

ASC Sermon September 1, 2013 G. G. West

Most of us are familiar with the names of Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt. Those names are linked eternally with their writings on manners and etiquette. Their successors in the case of Emily Post relatives and others in the case of Amy Vanderbilt are still happy to tell the rest of us how to live our lives showing “proper” etiquette and manners.

Almost twenty years ago, I attended weddings along with a friend of mine of several children of the sister of a brother-in-law, my sister’s first husband. I do not remember much about the weddings themselves or even where the weddings took place but I do remember the receptions. These receptions had “assigned seating.” At the second of these weddings, I found myself a good distance away from the head table. At my table

were my sister and her new husband, the gay uncle and his partner of the bride, and family friends who tended to drink too much and could be a little unruly. All of us were on the margins of the bride’s immediate family. At the last wedding, of the last child in that family to get married, our same group of outcasts found ourselves even closer to the exit door of the reception hall.

I recall saying at the time that if there were to be any more weddings we all might end up at a table in the parking lot!

Now do not think that I was angry about our situation because I was happy just to have been invited to the weddings. I am sure that our seating was what Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt would have advised. And all of us at the “misfit table” were very happy and had a great time.

Before Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt, there were others who weighed in on the manners debate to include even George Washington who wrote a list of “Rules of Civility” which included 110 rules to be followed in Colonial Americans.

But more important than all of these would be the rules of etiquette and manners as laid out by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

It seems in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus all too frequently is going to a meal, at a meal, or leaving a meal. In today’s passage, Jesus has been invited to the home of one of the leading Pharisees. It is not just an average occasion but rather a chance for the Pharisees to watch Jesus close up.

For us, the test that the Pharisees thought would take place was turned upon them and the only

observations made at the event came from Jesus as he made comments on their manners.

The religious and cultural norms of that period were very strict and the ways that one interacted in such settings were very much tied to your social standing and your place in society. Where you sat was important and was determined by your social rank so one should not be surprised that there might be some jockeying for a better position than one might merit.

And while we may believe that in our time we are always above such thinking, I am sure that many of us at holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas still sit by age groups by design and may even have a special table for kids? And perhaps after the death of a patriarch or matriarch

in our family, there might be some angst as to who would now sit in their places?

So Jesus while noticing how people jostled for places of honor at the table made a comment about that. It is not a question like the game musical chairs which we have all played where when the music stops all race for a chair and someone is left out and must leave the game.

Jesus tells us that it is better to choose a low ranking seat because you may not be the most honored guest but if you do that you will not be humiliated by shooting higher than you should. Instead, it is better to be called to a higher chair by the host which is much more honorable.

But Jesus goes further than that: he then challenges the wisdom and etiquette of his day.

If you were invited to a meal in Jesus' time you would be expected to return the favor to your host. The invitation comes with an expectation that you would do likewise.

Jesus turns this thinking on its head. He says that one should not invite people with the expectation that the favor would be returned to you. Instead, we are to invite people who would have no ability to repay the debt: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind because these too are members of God's family.

This is a hospitality that was virtually unknown in Jesus' time and it is also fairly rare even in our own time. The reward for such hospitality would eventually come from God Himself.

In a few minutes, we all will be invited to God's table to receive the life-giving body and blood of Jesus Christ. There will be no special distinction of rank or status here: all are welcomed in a place of honor whether you have money, power, or status or you are poor, sick, or otherwise find yourselves on the margins of our society.

We too are called to be hospitable to those on the margins of our world.

In the letter to the Hebrews we are specifically called to show hospitality, love, and kindness to strangers, for by doing that we are perhaps entertaining angels without knowing it.

It is hard for us put ourselves in the first century but it should not be a surprise that many did not fully comprehend who Jesus was. He was a

homeless preacher without any property or wealth. It is no wonder that many would not believe that he was the Son of God. He challenged so many of the norms and manners of his day which made him a target of the authorities of his time.

We know today who he was and we have the benefit of knowing about his life and resurrection which his contemporaries could not fully see or understand.

In a way, Jesus came into the world from the margin. He was a very unlikely candidate to be the savior that the world expected.

Jesus is an example for all of us. It is possible that God will return to us in the same manner that he came to us the first time: he or she might again

come to us from the margins of our world and we
might have difficulty in recognizing him or her.

Oh my—might he return as a woman or perhaps
even a lesbian????

Amen.