

**I remember waiting in the hall for my 3 o'clock *History of the Holocaust* class at the University.... UT....the burnt orange one in that other state. We met in a building that had been welcoming students and professors since the 40's. It had long hallways lined with old bulletin boards with little cork left... on which to attach notices.**

And yet, they were filled with posters and papers touting lost items, jobs, concerts, lecture events, roommates needed, and a variety of other info.

**The bulletin board closest to the room where my class met....always.....always had an interesting tidbit to read which made waiting in that old musty hall a bit less boring.**

Obviously someone with a sense of humor or with a calling to inspire manners in a seemingly crude and rude generation of young adults.... hung up a little cutout newspaper article.

A new one was there each week....faithfully attached to the bottom right corner of the bulletin board....dangling off the edge....slightly blowing in the circulating air of the vent from the ceiling above....

begging passer-bys and those leaning on the light green glazed cinder block walls to notice. "Read and learn"..... the little dangling paper would patiently whisper.

**And I did, every week of the fall semester in 1982. Miss Manners. That was the article: lessons on what to do if one needs to blow their nose at the dinner table or which way to pass the salt or butter or extra bread when a request was made by someone at the table.**

**Etiquette: When cutting a steak, cut no more than two bites at a time. Tear your roll before taking a bite. Tip your spoon away from your body and towards the upper portion of the bowl when consuming soup.**

Every week I read a new lesson on how to be proper, and acceptable.

An oyster fork is the only fork to appear on the left side of the plate,

**When pausing during a meal to talk, put down your fork and knife.... crossing them at the top of your plate.**

No elbows on the table, ever.

**Put your fork down in between bites.**

Sip your drink don't gulp, never slurp anything.

**And allow wine to be poured in your glass even if you aren't or can't drink wine....it's unnecessary to bring attention to yourself.**

**I'm sorry to report I don't remember all the tidbits of etiquette. And I would have to say I didn't always agree with what I read.**

I mean for gosh sakes if you can't or don't drink wine then don't allow your glass to be filled....what a shame to waste it.....and really....how much attention are you bringing to yourself when politely communicating with your host or hostess.

**When reading etiquette material it is important not to get carried away with so many details. If you do then it becomes difficult to enjoy the occasion.....and what is it all worth if we can't enjoy the occasion and the people we are with.**

**What is it worth if we concentrate on the minutia of dos and don'ts and miss the whole reason for gathering?**

It really gets down to what is more important....what paves the way for deeper meaning, purpose and joy in life.

**Of course my momma taught me manners and how to respect other people....**

but she also taught me how important it is to listen to the person across the table and to care about what they are saying and how they are feeling....and if need be break a rule of etiquette if the occasion calls for it.

**It is perfectly acceptable to disregard stated etiquette rules of the dinner table if someone or some occasion becomes more important than the rules!**

**What's more important?**

This is what the passage from Matthew's Gospel is asking....and speaking. In this scene Jesus refers to the dietary and ritual laws of the day. Though some of the laws established in ancient days were based on practical issues to stay clean and healthy....it was the fervor behind the observance of those laws that was the topic at hand.

**Yep, it will always be important that we wash our hands before eating a meal. And yes, there are guidelines for washing hands if we are to illuminate most of the germs and bacteria.**

**While serving as chaplain at a summer camp, we taught the children to wash their hands with soap and to not stop rubbing their soapy hands together until they finished singing the alphabet song at normal speed. That just so happens to be the right amount of time to kill most of the germs. Those working in the kitchen were required to sing the song twice before rinsing away the soap.**

Now a problem would have occurred....theological in nature....if we had told the children and kitchen staff that if they didn't wash their hands for the prescribed length of time then they would not be eligible to be loved by God.

**This is basically what was happening in the ancient days. The dietary and ritual laws found in scripture and culture had been elevated to the highest level of religious significance.**

If you don't wash your hands a certain way.....If you eat particular foods....or do not prepare them in the prescribed way....or consume a meal with the "wrong" kind of people....then your hope and expectation for salvation was on the line. You would lose status before God if you did not behave in the appropriate manner.

**William Barclay shares this about the words Jesus speaks before the crowd and the Pharisees:**

**"It may well be held that for a Jew this was the most startling thing Jesus ever said. For in this saying he does not only condemn scribal and Pharisaic ritual and ceremonial religion; this is a contradiction in Scripture itself. This saying of Jesus cancels all the food laws of the Old Testament. Once and for all, Jesus lays it down that what matters is not the state of people's ritual observance, but the state of their hearts."**

*Jesus said, listen and understand. It is not that which goes in your mouth which defiles....but what comes out of your mouth. Do you not know that everything which goes into your mouth goes down into your stomach, and into the sewage? But that which comes out of your mouth comes from your heart, and it is these things that have power to defile?*

**And with these words "the scribes and the Pharisees (the rule keepers, the etiquette police) were shocked and angry. The very ground of their religion was cut from beneath their feet....and if Jesus were right, their whole theory of religion was wrong.**

They identified religion and pleasing God with the observing of rules and regulations....

Jesus identified religion with the state of a person's heart.....and said bluntly that these regulations had nothing to do with religion.

**I'm pretty sure those words preach even today. Those words preach in the face of those who continue to reduce faith into a shallow list of do's and don'ts failing all the while to recognize what the heart of the matter is.....what is in the heart of the person.**

Say what you will about etiquette....but there are occasions when rules of what is proper and acceptable have no place and should be trumped by life's joy.....like a one year olds birthday party and that moment she smears cake all over her face and arms and chair....

**Or that special occasion when coming home after a long time away and your grandmother serves you her famous gumbo and she says, "Go ahead pick up your bowl and slurp down the last drop!"....and you do because this is one of those moments worth savoring and enjoying.**

Sometimes the person and or the occasion are far more important than the rules. Again, William Barclay writes...."what matters more is not how we act, but why we act; not so much what we actually do, but what we wish in our heart of hearts to do."

**She stood before me with her hands on her hips and said rather loudly, "The children need to know how important communion is. We need to teach them how to behave.....what is acceptable and what is not when coming to the table."**

So....we did our best. We showed the children all the accoutrements of communion: the trays, the little cups, the bread, the juice....and how to hold them and how to use them.

**We had trays with the little cups available on the table for those who preferred to use them.....and Joseph preferred to use the little cups. You've heard about Joseph this summer. I told you about how he learned how to pass the peace of Christ and what a moment it was when he stood before six foot eight Bruce with his hand extended straight up in the air.....**

Well Joseph **also** learned how to come to the table....he learned what the invitation was about.....and more than anyone ever has....he taught us how to partake and enjoy the holy feast of God.

**He politely and properly took his little individual cup of pasteurized grape juice and popped back his head drinking all the contents....but just in case he missed a drop.....he wiggled his little tongue to the bottom of that cup and slurped as loudly as he could making sure he got every molecule of blessing.**

**If I've already told you that story.....I'm telling you again....because some stories are worth repeating.**

And say what you will about a little boy slurping at the table of Communion.....

Because that moment was all about his heart....full of anticipation and joy that taught those of us around him how to receive and enjoy. It was his heart that opened us to the grace of God.

**So....when that time comes again to gather around the table.....Take a hunk of bread.....not a pinch.....and gobble down the grace and enjoy to the fullest the gifts God has to give.**

When the time comes....savor what your heart unfolds.

Take a hunk of bread not a pinch....God has enough grace for everyone.

It is not in the rules or the etiquette....it is not in the proper expectations that we discover the depth of God's love.....

The root of faith proceeds from our heart.....

**What matters to God is not so much how we act, but why we act; not so much what we actually do, but what we wish in our heart of hearts to do. Amen.**