seemingly most basic of table manners. But Jesus sees more important issues at work here than simple table etiquette. Jesus tells in no uncertain terms in this passage that the question of *cleanliness* is ultimately not about having clean hands but about having clean hearts.

Jesus' meaning is simply illustrated in a children's sermon. A pastor brought a container of mud to the children gathered on the steps to the chancel. "*Who likes to make mud pies?*", she asked. "*If you took a big bite of this mud pie it probably wouldn't taste very good and it might make you sick, but would it make you do bad things or hurt other people?*" *No!* is the obvious answer. "*Do people who do bad things eat mud pies? Do they do bad things because they ate dirt?*" *No, of course not.* "*The choice to do bad things is a decision that comes from our hearts, not a matter of what goes into our stomachs.*"

Cleanliness, as important as it may be for social etiquette, is not one of the table manners Jesus emphasized. Jesus came to change human hearts and lives not to reinforce social etiquette. Jesus chose this meal time to talk about what is truly important. It is no good keeping our hands clean if we're up to our elbows in evil. It's no good getting an A+ in ethics and flunking life. Jesus came to make a radical change in our hearts and lives, not to meddle with our etiquette.

In this instance Jesus' emphasis is on the heart and not on what happens at the table, but this story has put me in mind of how often we find in the Gospels and the rest of the NT that a meal – the table – is central to learning what it means to be a community of Jesus' followers.

This was hardly the first time Jesus had been criticized for his or his disciples' eating habits. Repeatedly Jesus and his disciples were accused of eating and drinking too much – but Jesus clearly had no problem with gathering in joy and festivity around the table.

Another accusation laid against Jesus was that he ate and drank with tax collectors and other *sinners*. We often see Jesus eating and drinking merrily in the company of all sorts of people. He ate at the homes of Matthew and Zacheus who were despised tax collectors, but he also ate at the home of Simon the Pharisee and Lazarus his friend. Anyone could eat with Jesus and he welcomed everyone to his table. Many historians believe that it was this very practice of Jesus' accepting the outcast, the unclean, the sinner, tax collectors and other Jews whose practice or profession or lifestyle made them as despicable as Gentiles and sharing table fellowship with them, that got him in such hot water that they wanted him killed.

In the gospel stories we often see Jesus at supper, teaching and telling parables. It seems to be his comfortable and natural setting. It was in this setting he gathered with his disciples and welcomed others in. It was in this setting that he appeared to his disciples following his resurrection. Jesus' table fellowship formed the Christian community that gathered in his name.

And of course we remember Jesus at his Last Supper. It was there he broke bread and gave it to his disciples to eat as his very body. It was at that supper that he took the cup blessed it, gave it to his disciples and told them to drink it as his blood. When they gathered to eat bread and drink wine he wanted them to remember him. He promised to be present with them in this meal. We picture him at that supper washing the feet of his disciples and showing us how to serve each other. He promised this meal as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. And it was this ongoing meal that formed the central gathering of the Christian community. It was in this meal that they shared communion with God and one another.

The question of Christian table manners comes up for the Apostle Paul. In Romans 14 and again in 1 Corinthians 8 the Apostle Paul took up the question of what food is acceptable to eat. Jewish Christians ate Kosher while Gentile Christians did not. Some Christians ate meat that might have come from sacrifice to the gods but others refused to eat meat that might have been sacrificed to idols. Paul agrees with Mark in 7:19 that Jesus declared all foods *clean*. *But* what is important for Paul is not whether or not we are OK to eat something but how our eating effects one another in community. If my eating meat might cause someone to think that idol worship is acceptable for a Christian, then Paul says, “*I will never eat meat (forever), so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*” (1 Cor. 8:13b) Christian table manners are about care and respect for others. We have a responsibility to support one another even if it might mean curtailing our own liberty.

A few chapters later Paul lambastes the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:17-23) because some wealthy Corinthians ate and drank at their gatherings while others went hungry.

The meal is to be shared by all in community. Some are not to have plenty while others lack. That is not the model that Jesus embodied and taught. That isn't the kind of community that honors Christ.

What my parents taught me at meal time has stuck with me and I've passed on to my children. Eating together in large part defined who we were as a family. It was our gathering time. That's true for the Christian community as well. What we share at the Lord's Table, and what we learn from Jesus in his table fellowship, identifies who we are. The good news is that we are welcome at this table. All are welcome at the Lord's Table. His life feeds our souls as well as our bodies. His love teaches us how to live. His fellowship continues. A great deal of what we need to know as Christians we learn and practice at the Lord's Table.

So, what do we learn about Christian table manners?

1. When challenged by the Pharisees about cleaning hands at meals Jesus taught the more important lesson of cleaning – of transforming – our hearts. Jesus offers us a new heart, a new life and brings us into a new creation.
2. Jesus' table fellowship was a joyous gathering and so he has taught us that joy and festivity characterize the Christian life.
3. All are welcome at Jesus' table, especially those who don't feel they belong.
4. As we gather at the table to share Jesus' body and blood we are continuing the life and community he began with his disciples. In this meal we re-member Jesus and receive Jesus. In this meal we share community with one another and with God. In this meal we both receive and become Christ's Body in the world. In this meal and gathering we receive a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come.
5. In this meal and in our wider Christian fellowship we are reminded that we have a responsibility towards one another. What we do and what we say has profound impact on others. Our responsibility to one another can be more important than our own individual freedom.
6. No one should go hungry at the Lord's Table. We have a responsibility to care for those within the church community and beyond who are hungry or in any kind of need.

Gathering around a table for a meal is an important act of community. Whether with our families and friends or in Christian community table manners are important. Amen.