

March 28, 2024  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Manners at the Lord’s Table”

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you ...”

In my childhood home, there were several rules we were expected to follow regarding behaviour at the dinner table, whether it was a regular weekday meal or a special occasion feast:

- No elbows were allowed on the table.
- You had to ask people to pass the food (no “boarding house reach”).
- You needed to say “please” and “thank you.”
- You were expected to chew with your mouth closed.
- You were also expected to clear the dishes off the table after dinner and help with washing and drying the dishes.

I often bristled at such rules (especially the one about not reaching for food – why did God give me long arms if I could not use them?), and I would often point out to my parents that my friends’ homes did not have so many rules at their dinner tables. When I mentioned what I had experienced in other homes, my parents’ answer was always the same: “You are a member of *this* family, and we want people to see how we respect them by showing good manners wherever we are.” For my parents, manners were a way for people to experience our values and the importance of respect for others in all circumstances.

Manners are often seen as a relic of a past time, rules about behaviour that have no place in modern society. Many dismiss them as outdated rules and regulations regarding such trivial matters as how to set a table, which fork to use, and what wine goes best with certain foods. But manners also are a means through which we express respect for other people and a desire to live in a world in which we care for the other person’s needs more than our own. Good manners call us out of our natural selfishness to a world in which we seek to live together in grace and harmony:

“Good manners are not a relic of the past but a timeless and indispensable component of a thriving society. They create an environment of respect, trust, and unity, fostering harmonious coexistence. Demonstrating good manners reflects positively

on your character and can enhance your personal and professional life.” – Andleb Khan.

Rules and expectations regarding table manners and other aspects of etiquette have been a part of societal traditions for centuries, including the Greek city of Corinth that was the home of one of the earliest Christian churches. In the first century, Christians met in homes for worship, often gathering at the dinner table for worship that would include the Lord’s Supper. This was a tradition that was evidenced in the earliest days of the Christian movement, when those who had accepted the apostles’ teaching and were baptized “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (Acts 2:42). Luke goes on to share further details on the life of the early church and how they lived together in worship and in their daily lives:

“Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke break at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” – Acts 2:46-47.

It would be nice to assume that such an idealistic portrayal of life in the early church was the norm throughout the first-century church; but by what we hear in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the real life of the church in that Greek city was far from idealistic. Paul had lived with the Christians in Corinth for an extended period, so he knew the people and their strengths and weaknesses. After he moved on in his missionary journeys, he received a message from a group he refers to as “Chloe’s people” about quarrels and conflicts that are threatening the health and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in that city; so Paul writes what will become his First Letter to the Corinthians to address such issues as divisions in the church, lawsuits between church members, marriage and sexual immorality, whether a Christian should eat food offered to idols, orderly worship in the faith community, and the reality of the resurrection of the dead for those baptized into Christ. Paul had hoped that through this letter the people of Corinth would repent of their actions and behaviours that were leading them away from God so that they might truly be “*the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

One aspect of life within the Corinthian church that Paul addresses is their behaviour at their communal meals that included the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Paul’s words to the Corinthians are quite harsh on this matter, for he finds nothing commendable about their practice of sharing this holy meal. They know the traditions of the Supper, but the way they comport themselves during the meal shows

that “*the Corinthian church was overruled by a culture of selfishness and failed to proclaim the meaning of the gospel to all humanity*” (Israel Karnudzandu). For the Corinthians, their observance of the Lord’s Supper has become a highly individualized affair. They may be following all the rules regarding table etiquette and how to set the table with the required cup and bread, but by their behaviour they are in fact abusing the Lord’s Supper. They have “*lost any sense that love as the right relation to others is the proper and necessary expression of their faith as the right relation to God.*” (J. Paul Sampley). This culture of selfishness and abuse at what is the Lord’s Supper is what leads to Paul’s harsh critique of the manners of the Corinthians at the Table of the Lord:

- “Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be divisions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you is genuine. When you come together, it is not to eat the Lord’s supper.” – 11:17-20.

Such words must have been shocking to the Corinthians, especially from this apostle who had often shared such table fellowship with them. But like prophets of the Old Testament who called the people of Israel to task for their abuses in worship, Paul chastises the church in Corinth for not paying attention to the way in which their practice of worship and their manners at the Lord’s Table are making a mockery of this meal with is the supper of the Lord, not there to use for their own selfish purposes. Paul is not criticizing them for their failure to understand the importance of the Lord’s Supper, but for their failure to put into practice the basic truth of this Holy Meal, which is that “*breaking bread and sharing the blood of Jesus is intended to foster solidarity and hospitality among worshipers*” (Kamudzandu). Instead of fostering such unity, the Corinthians are permitting their cultural and social distinctions to determine the way the Supper is shared. The church in Corinth reflected the local culture, with members from both wealthier and poorer parts of the community. While this was not a determining factor in the church’s life, in practice what would happen is that the wealthier members, who did not work long hours, would arrive early in the home where the community would gather for dinner and the Lord’s Supper. Instead of waiting to eat until all had arrived, they gave into their selfish desires and sense of entitlement by helping themselves to what was on the table; the result was that “*when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk*” (11:21). When those who worked a long, hard day arrived for the meal, they discovered that all of the food was devoured, and that their fellow church members had become drunk on

the table wine that was meant to be shared by all. This would have been a violation of social norms and customs at a normal table; for it to happen at the Lord's Table was an abomination and a betrayal of all that this holy meal was meant to represent for those who were called to share in the Body and Blood of Christ. Paul condemns those who behave in such a selfish manner for the way in which they "*show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing*" (11:22). His word of judgment as to what is happening in the worship life of the Corinthians is clear and harsh: "*What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!*"

"To dine alone at church means to decline to join with the church in this great expression of common Christian social life; and it therefore manifests contempt for the whole assembly. Some members would be unable to come to the meeting place early because as slaves they could not leave their masters' houses, and the free members who refuse to wait for them really shame them because their late arrival keeps them from full participation in the common life of the church. Paul recoils from this drastic abuse; they "despise the church" by making impossible a communal meal of the whole church. This is the situation that prompts him to cite the traditional origin of the supper practice." – William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther.

It is for the purpose of reminding the Corinthians of the origins of the Lord's Supper that they are so flagrantly abusing that Paul shares his teaching on what happened when the Lord Jesus gathered with his disciples "*on the night when he was betrayed*" (11:23). Paul begins his account of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples by reporting that "*I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,*" words he would use to vindicate his apostleship in his letter to the Galatians: "*For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed to me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*" (Galatians 1:11-12). Paul brings his audience back to the Upper Room where Jesus gathers to share the Passover Seder with his disciples, his Last Supper before his impending betrayal, arrest, condemnation, and crucifixion. It is at the table that Jesus takes two elements that are always present on the Seder table – bread and wine – and gives them a new meaning for these disciples and for all who will gather to share this meal we know is the Lord's Supper:

"... the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,

‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’” – 11:23-25.

“Remembrance” has its roots in Jewish heritage, in which liturgy unites the old story with the current worshipers’ story; such is the case when their bringing of tithes and offerings to worship includes the remembrance of all God has done for God’s people, their response being that “*now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me*” (Deuteronomy 26:10). When the Corinthians tell the story of Jesus’ Last Supper and his giving of his body and blood in this meal, it becomes their story; “*they remember the story in a way that ties their own lives into it in a transforming and illuminating way*” (Sampley). The Supper affirms in its distributing of the bread to the members of the church that Christ’s body is for all who believe that it is God’s gift for them. The Lord’s Supper is “*a divine legacy, intentionally handed down from past Christian generations to those who are yet to be incorporated into the trinitarian mission of God.*” (Kamudzandu).

After recalling Christ’s gift of his body and blood at his Last Supper in what we know today as the “Words of Institution,” Paul concludes with the statement to the Corinthians that “*as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes*” (11:26). “Christ’s death” is shorthand for the whole history of redemption in Christ and rehearses for Christian believers the true scope and setting of the life they are called to live together. While those who come to the Lord’s Table truly believe that the Body and Blood of Christ are “for you ... for the forgiveness of sins,” their practice and participation in the Lord’s Supper is not merely for their own sakes but for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their faithful practice of sharing in the fellowship of this meal will become a means through which others will see through their actions that Christ is truly present in this meal and that the meal they share is “the gift of God for the people of God.”

“The action for Christ’s remembrance is extended to announcing the death of the Lord until he comes, thus specifying the meaning of the cup and placing the remembrance in the ongoing worship and life of the church. The Passover setting is not to the fore at this point, but Paul is rather emphasizing how each common meal is to become a recollection and proclamation of the gospel.” – Orr and Walther.

While our practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper usually does not include a meal at which we are careful to practice good table manners, it is important for us to be cognisant of how we approach this meal if we are to be faithful in our call to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” in our sharing of the Lord’s Supper. We must always be mindful that this is the *Lord’s Supper*, and we must take great care

that we do not make it about ourselves or our own selfish wants and desires but always remember that we are the servants at the Lord's Table. The Words of Institution remind us every time we gather for this meal that Christ gives his Body and Blood for "*you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins,*" and we must never place any barriers or restrictions on the gift that is meant to be shared by all. We must make certain that we are faithful in all that we say and all that we do, so that through our practice of faith and behaviour in our life together we might be faithful witnesses to our Lord who gave of himself so that all may share in the gifts of everlasting life.

"The same Lord's Supper that forgives is also 'a true bond and union of Christians with Christ their head and with one another.' We are, through this gift, 'incorporated into the body of Christ, which is the church.' Because we and others share unmerited forgiveness, we are on the same level at the Lord's Table. We have to be very careful about placing different levels where God does not, and about ruling people away whom Christ includes at his Supper." – Martin Marty.

The table manners that I was expected to practice at our home table were also the manners that I was expected to manifest when I was in other people's homes. It did not matter if my hosts had similar standards; my behaviour when I was a guest at other people's tables was a way in which I showed them respect and embodied the values of my family. When we gather at the Lord's Table, we must also be mindful that our practice of sharing the Lord's Supper is a form of proclamation, a way in which through our deeds we embody what we believe about this meal we share on this night in which our Lord was betrayed: that the meal we share is the Lord's Supper, and that these are the gifts of God for *all* the people of God.

Amen.