

Many of you know that my day job with AT&T takes me to many countries around the globe, and as an ambassador for American business, I am sensitive to proper manners that are appropriate in each culture. As an example, the following is from Chinese Etiquette in Business. "Foreign guests who are not familiar with the Chinese custom of seating should not rush to sit down. They should wait for the host to indicate where they are to be seated. Once placed, the chief guest may get up to offer the host the first drink, who then reciprocates. Thereafter, others take turns offering drinks to both hosts and guests". And many might know that in Middle Eastern countries, only the right hand is used above the table (the left being considered unclean). The Gospel today puts proper table manners in focus as Jesus is a guest of the Pharisees.

Now the Pharisees were a frequent target of Jesus teaching, usually in 'this is a bad example' kind of way. It seems that most of his parables and teachings closed by challenging them (and others, including the Hippocrates and the scribes), and the status quo that existed under Roman rule. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 c.e., the Pharisees (who grew in influence as the institution of the synagogue evolved) perceived themselves to be defenders of Jewish faith through the careful adherence to the Jewish law. They championed the covenant that as God's chosen People, every Jewish person could sustain their identity and depend on their God to preserve them no matter who rose against them on Earth. Unfortunately, as we humans are so prone to do, some of them took adherence to the Torah to be the end goal, forgetting that God gave them the law so they might be a better people in community and communion with themselves and their God. As we too often see in the modern political arena, when people allow dogma to overcome compassion for each other, the result is (at best) gridlock, and (at worst) human suffering. Demagoguery over compassion.

Jesus knew He was entering potentially hostile territory in accepting an invitation to dine with a leader of the Pharisees. The appointed reading this morning skips over another miraculous healing of a man with dropsy, shortened from hydropsy or in modern medical terms, edema. Jesus, having faced the wrath of the leader of the synagogue for the curing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath, asks those assembled at the dinner if it would violate the proscription against working on the Sabbath to heal the man. He again used the example of a devote Jew caring for thirsty or trapped livestock as permissible on the Sabbath. When no one was willing to answer him, Jesus took the compassionate path and cured the man. I am sure there were purists in the crowd who would have preferred the afflicted to wait until the following day, and felt that Jesus was flouting Halaka law again. I am also sure the man, even a devote Jew was eternally grateful to have been relieved of the painful swelling of his body. Compassion over law.

We also can't lose sight of the fact that Jesus was still fully Jewish, and this entire evening was likely an effort by the Pharisees to see just how far He was willing to push the envelope. He had already proven that he was well versed in the teaching and the scripture, and so adroit in his reasoning, that he was able to use the ancient teachings

against the leaders who would deny him as the Messiah. Was he there to bring salvation, which the Pharisees would see as the advancement of their role to the leaders of a new nation of Israel, or was He here to split the faithful from the faith they so stridently tried to sustain? There was no doubt Jesus was sent from God, the miracle of healing at the dinner table one more example of His compassionate power. But what was his intention? So when he began to offer advice about how best to approach a situation where an individual's rank would be both obvious and publicly affirmed (or not), most would have thought it simply a conventional wisdom. How much better to be perceived as taking a humble place, and then to be publicly elevated to a position of honor? Since the guest cannot know who else has been invited, there would be no way to predict where they might be placed. Jesus is addressing the assembly, and I am sure there were nodding heads and murmurs of agreement. Anyone who has ever organized a wedding reception knows that the art of seating the many friends and relatives involves matrix mathematics and a seeming endless set of boundary conditions to avoid conflicts and hurt feelings.

But then Jesus turns his attention to the host. When you have a banquet or community meal, don't invite your friends or relatives. Because the reality is that they will be of a similar social standing as you, and will likely feel compelled to reciprocate with an invitation to a similar event. And if your intention is to do good in the world, simply eating at each other's houses does nothing for those in need. Just as Matthew 6, where we are urged to submit our offerings and sacrifice to God in secret, Jesus urges the Pharisee to do for those from whom he can expect no recompense, except the good will of those who had so little. He further puts into context the kind of reward the Pharisee will receive, the reward of righteousness at the resurrection. And this path is consistent with the law, that the path of charity is called for specifically in the Torah. Jesus leaves him with only one path, that in order to be true to the Law, he must care for those who are powerless for themselves. And as much as the Pharisees would shun the outcast, Jesus is here on Earth to welcome them with the Good News

And on the grander scale of our relationship with God in the modern world, we cannot become numb to the needs of our world and our community that our relative affluence affords us the opportunity to ignore. Whether it is the guests that come to the food pantry or those who come to seek solace and support from addiction or abuse, we must remain focused hosts, that we raise everyone up to a place of honor at our table. There are no first and second seating's at the Lords table, and we must live that example in everything aspect of our lives. Because surely we do not want to be the ones, who at the Heavenly banquet, Jesus has to say, 'excuse me, but you have the seat I have reserved for this person who you did not care for in my place'. He has promised to raise up the poor, the humble and the meek; the rich and the powerful, He will turn away.