

Table Manners, Table Integrity
Psalm 26; Mark 10:13-16

Mark 10:13-16

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Psalm 26

¹Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

²Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind.

³For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
and I walk in faithfulness to you.

⁴I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;
⁵I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

⁶I wash my hands in innocence,
and go around your altar, O LORD,

⁷singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
and telling all your wondrous deeds.

⁸O LORD, I love the house in which you dwell,
and the place where your glory abides.

⁹Do not sweep me away with sinners,
nor my life with the bloodthirsty,

¹⁰those in whose hands are evil devices,
and whose right hands are full of bribes.

¹¹But as for me, I walk in my integrity;
redeem me, and be gracious to me.

¹²My foot stands on level ground;
in the great congregation I will bless the LORD.

The Sermon

Our family was seated around the Sunday dinner table at my grandmother's house—the grandmother who had immigrated from Serbia in the early 1900's and then lived and worked for 54 years on a farm in Indiana before retiring in her widowhood to a town house my Dad had set her up with in my hometown.

Back in Yugoslavia, Maw-Maw had grown up as one of several children in a large household; their father ran a tavern in Pristina, the capital city of Kosovo. As an adult, she spent those 54 years on the farm cooking for a husband, three strapping sons, hard-working farm hands, lots of other family members and any visitors who might happen to be around at any given time.

Decades later, Sunday dinner—or really any meal at all at Maw-Maw's house—meant she would be laying out the exact same quantity of food, even if it was just one or two of us, and if one crumb was left over, she would take it as either an insult that you didn't like her food, or she would weep uncontrollably, fearing that you would spend the rest of the day starving since you had only eaten 11 eggs and not the full dozen.

I am too young to remember this personally, but a family story that refuses to fade away is that one of my older brothers, a small child at the time, had recently learned how to whistle. During a lull in the dinner table conversation, or just absent mindedly, sitting at the table, he started exercising his new talent.

Dad, a sophisticated, urbane executive, always mindful of proper etiquette and table manners, said, “Hey, now: we don't whistle at the table.” And then he said, “Isn't that right, Mom?”

And she said, “That's right—we *sing!*”

Steven Pinker, in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*,ⁱ lays out an argument that humankind over the centuries is becoming less violent, not more. He mentions the confluence, during the late Middle Ages, of declining rates of violence with the advent of books on manners and etiquette.

He says, “By laying down rules for what people ought not to do, these manuals give us a snapshot of what they must have been doing. The people of the Middle Ages,” he concludes, “were, in a word, gross.”ⁱⁱ

I’ll refrain from reciting what people were instructed not to do publicly in terms of bodily functions, but among the rules of etiquette that were just starting to be named, there’s a long list under the category of table manners, all of which are in the negative:

- Don’t be the first to take from the dish.
- Don’t fall on the food like a pig, snorting and smacking your lips.
- Don’t turn the serving dish around so the biggest piece of meat is near you.
- “Don’t wolf your food like you’re about to be carried off to prison, nor push so much food into your mouth that your cheeks bulge like bellows, nor pull your lips apart so that they make a noise like pigs.”
- Don’t dip your fingers into the sauce in the serving dish.
- Don’t put a spoon into your mouth and then use it to take food from the serving dish.
- Don’t gnaw on a bone and put it back in the serving dish.
- Don’t wipe your utensils on the tablecloth.
- Don’t lick your greasy fingers, wipe them on the bread, or wipe them on your coat.
- Don’t [throw] bones, pits, eggshells, or rinds...on the floor.
- Don’t clean a dirty plate with your fingers.
- Don’t stir sauce with your fingers.
- Don’t lift meat to your nose to smell it.

Pinker says, “In the mind of a modern reader, these advisories set off a train of reactions. How inconsiderate, how boorish, how animalistic, how immature those people must have been! These are the kinds of directives you’d expect a parent to give to a three-year-old, not a great philosopher to a literate readership. Yet as [the earlier scholar Norbert] Elias points out,

*the habits of refinement, self-control, and consideration
that are second nature to us
had to be acquired—
that’s why we call them second nature...*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Refinement, self-control, *consideration*.

Manners for the table.

“Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.
I wash my hands in innocence,
and go around your altar, O LORD”—your table—
“singing aloud a song of thanksgiving...”

The commentaries are silent about any specific, known ritual that Psalm 26 refers to in terms of going around God’s altar in Old Testament times.^{iv}

But somewhere back in the dark past out in the Palestinian landscape, half a millennium before Jesus was born, whoever composed and recited this psalm had a clear idea about a certain kind of manners required to come to the table.

Vindicate me, O LORD: *shaphat*, “judge, govern” me, O LORD;
for I have walked in my integrity, *betummi* (בְּתִמְמוֹתַי).

Integrity is related to the word “integrated.”
It’s when thought, word, and deed are all related;

when what you believe is evident in every aspect of your life,
 whether it's convenient or inconvenient,
 even when it costs you something.

It's when you do what God has told you is good—
 what is just, kind, and humble before God—
 even when nobody else is looking.

Steven L. Carter, the Yale legal scholar who wrote a book called *Integrity*, prefaced it by saying, “It must seem odd to find a book by a lawyer—still worse, a law professor—on the subject of integrity. So let me make clear that integrity is something I only think about, not something I exemplify.”^v

Integrity for disciples of Christ is when
 our sense of gratitude to God,
 and our sense of responsibility to the world,
 and our sense of joy, deep within ourselves,
 which is not dependent on whether we happen to be
 particularly happy at any given time
 are all fed and nurtured together,
 and all feed and nurture each other.

The two words most closely related to the Hebrew word for integrity
 are “perfect” and “simple:”^{vi}

Perfect as in when something is entirely
 what it was created to be;
 Simple as in nothing artificial added to the purity
 of what God has made it to be.

Like, for example, the way Jesus said,
 “Let the little children come to me;
 the kingdom of God belongs to them.
 You can only enter the kingdom of God
 by receiving it as a little child.”

When I come to God's table,
it doesn't seem like I have much to offer.

That's the old story about stone soup,
where everybody in the village is hungry,
and nobody thinks they have anything that could feed anybody.
But a stranger comes and offers to make stone soup,
and boils some water with a stone in it
and asks if anybody has anything else they could add
to make it a little better.

And one person has an herb, so they put it in the pot.
and one person has a carrot, and one person has an onion,
and one person has a potato, and one person has some seasoning.
and one by one, they put these hopeless little individual things
into the boiling water,
And pretty soon all they have to do is take out the stone,
and now everyone can be fed.

Everybody has something we can contribute to the stone soup of our
little village—

a few possessions,
a little bit of money, some knowledge;
maybe, on a good day, some refinement,
self-control, consideration;
and whatever gifts God has given them.

But no matter how great or poor our resources,
all we really have to show for ourselves is our integrity.

And, more often than I care to admit,
integrity is something I think about,
more than something I exemplify.

Thank God we have a judge who welcomes us as children.

Is what I am doing with my life
what I honestly, fervently, joyfully believe that God wants me to do?

Do my words, spoken or typed on a keyboard,
bring hope into the world, or just more cynicism
and gloating and despair?

Are the amount that I give
and the amount that I retain
the right amounts, in God's eyes?

Am I being, every day, the person God put me on this earth to be?

For all our achievements and successes, we come to God as little
children.

Is there anything purer in its simplicity or more perfect than a child's
integrity?

When a child looks at you with all the trust in the world, you hold in
your hand a terrifying power, a power of which that child has no
awareness.

Pau Casals, who saw most of the tumultuous 20th century and was
perhaps the greatest cellist who ever lived, was recorded saying of the
world's children,

“We teach [our children] that two and two make four, and that Paris is
the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We
should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a
marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never
been another child like you... You are a marvel.”^{vii}

I reflected on a somewhat less credible message that I heard in a commercial that ran during the Super Bowl this past year. The camera, from above, was looking down over smiling babies in the nursery, one at a time, the camera benevolently capturing these beautiful, tiny children of every race. The spoken voiceover was a narration in which a woman's voice, soft but strong, was giving a similar kind of blessing to the children. I don't remember most of the text, but at one point, she said, "Some people may see your differences and be threatened by them. But *you are unstoppable.*"^{viii}

And I knew that this was a piece of pandering fiction, which is a polite way of saying, a lie.

There are checkpoints; there are borders; there are guns; there are social constructs and economic realities; there are injustices upon injustices all over the world.

How we all wish that you could look
 at any beautiful baby in the nursery and say, "You are unstoppable."
 But in our hearts and in our minds, we all know
 that every fragile human being on earth is stoppable.

Last year, the Chinese-born movie director Ai Wei Wei released a documentary called *Human Flow*. He took his cameras to places all over the world where people have had to run from their homes, made refugees overnight by war and violence and persecution.

It's a tough movie to watch: full of tears and aching feet and baffled, beaten faces struggling to keep going, whether that means moving, physically, on foot, or just facing the soul-destroying days
 in refugee camps, at closed borders,
 in places where there is simply no place else to go,
 trying to find just enough scraps of hope
 to be able to face the next day.

I began to notice, about halfway through the movie, that everywhere on earth that those cameras go, following thousands,
and tens of thousands, and ultimately millions of displaced people,
inevitably, reliably, children provide laughs and smiles and hope.

They come up to the camera with their curious faces,
or start rolling around with each other,
or they just smile and, in the best possible and least refined sense,
act their age.

Time after time after time, in these horrible and incredibly dispiriting conditions that no human being would ever want to find themselves in, on every continent and in every culture, it's children who save the endless days from utter despair.

And so on World Communion Sunday,
or on the first Sunday of our Stewardship Season,
or just on a regular day
when we lift up to God all the things we have in our lives
for which gratitude is both
our obvious and our well-considered response,

We come to God as all that we are, with all that we have—
but we come as little children.

We bring to the table our integrity,
or at least the best approximation of it we can summon,
and we say, "Here is what I am and who I am.
You have made me, and I am yours.
I trust you implicitly.

We come knowing our responsibility to the world's children,
and we come knowing that, ultimately,
we are all God's children.

Maybe that's how the dysfunctional family dinner table
 becomes a sacred place;
 and maybe it's how the sacred table of the Lord's supper
 becomes the central place of our everyday lives.

“Do not stop the little children,” Jesus said,
 “for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

As for us, we have our prayer:
 O God, I walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me.
 I come to your table in the innocence of a child,
 to sing a song of thanksgiving and tell all your wondrous deeds.

I guess Maw-Maw was right. At the table, we sing.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
 October 7, 2018

ⁱ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2011)

ⁱⁱ Pinker, *Better Angels*, 69

ⁱⁱⁱ Pinker, *Better Angels*, 70 (emphases added)

^{iv} I'm not kidding: Mitchell Dahood's *Anchor Bible commentary* (1965); James Mays's *Interpretation commentary* (1994); the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968); *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (1962); the two most recent editions of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (incl. 2018); *Leonard Marks's Norton Critical Commentary on the English Bible Old Testament* (2012); the *HarperCollins Study Bible* (1993) and still other commentaries I consulted have not one thing to say about any specific ceremony. The few who even mention the line after “I wash my hands in innocence” simply use verse 6b to posit such a ceremony.

^v Steven L. Carter, *Integrity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), ix

^{vi} *Per Strong's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*

^{vii} I have yet to find a definitive source for this quote which is widely attributed to Casals. I did not find it in his lovely memoir, *Joys and Sorrows*.

^{viii} T-Mobile Super Bowl Commercial 2018 “Little Ones,” viewable on Youtube as of this writing