

August 31, 2025

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“Table Manners”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

It would be an interesting experiment to go through a year without using the word “religion.”

Not only because it’s a contentious word; I would be interested to see how we would talk about the values we hold concerning what it means to be human—a good human—in the world without using the *religion* label.

Recently one of my theological heroes, Brian McLaren, made the statement that religion, at its core, is the “stories and practices of cohesion”.

That is, even before it took on the term—*religion* has been the tradition of bringing cohesion to societies.

I think it’s an interesting take.

We don’t always hear that word *cohesion* used in religious talk. It’s more commonly used in the workplace; And mostly in the negative sense, as in: “That team lacks cohesion,” or “That project lacked cohesion.”

The Cambridge Dictionary defines *cohesion* as: the state of sticking together (when it comes to objects), or (when talking about people) being in close agreement and working well together.

I might prefer the word *integration* a little more. Because it gives the picture of disparate parts being actively brought into a whole—not necessarily to a place of agreement, but to a place of belonging nonetheless.

The opposite of this would be discord, dissension, or dis-integration.

If McLaren is right, that when you boil it down, religion is the stories and practices of cohesion, then that act of bringing together should be the benchmark for everything we do, as religious people—be it the integration of self, community, our world, and all of creation.

Anything that works against the act of bringing together is then anti-religious, against the work of God.

My practice of cohesion—my *religion*—takes its model from the person and ministry of Jesus. It's why I call myself a Christian. I study and re-tell the stories of Jesus because I believe in this human project of cohesion and integration and no one showed us the way more powerfully than he did.

Yet, a case could be made that the humble Jewish carpenter didn't come to birth a new religion but to build a table.

One thing I love about how Jesus goes about his mission, is how he uses other people's tables as occasions to teach the practice of cohesion.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is at the home of a pharisee who is hosting a meal on the sabbath.

Jesus...pharisee...meal...sabbath. Right-off-the-bat, this is a recipe for a major disruption.

One thing you have to know: when Jesus is invited to your dinner party, you best be ready for disruption.

But before he causes a scene, he observes. Jesus has a way of letting the drama of our foolishness unfold and then using it as an object lesson.

You get the idea that as soon as the invited guests arrive they are already jostling and shoving one another to secure a prominent place at the host's table.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Theologian, calls this human penchant for zero-sum competition the "dangerous enemy" of Christian community.

In his book *Life Together*, he claims:

"from the first moment when [someone] meets another person [they are] looking for a strategic position [they] can assume and hold over against that person."

I imagine that's what's happening here.

Showing up... just to size up... so that they could one-up the other.

Already, first century dinner parties in the middle east were political affairs—a chance for the invited to flaunt their social class and status.

These were insular, self-replicating events. You host events like these so that the invited might in turn invite you to their parties. Quid pro quo: I scratch your back, you scratch mine—A closed-circuit of exchange between those of similar status in society.

This was an inherently Roman idea, based on the patronage system. Something is given or offered, knowing that there would be an exchange of similar value.

This keeps those of a more lowly status from ever participating. They wouldn't be able to reciprocate. They couldn't throw a party of their own in return. Therefore, they would never receive an invitation in the first place, much less accept one.

This assumption and arrogance of position is at the heart of patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity...

...this demand for a prime spot at the table...

...this need to be recognized at the very top.

We live in a world where there is a large majority of people who have taken the best seats at the table and don't intend to share.

Even more, the invitations to these parties cycle only amongst those who are willing to play the system and reciprocate.

We too can get caught up in playing that game of upward mobility, climbing the social ladder, hoarding the benefits of being in our group. We are not exempt.

Without some discipline of often re-subscribing to a different economy... without the regular commitment and re-commitment to exit the game...

...we are prone to default to this way of being.

Not because we were created this way but because in our humanity we are driven often by fear and the anxiety that there will not be enough.

I was trying to explain to one of my girls how church, more specifically, and maybe religion, more broadly, is a way we are reminded to be good humans in the world—those being moved by love and justice.

Yes, church happens every Sunday—It's because we need that regular reminder, that weekly pattern of realignment.

So going to church is more akin to school, in that we are learning something—not just about a person, but about a whole way of being.

Until we enlist, daily, in the economy of God's Kingdom—where we are already welcomed, loved, cherished...

Until we get out of bed in the morning ready to live by the divine currency of generosity and abundance, we too are prone to play the system, jostling our way to get to the front, to be recognized, in an "anxious scramble for greatness".

True religion is in the table-building business.

Our religion, these days, often has turned the table into a tablet. A handy little tablet of a bite-sized, word-based, template of truth, with its rules and regulations.

Think about your most vivid memory of being with a group of people around a table?

What did it look like? What did it sound like?

For me, it almost couldn't be described in words. It is a cacophony of joyful conversation and banter, everyone contributing to this wholeness of belonging. How can this table-experience be minimized to a set of beliefs and creeds, to a selection of few choice individuals?

What does table sharing look like for our church today?

Are we content to be insular, sharing the invitation amongst ourselves, perhaps making the table smaller to keep track of who gets a seat at all?

What does setting God's table for our community look like? What habits will we need to break? What attitudes will need to dissolve?

May we re-commit to the practice of bringing cohesion to the people in our circles, beginning with our often fractured selves.

I want to close with a short poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes called *Places*. May it also be our commissioning today:

Places

To live every moment

so as never to place yourself
above anyone.

To lift those
who've been put
in low places.

To do away
with places.

Amen.