

Etiquette

A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church

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Luke 14:1;7-14

We live in a world ruled by etiquette. Here in North Carolina and other southern states, we may even live in a world of hyper-etiquette.

As a seventh grader I was enrolled in Mrs. Floretta Baylen's etiquette and ballroom dancing class, culminating in a formal Cotillion. Floretta taught three generations of Winston-Salem teenagers dating back to the 1930s. She must have been in her eighties when she taught my class, but she glided across the dance floor like a much younger woman. She wore ruby red lipstick, so much of it that her microphone was stained red, and she could command a room, corralling middle-schoolers to attention with a stern look or sigh.

Two things are forever fused in me because of Mrs. Baylen.

Gentlemen, always, always, always escort your partner on your left arm, and open the door for her with your right hand. Door handles are on the left of the door and swing open across the right side of your body. If you attempt to open the door from your left, you'll cause a massive amount of fuss, because you'll have to awkwardly pull your arm over your partner's head AND simultaneously shoo her out of the way of the door. And there are other side-effects. Just do it this way. It's better for everyone involved. Really. I promise.

And Gentlemen, Gentlemen, Gentlemen, I don't care who you are, where you are, when you are, always, always, always allow ladies to go first, as well as anyone your senior in age. There are no exceptions to this rule. And hold the door.

In my early twenties, I worked for a woman from New York who wasn't quite forty, and who had different expectations of etiquette. We worked in a tall building, and we often arrived at the office about the same time, and therefore used the same elevator. And of course, I always allowed her to exit the elevator before me or made sure to hold the door. One day she said to me, "Stop it. I don't need you to open the door for me."

But I was living in Floretta's world. I said, "I know, Marcia, please don't fault me for this, it's just that there's this little, old cotillion instructor on my shoulder, and if I don't do this, I'm afraid she's gonna snatch me by the back of the head.

And then, I don't know what came over me, but suddenly, I was Mrs. Baylen, and I heard myself say:

Sure, I know holding the door is an antiquated practice in this age of women's liberation, but Mrs. Baylen reminds us that using our manners or etiquette shows consideration for others – it says no matter how important or unimportant you are, I see you as a human being, and a person of value.

And most importantly, Marcia, if we adhere to such a system, it removes the awkwardness in social encounters. So I think you can understand, how I'll have to respectfully decline your request. After you.

Of course, there's even etiquette in this room. Each week, this congregation is so diligent in humbling itself, and letting others go first. Not once in the four years that I've been your pastor has anyone sat on the front row – the place of honor – but you've all sat in the back, allowing me the great privilege of saying, "No friends, you are much too special, please let me honor you with an invitation to sit in a place that better recognizes your lofty achievements!" Who knew that backrow Baptists have just been following Luke's gospel all these years!?!

Okay, that's a lot about etiquette, but I promise I'm making a point. In any age, in any situation, there are rules or practices that establish acceptable patterns and behaviors. And in the patronage system of the Roman empire, it was particularly important to know the rules. You needed to learn how to navigate a system where your actions reflected not only upon you personally, but also upon your patron. Do things that make you both look good, but especially your patron, and avoid anything that might potentially offend your patron.

So Jesus gives a little party tip. Be smart about your seat. Choose a place that rewards your humility and demonstrates your host's graciousness. Avoid sitting in a place that might put your host in an awkward spot.

Is Jesus telling us how to game the system? Only if we stop here.

But then Jesus says, “Now you know how to operate in a banquet. Go back to your own homes and throw a banquet yourselves. But don’t invite those people who will advance you in the patronage system. Invite those people who cannot and will not enhance your social status.

Do you see what Jesus does here? It’s really clever I think. He has this ability to take the systems that undergird us – society, economy, government, religion – and he identifies their most noble qualities.

In this instance it’s societal etiquette. Be humble. Yes, we all need a little humility. How smart. Back to the basics. Humility is a path for advancement.

And then Jesus shows us how to reimagine these noble qualities in a reconfigured way. Use the quality of humility to inform your living into the Kingdom of God.

Used as a tactic of advancement, humility may lend you more favor from your patron, but it’s only indebting you further into their grip. Social advancement will offer you a greater capacity to consume things, but it will also bring with it an unquenchable thirst for more.

But if we’re living humbly – loving God, sharing in community, being a neighbor, recognizing the dignity of others, devaluing material wealth and advancement, what need have we of assigned seats? When we throw a banquet without status, without expectation of favor, we are acknowledging that the people around our table matter for who they are: children of God.

Imagine the rewards. A meal, a meeting, a Sabbath, a worship service, a conversation – none of them done to advance a personal or corporate agenda but done instead to simply love and be in community with others. If such things are organic, we begin to break away from a dependence on patronage and a myth of scarcity, and we begin to move closer to an interdependence with God and neighbor and a myth of manna or enough-ness.

We often pay attention, and tend to remember the practice of hedging that Jesus encourages in so many of his teachings. This is the idea that you draw hedge, or a

boundary, or warning track around Torah. Don't just not steal, or covet, or murder, or insert offense here; don't do the things that might be their root causes. Resolve arguments before they fester; be decent to your neighbor; build solid, partnering relationships with your loved ones, so that you won't be inclined to wound them.

But this business with banquets, it feels more positive, doesn't it? Jesus is saying, do the same things you'd do to advance yourself in a patronage system – being a good patron to your clients, and vice versa – just stop acting like you're in the patronage system, and start acting like you live in God's system. In other words, expand your neighborhood – because neighbors, no matter their income, no matter their status, no matter their abilities – they take care of one another by loving each other, and sharing with one another, and celebrating with one another, and sitting at round tables. And sometimes, for their most-honored guests, the ones that show up late or unexpectedly, they find 'em a card table, and a lawn chair, because that's what neighbors do in God's system.

One last point. The last few verses describe marginalized persons for whom to throw this banquet – those with low income, or those who are blind, or are crippled, or are infirmed. Our modern minds could, and most likely should take offense to such a sweeping generalization. I'm pretty sure common disabilities are no less immune for the wealthy than are generosity and hospitality for the poor.

But remember, Jesus is making these comments at a banquet thrown by rich authority figures. And Jesus always makes subversive comments in such places. Anyone who understands the calculations of God's Kingdom, understands that wealth and health, and other markers of privilege or normalcy, have no bearing in the beloved community. Not to mention the fact that Jesus, in the midst of those who oppress – that is the patrons of the patronage system – tells his host, "You should throw a banquet for those people who will not advance you socially." He's calling out the hypocrisy of the system, right to their faces, and then challenging them to be authentic. And my assumption is that if his host actually decides to listen to his advice, he might just find the same humanity, the same love, the same spirit, the same fulfillment, and probably more of it, in the people he's been foolish enough to think of only as clients. And he may just realize how absurd it is to believe that God's "wow" is unable to transcend artificial barriers.

So...Sardis Baptist Church, throw a banquet. A big one. Not because you are still scared of Floretta. Not because you want to gain favor. Not because you like to avoid social awkwardness. But throw a banquet, because your neighbors have value. And when you live with them in God's Kingdom – their generosity, their love, their grace, their hospitality, their gifts are more than the patronage systems can ever provide.

Amen.