

Jesus's Tips On Table Etiquette

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on August 28, 2022
based on Luke 14:1, 7-14*

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews 13:2 (NRSV)

I want to begin this discussion on Jesus's table etiquette by looking closely at table etiquette in Ireland from a woman who goes by the name, C.E. Murphy.

In Ireland, you go to someone's house, and she asks you if you want a cup of tea. You say no, thank you, you're really just fine. She asks if you're sure. You say of course you're sure, really, you don't need a thing. Except they pronounce it, "ting." You don't need a ting. Well, she says then, I was going to get myself some anyway, so it would be no trouble. Ah, you say, well, if you were going to get yourself some, I wouldn't mind a spot of tea, at that, so long as it's no trouble and I can give you a hand in the kitchen. Then you go through the whole thing all over again until you both end up in the kitchen drinking tea and chatting.

In America, someone asks you if you want a cup of tea, you say no, and then you don't get any damned tea. I liked the Irish way better. C.E. Murphy, Urban Shaman

We take this stuff for granted, but look, we're all well trained by our family of origin about such norms and it's all so deep in us. I want to plumb down on this now. By way of that, here's some personal history of mine as preamble.

Fifteen years ago I was pastoring a church in Ashland. I kept hearing in the national news about city after city across the country beginning a program like one in Multnomah Co called, *Portland, Everybody Reads*. You know, where a committee in the city would chose one book for everyone to read so the whole city had the same reading experience. Beaverton has a version, too.

Now Ashland, a college town, was full of readers. I couldn't figure out why, bursting as it was with readers, it hadn't tried something like this. At the time I was writing a regular column for the local newspaper, "The Daily Tidings," and I had the thought that I could start an "Ashland Reads Together" program and promote the whole thing through my column. "Easy peezy."

All I had to do was assemble a small board. Together we would pick a book and invite the author to come, if possible – and make the rounds of the high school and the college. I had access to some money for such a thing. So I made a visit to my friend, Amy, who was a reference librarian at the city library, and asked if she would join the board.

She gave me an odd and meaningful look; said that she, in fact, had been trying to get the head librarian at the county seat in Medford to start such a program for six years and it just wasn't happening.

So, she asked me to put my idea on ice for a week while she would bring it up at the next library staff meeting and see what they would say about it. Well, within a week, knowing I was fully able to launch an independent program in Ashland, the county decided to start a "Jefferson County Reads Together" program; and they wanted to know what book I'd choose to launch the thing.

Without trying, I had shamed them into getting a county-wide program going that Medford had soft peddled forever, and I had accomplished it without any idea I was doing it, and without lifting a pinky finger. Anyway, I said, "How about *To Kill A Mockingbird*?"

Actually they chose something else. They chose, *The River Why*. But eventually, after I'd moved away, they got around to *Mockingbird*, because race difficulties being perennial, Harper Lee's book never goes out-of-date. It's like the voice of our collective conscience on the subject.

Anyway, I bring that up because when I read two of the lectionary passages set for our worship today, I thought immediately of Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. If you haven't read it, or seen the movie, you should.

Within the first thirty pages you encounter the following remarkable story that goes perfectly with the story in our gospel lesson:

It is the first week of school for Scout Finch. Her first grade teacher is Miss Caroline, who is also brand new. At lunchtime, Miss Caroline surveys the lunch boxes her students have brought, and notices that one little boy, Walter Cunningham, has none.

She offers to lend him twenty-five cents to buy his lunch. Walter refuses, Miss Caroline doesn't understand, so Scout stands up and explains in front of the whole class that Walter doesn't have a lunch because he's a Cunningham and the Cunninghams are so poor they could never afford lunch and couldn't afford to pay back the twenty-five cents. It's a difficult moment, and later, at the lunch break Scout's brother, Jem, invites Walter to come home with the two of them for his lunch.

Calpurnia, the beloved housekeeper and cook, sets another place at the table so the three children and the father, Atticus, sit down to eat. Walter asks if there is any molasses in the house. Calpurnia brings the syrup pitcher, and Walter pours molasses on his vegetables, potatoes, and his meat, too. Scout says, "[He] would probably have poured it into his milk glass had I not asked him what the Samhill he was doing."

Atticus shakes his head at Scout, and Scout says, "But he's gone and drowned his dinner in syrup." This is when the real table etiquette lesson begins – and it's a lesson for Scout, not for Walter.

"It was then that Calpurnia requested my presence in the kitchen," says Scout. "She was furious. . . . She squinted down at me. There's some folks who don't eat like us," she whispered fiercely, "but you ain't called on to contradict 'em at the table when they don't. That boy's yo' company and if he wants to eat up the table cloth, you let him, you hear?"

"He ain't company, Cal, he's a Cunningham." "Hush your mouth! Don't matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house 's yo' company, and don't you let me catch you remarkin' on their ways like you was so high and mighty!"

Yo folks might be better 'n the Cunninghams, but it don't count for nothin' the way your disgracin' 'em. If you can't act fit to eat at the table, you can just sit here and eat in the kitchen." (pp. 30-31)

Remember Jesus' admonition? "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Add to that these words, written to one of the earliest Christian churches; words which are found in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without even knowing it."

Together these passages underscore a very important biblical theme. The heart of what it means to follow Jesus is reflected in hospitality.

The life that has been redeemed and re-constituted by the love of Christ will be characterized by openness and hospitality. The exact translation of which is *not*, in fact, hospitality, but "the love of strangers." Think of that, the love of strangers.

That reference about entertaining angels without knowing it refers to one of the Bible's oldest stories from the eighteenth chapter of Genesis.

In that chapter, three strangers visit Abraham and his wife, Sarah, who receive them graciously. They bring water to wash their feet, they slaughter a calf, bake some biscuits, and bring drinks. It turns out that the three guests are either on a mission from God, or one of them is actually God – it's a difficult passage to translate.

They are there to tell Sarah that she's going to conceive in her old age and have a child. Sarah laughs at the absurdity of their suggestion, but later she gives birth to a son, Isaac, whose name we find out means "Laughter."

So, looking back to that old story, the idea the writer of *Hebrews* is reflecting on is that these were angels, messengers from God, and if Abraham and Sarah had not extended hospitality to them, none of us would know the true miracle that is represented in Isaac's birth.

"Let mutual love continue," the writer of Hebrews says to the early church. Let love among you be genuine and powerful and real, and don't forget the stranger, don't forget to be hospitable.

The sense of it is that sometimes people in the church can enjoy loving one another so much that they become cliquish; a closed company, and an outsider won't feel welcome at all; in fact he or she won't be given a chance to break in.

This is, in fact, endemic in churches. We enjoy seeing each other so much that we can't wait to greet one another when we all show up Sunday morning and poor Pastor Don can hardly do the welcome because of the din of good will. Same thing happens at coffee hour, so a stranger may find it difficult and awkward, standing there alone.

But it's even more serious than that. In the story we heard read this morning, a Pharisee invites a group of important people to a dinner party and Jesus is one of the guests.

People then (and now, as well) were invited to dinner because the host was interested in them, or was related to them, or wished to establish a reciprocal kind of relationship with them.

Dinner parties are usually pleasant affairs, and, if the food isn't great, well maybe the conversation will make up for that. But not at this dinner party, the way the gospel writer, Luke, recalls it.

As soon as the guests are seated, Jesus criticizes the other guests for the way they jockey and scramble to get the best seats at the head of the table. "Sit at the lowest place," he says, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all those who humble themselves will be exalted." That must have made everybody uncomfortable.

But Jesus is just warming up. He also scolds the host, criticizing him for his choice of guests. One New Testament scholar, commenting on this passage, says, "I'm certainly glad I wasn't at that dinner party." Jesus levels everybody.

"Don't invite these kind of people," Jesus says, people who will, in all likelihood, return our invitation. Instead, he says, invite poor people, the blind, the bent over: people who live on the other side of the tracks.

Jesus proposes that his host cross a very important social, political, and religious boundary, not unlike Calpurnia extending hospitality to a poor little white boy who pours molasses all over his mashed potatoes.

Jesus proposes a human community based on something other than social custom, economic reciprocity, and intellectual affinity. He proposes a human community based on nothing but the fact that God is its creator and therefore each person is a precious child of God. Every one of them.

Now, the Quaker theologian Parker Palmer wrote a whole book on this subject called, *The Company of Strangers*. He suggests that modern life cultivates a suspicion of strangers. In fact, he points out that we have organized our lives so carefully that we spend much of our time in private and rarely, if ever, allow ourselves to say more than "hello" or "excuse me" to a stranger.

We live, eat, work, travel, shop, and engage in leisure time activities with people like ourselves; people we choose to be with. And all the while we regard the stranger as sinister.

I'm thinking of this because I have the Next Door app on my phone and it is often blowing up over "suspicious" strangers in the neighborhood doing odd, "not-in-our-neighborhood" things. Right?

But listen to this. According to Parker Palmer, our mistrust of the stranger is the thing that actually ends up making the places we inhabit unsafe.

Here's his reasoning: he says, our suspicion of strangers causes us to avoid certain places; particular neighborhoods, so, "when we begin to think of certain spaces as unsafe, we withdraw from them, and as we withdraw from them, they **do** become unsafe."

He says this: "Space is kept safe and secure, **not** primarily by good lighting and police power, but by the presence of a healthy public life."

I think that's absolutely true. I mean just consider, it's fascinating that one of the spaces people often stay clear of in Portland is . . . the Park blocks.

But on Saturday morning, when the Farmer's Market motors up, that area becomes the most vibrant and friendly plot of land in the whole city. And it's that way for six, maybe seven hours, and then it goes back to being a place to avoid at all costs.

Just think about that for a little bit. Hear Parker Palmer's idea again: "[Our spaces] are kept safe and secure, **not** primarily by good lighting and police power, but by the presence of a healthy public life."

I wonder if it might be true that the Christian Church, over the centuries has lost track of the heart of the gospel, you know, as it comes to us from Jesus.

The church has spent so much time focusing on sin and moral purity, putting up walls, when our fundamental purpose as Christians is, in fact, to live in the world in a way that shows the hospitality of Jesus.

Jesus's clear instructions to people who want to be associated with him are mostly about loving the unlovely, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, befriending the lonely; showing hospitality to strangers.

Can you imagine: churches no longer locked up tight as drums, safe and secure and protected from strangers? Can you imagine if Christian churches said, "Come in. This building we have built and maintained and love so much is not ours at all. It's for you."

Oh, I know, property committees would never go for it. I can just hear the blow-back about it. "People would trash the place, spill stuff on the carpets; carve their initials in the communion table."

Well, let me tell you a true story about a city church that had fallen on hard times. It was named *Antioch*. That was it. Just *Antioch*.

Well, *Antioch's* sell-by-date had just about arrived. They had once been quite large, but their membership had dwindled a lot.

The few funds they could raise went into their very part-time pastor's salary, and to keeping up their historic building.

All they really had left that they were proud of was their building. So they made a decision, "What have we got to lose, they asked themselves? Let's keep our building open twenty-four hours a day so that anyone on the outside can come inside and pray."

Well, some people did come in off the street and pray. But then they noticed that, every night, about a dozen *non-prayers* came in, too, and they spent the whole night sleeping in the pews.

Well, someone in the church who didn't like this new openness turned them in to their insurance company. Yeah, and then the insurance company decreed that they would not be allowed to unlock their building overnight anymore.

So, the church elders looked for another insurance company, but none would allow them to keep their doors unlocked. So the church elders met, and decided to do something about that. They locked the church doors . . . and they put the key to the front door under a rock.

Then they painted a word on that rock. They painted the word, *KEY*.

One of the members explained, "We haven't had much luck attracting people to our church. Those who are our members are very sporadic in their attendance. The folks who come into our church during the week or stay here at night - they really want to be in our church even more than the rest of us. What can I say? They've shamed us into letting them in."

Parker Palmer says, "[Our spaces] are kept safe and secure, **not** primarily by good lighting and police power, but by the presence of a healthy public life."

So, as we look to begin a new year with Labor Day and Welcome back Sunday after that – how is it with Southminster? We have a sign on the front of the building that says we welcome every one.

Do we really do that?

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without even knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)

Amen

Henri J.M. Nouwen, Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."

