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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Table Manners”

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Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

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Table Manners

After When our oldest child was in her first year of preschool, my husband Derek and I joined her class for snack on our daughter's birthday. In the classroom, we expected to find what you usually find when a group of preschoolers get together a fair amount of chaos and an even larger amount of noise. But we entered the classroom just as the twelve three and four-year-olds had gathered around a large table with their teacher, Miss Mary, and her assistant. As the children took their seats at the table they did so with a kind of quiet reverence. We watched as the teachers served the children one by one. To our surprise, once the children had a portion of birthday cake and fruit on their plates, they waited patiently while the other children were served not one child made a move to eat. Then the teacher, in silence, lit a candle at the center of the table and led the children in a song.

After the song, without saying anything, the children and their teachers began to eat. My husband, who at this point had been quiet for probably the longest stretch of his life, turned to the teacher next to him and began to make small talk. One of the children stopped eating and whispered loudly, "Miss Mary, Sarah's daddy is talking." "Thank you," Miss Mary said. Then she turned to my husband and said, "We wait to talk until after we have finished our food." When we left the classroom, my husband went straight to the school's enrollment director. "You need to get a video camera and film snack time," he told her. "No one will believe you can get a room full of three and four-year-olds to sit quietly like that. Everyone will want to send their kids here!"

Later, in a conversation with the teacher about how amazing it was that her students maintained such decorum at snack time, she assured us, "It's all about setting an example. If we stay calm and collected and show them how to act, most children will eventually do as we do." For the next few weeks in this season leading up to Thanksgiving and Christmas, when many of us will gather around our tables with family and friends, we will be considering in worship what we learn at God's table. This table and the sacrament we celebrate here the Lord's Supper is at the center of our life together. At this table, we *remember*. As the words of institution remind us, when Jesus celebrated this meal with his disciples, his instructs them to "remember him" whenever they celebrated this ritual meal.

At this table, we remember who Jesus is. But at this table we also remember *who we are*: Jesus's disciples, those who practice the discipline of following Jesus and living the example he set for us.

Today we heard a story in which Jesus offers us by example a whole new set of table manners. When we hear the phrase "table manners," we think of rules like: Keep your elbows off the table, don't talk with your mouth full, ask for food to be passed to you, never say "I don't like that," but rather "no, thank you;" serve guests at the table first; use your inside voice and your polite words. And the most recent addition to most lists of table manners: no devices at the table!

In Jesus's day, just like ours, there was an agreed upon set of table manners. When Jesus was invited to someone's home for a meal, as he often was, he knew what was expected of him. But in today's story, he sets an example of a different ethics and offers us a new way of thinking about what matters most when we come together around God's table.

The first person to abandon accepted rules and norms in this story is not Jesus, it's Simon the Pharisee. At that time, when you welcomed guests into your home for a meal, the first thing you would do is greet them with a kiss and offer them water and oil to wash and soothe their hands and feet. Simon did none of these things for Jesus, but Jesus doesn't make a fuss.

Instead, he simply takes his place at the table with the rest of the guests. This is when the woman steps in. As with so many women in the Bible, we do not know who she is or how she ended up in Simon's home, but she seems determined to make up for Simon's breach of hospitality. She bathes Jesus's feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, anoints them with expensive perfume, and kisses them. Every one of these acts violates tightly-held cultural and religious norms: women simply did not do these kinds of things in public.

So, it should be no surprise that Simon is thinking disparaging thoughts about her and about Jesus. What's surprising is what happens next: Jesus "speaks up." Although Simon didn't voice his concerns aloud, Jesus acknowledges Simon's obvious discomfort and then Jesus defends the woman and her actions. This is the first manner we learn at God's table: **speaking up**. Unlike that table at my daughter's preschool, at God's table, Jesus wants us to use our voices, to talk to each other, and especially to speak up and speak out against injustice. Here, Jesus

uses his power and privilege to defend the woman who has been oppressed and marginalized and harshly judged. He sets the example for us to speak up and use our voices on behalf of those whose pain and suffering too often goes unvoiced and unnoticed.

A recent report titled, “Hidden Tribes,” breaks Americans into seven political groups from left to right. And I doubt any of us would be surprised to learn that the most politically active groups are those on the extremes. In a recent column, David Brooks pointed out that what these two groups have in common is their power and privilege. The people in both of these groups are the richest, whitest, most highly educated, and most secure of all the other groups.¹ They have extreme views and spend quite a lot of time trying to see which group can bash the other the loudest. This is not the kind of speaking up that Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about using our power and privilege on behalf of others. Jesus has every right to call out Simon for his incredible breach of hospitality, but instead of attacking Simon directly, Jesus tells a parable. He engages Simon and leads him through a path of discovery that helps Simon see things differently.

So the second manner we learn at God’s table is: **draw the circle bigger**. Instead of speaking up in a way that shuts people out, speak in a way that draws people in. Notice that Jesus does not berate Simon for his failures; he tells him a story which invites him to see things differently. When I attended a leadership training on race, power, and privilege, the facilitators would invite us to consider “calling people in” when we observed offensive behaviors rather than “calling them out.” Calling in is an invitation to someone to recognize where they might have a blind spot and to consider how it might affect or offend another person. At this table, Jesus wants us to speak up and call people in, to hold each other accountable and draw each other closer, and to expand the circle of inclusion.

After the 2016 election, two friends named Justine and Tria spent a lot of time talking about how disheartened they were by the polarizing and vilifying language they heard during and after the election. They realized that, among their friends, almost everyone held essentially the same political views they did. So they intentionally set about finding people with different political views and eventually they came up with a list of people to invite to a dinner party.

¹ David Brooks, “The Rich White Civil War,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/opinion/politics-race-white-tribalism.html>

Justine and Tria were convinced that the only way to overcome the partisan divide was to get a small group of people around a table together to build understanding and imagine a way forward. After the first dinner they held another, and another, and another, and eventually, they formed a movement called *Make America Dinner Again*. Online, you can find resources to put together your own *Make America Dinner Again* party where people of good will but different political views gather around a table and engage in respectful conversation. Instead of tightening their circle of like-minded friends, Justine and Tria intentionally expanded their circle and invited new people into it –and they created a vehicle through which others could do the same.²

I am convinced that, in this polarized and divided moment we find ourselves in, the church is becoming one of the last places where people of different views can come together, because at church we proclaim that what we have in common is more important than anything about which we disagree. And this table is what allows us even commands us to do that. This table is where we remember and claim our common identity as God’s beloved children, and our common identity as sinners, people who are broken, who have made and will keep making mistakes, but who rest in the promise of God’s forgiveness and who extend that forgiveness to others. As Jesus points out in this story, the woman may be a sinner, but so is Simon, so are all the Pharisees, no matter how hard they try to follow the rules.

So how can we, as the church of Jesus Christ, be this kind of place where people with all kinds of different views come together without becoming as deeply divided like the rest of our culture? Well, for a moment, imagine a 300-acre cattle ranch. Even if a rancher could afford to fence in such a vast territory, most of the rancher’s time would be taken up mending breaks in the fence, with no time to care for the herd.

When this challenge faced ranchers in the American West, they came up with a simple but brilliant solution: they dug a deep, cool well at the center of the property, a well so deep, so refreshing, so thirst-quenching that a fence is not needed no cattle would wander too far from the source of this nourishment.³

² <http://www.makeamericadinneragain.com> It is well worth watching the short video that share the history of this movement!

³ Mark Ramsey, “Fences and Walls,” <https://macedonianministry.org/fences-and-wells/>.

Our identity as God's beloved and forgiven children is the deep, deep well at the center of our life together, and this table is the primary place we come to remember that. It is also the place that gives us the nourishment we need to claim that identity, confess our sin, receive God's forgiveness, and be transformed to love others as God has loved us.

Which brings us to the last of the manners at God's table: **extravagant love**. We who gather at this table, this deep well of spiritual nourishment where we remember who Jesus is and who we are, we who gather at this table are called to practice extravagant love, the kind of love the unnamed woman showed Jesus – love that breaks the rules, love that defies tradition and convention, love that will not be repressed. This is the example God showed us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it is the love this table calls us to live out.

Today, we will not gather around this table for communion, but we are invited to come to the table and make a commitment of our resources as a response to God's extravagant love. We are called to come to this table and remember, to remember that everything we are is because of God. To remember that everything we have belongs first to God. As with all things extravagant, to give generously to the church really makes no rational sense. It goes against all the cultural rules of keeping what we've earned, taking care of ourselves first, and being prudent with our resources. But at God's table, we are called to follow a different set of table manners, the ones Jesus shows us: to speak up, draw the circle bigger, and love extravagantly. As we do, as we learn and practice the manners of God's table, may we find ourselves deeply nourished by the sustenance God offers us and fully equipped to live out our calling together in joy.

Amen