

Party Etiquette

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 30, 1992, the 12th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: Luke 14:1, 7-14.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A memory was released as I thought and prayed about our Gospel lesson where Jesus hands out advice as to how to act at a dinner party. It was something that happened well over 40 years ago. I was only about six years old. I was at an evening worship service. The sanctuary was bathed in soft evening light. The Communion Table was prepared for the Sacrament with a white linen cloth lying on top of the trays for the bread and wine. I was sitting about half-way back on the right side. My mother was on my right and I was leaning up against the end of the pew.

I glanced across the aisle and was shocked, even frightened, to see the town drunk sitting there, unshaven and in his work clothes. I was frightened because he was a frightening man. I sometimes saw him staggering home on summer evenings from Ziggies bar. He was loud and crude and took the Lord's name in vain which I never heard my father do. I always gave him a wide birth. His son, several years older than myself, sat beside him in the pew that night. He was also frightening. He use to pick fights with me. And though he was only about 10 he could swear every bit as well as his father.

The two of them lived in a small, one story shack. I remember there place very well because it was the same shack my family lived in before my father built a bigger house. It had a very small kitchen-dining room, about 9x9, and a living room about the same size. There were two small bed-rooms just about big enough

for a bed. It had no hot water! It had no bathroom. They used an outhouse in summer and winter. There was a bath-tub on the back porch which was dragged into the kitchen and filled with water for infrequent baths. That's where the town drunk and his son lived.

What brought them to church that evening I'll never know. Had one of the saints invited them? Or had the two of them just wandered in off the street because they saw the sign on the church that said, "Jesus saves." And what did he think of the rest of us all washed and dressed up with our nice homes. They looked uncomfortable and out of place like they didn't know what they were suppose to do. They didn't know when to stand up or sit down. They didn't know the words to the Lord's prayer. They didn't have the slightest idea how to act ^{in the Lord's House and} at the Lord's Table.

Finally the time for Holy Communion had come. My attention went from the town drunk and his son to the minister standing behind the Communion Table. He read the words of institution including the warning that the Apostle Paul wrote. "But let a man examine himself", Paul wrote, "and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." The minister then exhorted the congregation not to take the sacrament if they had sin in their lives. "It's a risky and dangerous business to take the Lord's Supper if you have sin in your heart," he said.

Then the tone of his voice softened and he said, "Jesus is here to forgive all

our sin. All we need to do is confess our sins and ask him to forgive us. Jesus died for all our sins, your sins and mine. There's no sin so great or so terrible that you can't confess and be forgiven. Jesus is here tonight to forgive you." And then he'd plead with us not to exclude ourselves from the Lord's Table. "Jesus wants you, whoever you are, to eat and drink with him. He eats and drinks with sinners. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He came not for the righteous but for sinners. Please, please don't turn your back on Jesus! Come to the table. There's grace for you. There's forgiveness. There's cleansing from sin."

The elders came down the aisle with the bread and the wine to serve the congregation. I had learned, from experience, the proper way to take communion. I took the bread, bowed my head, closed my eyes reverently and counted to about 30. I wasn't suppose to count. I knew I was suppose to examine my life for sin and confess it to the Lord. ^{but I couldn't think of anything to confess} I was suppose to think of Jesus hanging on the cross. I was suppose to imagine the agony on his face, the nails in his hands and feet and the blood flowing from his side. Only then was I suppose to take the bread and eat it. There was a proper etiquette involved in taking the Lord's Supper and anyone who worshipped in that church with any regularity would pick it up.

I wondered what the town drunk would do when the Lord's Supper was served to him. Would he take the bread, this man who took the Lord's name in vain? What would happen to him if he took the bread? Would he get sick or die? Those are the questions my six year old mind was asking. I was actually afraid the man would take the bread and cup. I watched as the elders brought the plate to

him, right across the aisle from me. I watched that man like they watched Jesus that Sabbath day when the Pharisee invited Jesus for a meal.

The elder put the plate in front of him and the man took it and immediately gobbled down that little piece of bread as though he were starving. He didn't even bow his head. He didn't pray. I was half afraid he was going to scoop up all the little pieces of diced bread and gobble them down. Then he handed the plate of bread to his son who likewise took the bread and ate.

And I thought, "They don't know how to act at the Lord's Table."

I never remember seeing that man or his son in church again.^{I wonder if anyone greeted him... visited him... invited him to dinner...} This happened ^{so vividly} ~~at least~~ ^{over} 40 years ago. Why did I remember that incident^a as I read and thought about our Gospel lesson? I think I know why I remembered.

Luke says that Jesus was invited to a Sabbath meal by a Pharisee. When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the most prestigious seats, he told them a parable. He said, "If you get invited to a party, don't take the seat closest to the host because it may be intended for someone else and then you'll be embarrassed when the host tells you to move. And if you're giving a party", Jesus said, "don't ask your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors... but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Now Jesus wasn't a first century Emily Post or Miss Manners, telling us how to behave at parties. Jesus is telling us about God and about the people whom God, ^{and about how we who have been invited into God's kingdom} in Christ, invites to eat and drink with him. God, in Christ, invites the poor, the ^{one to act,} crippled, the lame, and the blind. The only way to respond to this invitation is by

the renunciation of any claim or merit of our own. There are no chief seats here. There is no room for a VIP mentality which makes a person think he or she is God's favorite and, therefore, entitled to preferential treatment in God's Kingdom. We are all on the same level at this table. If we come to this table we must come

as poor, crippled, lame and blind men and women. We come to the Table

remembering that "none are so far from God as the self-righteous" (A.M. Hunter).

I had chosen a place of honor that night ^{long ago} where I could sit and look down upon my neighbor. I didn't realize that Jesus had invited the town drunk and his son that night. Jesus came walking down that aisle and didn't even look my way that night. Jesus completely ignored me, ~~that night~~. But he took the town drunk by the hand and said to him, "I'm really glad to see you and your son here tonight. I've waited for you to come for so long. Please don't mind these others, especially that six year old kid sitting across the aisle staring at you. They really don't know how to act at my Table. Please don't let their arrogance and immaturity keep you from enjoying this meal and receiving all the benefits from it. Come up front and sit with me."

Let us pray: O God, you call the poor and the sinful to take their place in the festive assembly of the new covenant. May your church always honor the presence of the Lord in the humble and the suffering, and may we learn to recognize each other as brothers and sisters, gathered together around your table. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Let me suggest just one way we can apply what Jesus said to our lives. We can intentionally decide to get to know someone who is not at all like us; maybe someone whose lifestyle is immoral in your eyes; someone whose political beliefs run contrary to your own; someone who comes from a different social class. Then you are ... speak to them ... try, however difficult it is, to get to know them and how they think and feel. Invite them to the Octavian Hotel for coffee.

The same goes for Jr & Sr High kids. I know how important it is to be popular and to be a part of the in crowd. But look around the cafeteria for the boy or girl eating by themselves ... move beyond the comfort and security of your group to include someone different in your group.

If we all did this maybe, one day, our church would be filled with all those people God wants in his kingdom who are now excluded.