

“Common Courtesies”

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Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

[Jesus said,]“Many people are invited, but few people are chosen.”

Matthew 22:14

Let us pray... O God,
Help us to be open to others and their ways, affirming that
just because something is different, it doesn't mean it's wrong or bad.
May we take responsibility for our own ways,
such that just because something is our custom, doesn't make it right.

Amen

I've always been uncomfortable with the last part of this parable –
though the part about a king retaliating against a whole city
for murdering his messengers, is just as alarming!
Doesn't it seem unreasonable to invite everybody off the street to a wedding,
but then get upset because they didn't wear the right clothes?
Once again, Jesus is using hyperbole like a sledge hammer to get his point across
to the listeners of his day who would certainly recognize this kind of treatment
as typical of the Romans.
Jesus was trying to break through to people who could be
hard-hearted, stiff-necked, and just plain vindictive.
Jesus was trying to say,
“You are doing this to me! I am inviting you to a celebration
called the Kingdom of Heaven, God's Beloved Community!”

The Church with a capital “C” offers that same courtesy of “y'all come!”
where people can still come to experience community.
However, every congregation must recognize they are always *in process* to become
that Beloved Community that is possible ‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.
We are never quite there, because there'll always be some instance of
just not getting what it's about, bringing in ‘the world’ along with its prejudices.

For example, what if we took Jesus' parable literally and
applied it to the church – “Sorry! ‘Florida Casual’ is not allowed...”
That is not the sense of Jesus' parable –quite the opposite...
Attitudes of intolerance and disrespect are the shabby wear we must leave at the door
in comparison with the Christian chic of affirming people
as they seek to truly be themselves –
which is essentially to encourage one another to show forth your best.

Willard, p.2

Customs differ from culture to culture, country to country,
religion to religion, town to town, neighbor to neighbor, family to family,
generation to generation, person to person
as to what is common courtesy.

It is common courtesy in New York City,
not to look somebody you meet on the street directly in the eye,
because it means a challenge.

It is common courtesy in the Middle East, not to reach out with your left hand,
because it is considered unsanitary and therefore, offensive.

Some cultural taboos can have dire consequences when broken –
An example is in the beginning of the film, “Lawrence of Arabia”.

T. E. Lawrence was an English soldier
sent out to be a liaison with Arab tribes during WWI.

As he and a guide travel across the desert,
they stop at a well to drink.

When a stranger rides up on a camel, he shoots and kills the guide,
but spares Lawrence.

The stranger is a prince of the Harith tribe and the Hariths own the well.

The guide was a Hazimi and the Hazimis were forbidden to use that well.

The guide knew this – and so he was killed.

Lawrence was English and an ally, so he was spared, and –
if you remember my joke from last week,
he wasn't even wearing a necktie!

<http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/296447/Lawrence-of-Arabia-Movie-Clip-My-Name-Is-For-My-Friends.html>

Breaching some social taboo can be less dramatic,
but still significant regarding the distinction between ‘cultured’ or ‘uncouth’ –
like when you are dining out at a fancy restaurant.

It helps to know white wine goes with fish and red wine goes with steak
and you are supposed to use outside utensils first.

If you don't know and want to avoid certain *faux pas*,
you can always refer to *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette*.

Topics include:

Your Private Life, Your Professional Life, Travel, Entertaining with Ease,
Sports and Exercise, The Art of Communicating,
and of course Weddings, and Other Ceremonial Occasions...

However, Amy Vanderbilt is not always around – what do we do then?

We can learn from our mistakes, like in the film, ‘Jeremiah Johnson’
when the title character – who wants to learn to be a mountain man,
visits an Indian village and makes a major cultural misstep.

Willard, p.3

When the village chief says he is impressed

by the horses he captured from mutual enemies, Jeremiah offers them as gifts.

However, he has placed the chief in a bad situation

possibly to be embarrassed or lose face if he can't match this gift.

The chief's daughter, then, is offered in exchange for the gift horses –

so he must marry her or risk insulting the chief and a worse fate.

Jeremiah agrees to cooperate – and it turns out to be a happy marriage for him.

The performance of religious ritual can be sensitive depending on expectations of the one performing the ritual and the participating congregation.

It is best to remember that all Christian ritual is “vicarious” –

the minister is a “vicar” or “one who stands in place of” Christ.

This means God acts through a minister during a ritual.

Things can go wrong and it depends on how open the minister is

to God's leading to make the difference between crisis and grace.

One of my greatest teachers was The Rev. Alfred Johnson, now a Methodist bishop, who taught me about “flow” – not a term he used,

but is the way I describe what I learned by working with him in worship.

As a student ‘youth minister’, I would wear a robe and assist in the service, and it would be during the prelude or introit when he would ask me

to read a scripture or do a prayer, change things on the spot.

Now he was not changing what was written in the bulletin –

only which of us would do it.

What he taught me was that worship is fluid and we trust the Spirit,

especially when things go wrong – and that you respond to what happens

like an artist responds to the first brushstroke of ink on paper

or a jazz saxophonist playing off the last note with a lick or riff.

The common courtesy that must be made to God and the congregation in worship,

is not to interrupt the flow.

‘Perfection’ is a dangerous concept when it is applied to worship ritual as in ‘my way or the highway’ thinking.

Strong feelings about the right way to do something

can lead to dissension – even among well-meaning people,

or especially with well-meaning people.

Yet when we seek to be perfect in showing love,

as the Apostle John says in 1 John 4:18,

‘perfect love casts out fear’ as well as disagreement and discord.

Willard, p.4

In our reading from Philippians today,

the Apostle Paul describes a process for how Christians
can get to agreement by allowing the Spirit of God's love to act.

First of all, Paul reminds everyone that they are loved,

then he specifically calls for Euodia [U-o-dee'-a] and Syntyche [Syn-tee'-kay]
to work it out, reminding them of their original goal together:

to share the Gospel – the Good News of God through Christ.

He calls on others to help bring the factions together,

by bringing their concerns to God through prayer –

that it is in meeting with God that differences are resolved.

Finally, in Phil. 4:8, Paul encourages Christians back then and now,

to keep the focus on all that is:

excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise.

Keep the focus on the positive – on what is most loving and rejoice!

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, 'Rejoice!'

Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say, 'Rejoice!' [2x]

If you do that, no matter where you go, you're not going to make a mistake

and commit a faux pas, gaffe, karmic disaster, or any kind of spiritual crisis.

Common courtesy will always prevail by doing the loving thing.

It is what Jesus would do and what Paul was teaching the early Church to do.

On my airport van ride back from Orlando last Friday,

I happened to tell my fellow passengers about how the United Church of Christ

accepts all people – gender orientation not-withholding,

and a young man who was about 20-something, said,

'Just like Jesus.'

I don't know what his religious background was,

but he knew – at least that much, about the character of Christ

and that Jesus' cordial invitation extends to all.

At the end of this month,

we will host members of the immigrant farm-worker community,

Calle de Milagros of Dade City.

In November,

we will host our Interfaith Community Thanksgiving Service

with an imam as our guest preacher.

In December,

we will host our friends Sheldon Skurow and Imam Sykes

along with members of their faith communities

to worship in concert with us.

A better world is possible if we exercise the common courtesy of love.

Amen

*Our lesson from Philippians 4:1-9 speaks about
what we should focus on in life and how that leads to peace...*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

^{4:1} Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss,
who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Loved ones,

² I urge Euodia [U-o-dee'-a] and I urge Syntyche [Syn-tee'-kay]
to come to an agreement in the Lord.

³ Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend,
to help these women who have struggled together with me
in the ministry of the gospel,
along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers
whose names are in the scroll of life.

⁴ Be glad in the Lord always!
Again I say, be glad!

⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people.
The Lord is near.

⁶ Don't be anxious about anything;
rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions,
along with giving thanks.

⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding
will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

⁸ From now on, brothers and sisters,
if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable,
focus your thoughts on these things:
all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure,
all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.

⁹ Practice these things:
whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us.
The God of peace will be with you.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 22:1-14

22:1 Jesus responded by speaking again in parables:

2 “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son.

3 He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn’t want to come.

4 Again he sent other servants and said to them,

“Tell those who have been invited,

“Look, the meal is all prepared.

I’ve butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle.

Now everything’s ready. Come to the wedding party!”’

5 But they paid no attention and went away—

some to their fields, others to their businesses.

6 The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them.

7 “The king was angry.

He sent his soldiers to destroy those murderers

and set their city on fire.

8 Then he said to his servants,

“The wedding party is prepared,

but those who were invited weren’t worthy.

9 Therefore, go to the roads on the edge of town

and invite everyone you find to the wedding party.’

10 “Then those servants went to the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding party was full of guests.

11 Now when the king came in and saw the guests,

he spotted a man who wasn’t wearing wedding clothes.

12 He said to him,

‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’

But he was speechless.

13 Then the king said to his servants,

“Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness.

People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.’

14 “Many people are invited, but few people are chosen.”