

## *Minding our Holy Manners*

*Psalm 1 and James 1:17-27 Be Doers Of The Word*

“Minding our manners.” “Minding your manners.” I don't know who comes to mind when I say that phrase. Though I did not know her for long, it is my maternal grandmother who comes to my mind. I can hear her voice ‘Who pours the tea?’, ‘When do you start eating?’, ‘Where are your elbows at the table?’

I was raised in a British tradition so the eldest woman at the table always poured the tea and you did not lift your fork or spoon until, if the queen was not present, the oldest woman at the table did. And yes, we were always taught it that way, as if the Queen might drop by. Elbows will be held in tight, especially after the meal when one really wants just to lean on the table and stretch out. Again, the queen might just pop by.

The tea cup is still used in so many cultures. The one below on the Communion table is from the western European tradition; small and dainty handle and not so much room in the cup that you might quench your thirst. But you would get a taste of the sacred tea. All cultures have a ceremony. You don't always call it that anymore, but we all have a way to say: we share this cup, we share this pot, we trust one another enough to share a cup and the conversation that happens as the tea is shared.

God calls us into relationship with each other and all through August we talked about what that means. It means risking sharing our gifts. Sometimes it means taking the risk of having someone else pour the tea knowing they might do it “wrong” but still wanting them to be at the table so much that we risk the drops of tea on the tablecloth.

September for me is the start of a new year, always has been. Not only is there a shift in the flavour of the air outside, but there is that beginning of new rituals. Coming back from summer camp, summer gardens, the summer cottage. Coming back to school or work; those old routines. And that is why we chose September as our time to look at how do we live together, what are the ways we mind our manners with one another?

This morning we see from the scripture from the letter of James to the church some of the ways minding matters looked in the early church and, in your pink insert you'll find on one side something called the “Holy Manners.” It has been created over the last about 10 years in different

circles in the United Church. It comes from many sources: Mennonite, United Church of Christ, and the Methodists. A United church moderator began to bring it together more formally. She tried to help us understand that we needed to be kind and gentle with one another, not just when we had time, but whenever we were together. In particular, we needed to when we were together around contentious issues. And so, we have a list of words and then a list of actions. I want to walk through this with you this morning, listening to both James and these words of wisdom from our faith ancestors.

James says that all people and their gifts are from God and the gifts they give to the world from God must be respected, heard and listened to for these are God's first fruits. First fruits are the words and the terminology used for "tithing," a practice - that before any bills come in - we offer a tithe to the church. It started when folks began to give food to the priests, who couldn't work in the field. A little bit of everyone's harvest would allow the priests to eat. It was a celebration that God gives first; before we ask, before we deserve, God gives. And James teaches that God's very first fruits, God's first offering, are us: the people of God and our gifts.

The English word be used for this listening and honouring is respect. And, we don't want to ONLY hear this wisdom, as James said, we want to be DOERS of this wisdom and so we ponder ways to respect. We begin by listening. We listen with all that we are, and we listen to all that is being communicated by be other. This means sometimes hearing with our ears words like 'I'm fine', *but* noting with our eyes and our hearts that there are tears in the eyes of the other. It means understanding that 'fine' doesn't mean 'good' or 'happy.' It might mean, "I'm not quite ready to tell you about why there are tears, but I will show you my tears." Receiving all of that is respectful.

Also, respect means listening through different ways of communicating to try and hear someone's content. This is where I, as always, bring up my dear brother-in-law. He communicates louder than anyone else in our family. Even when the content is 'I adore you and I'm so excited you're here', he says it in a way that my ears hear him saying (gruffly), 'I am so glad you're here'; but, he actually really means (happily and with a lilt), 'I am so glad you are here,' with a big smile on his face. And so, it takes my respecting him to listen enough to try and gauge what his content is so that I can truly hear who he is and what he's saying rather than my reaction which is, 'Oh lord you're loud, oh goodness.' He also, of course, is getting used to my startle response as he respects me.

One of the other parts of respect is keeping confidentiality. This is in our "Holy Manners" because we believe that everyone's story is sacred. So, when I hear your story (like "today is I'm fine with tears in my eyes,") I need to remember that it is your story. And so, I don't go about making up your story, "oh I'm sure she's sad because, I'm sure she said fine because." I allow you to tell your story. And if I am worried about you I may go to a friend of yours and say, "can you look in on her," but I will not try to make up your story or tell your story. It is yours and it is sacred.

The next word on our list is humility. James says it this way, ‘welcome with meekness the truth of God being in each one of us to speak.’ Or in other sentence he says, ‘for those of you who are religious,’ (not that there are any of those in the room, but) ‘for those of you who are religious, bridle that tongue.’ We want to be hearers of this wisdom and we also want to be doers of this wisdom and this is when we need to be humble. We need to say yes when we ourselves can do something, but we also need to know that we need to speak for ourselves. I can’t know what *we* all are thinking or what they are all thinking. I need to speak for myself strongly and yet know that around me are all children of God and in the weakest voice I can hear maybe the strongest truth.

We now come to patience. James says it this way, ‘we must be slow to anger.’ We must pause to ponder the other first. Quick to listen, slow to anger, slow to speak. Our “Holy Manners” says we must seek to both express ourselves fully, and affirm the wisdom of silence. We must pause before speaking to truly ensure that we have heard. This is most difficult for me. While you are speaking to me I am (while trying not to) trying to come up with the best response in my head. Which means I’m not actually listening to what you’re saying, I’m just really coming up with my response. This gets me into great trouble because I can respond perfectly to the first thing you said, but I have completely ignored the second thing you said. So, I often say things like, ‘Yes, I think that’s a great idea,’ and realize that the second thing you said was not a great idea. Pausing and trusting the wisdom that comes in silence, the wisdom it comes from waiting, this is the Holy Manner of patience.

Our last two words for today are courage and compassion. James says we need to have the courage to bridle our tongues, yes but sometimes we also need the courage to speak up in love and encouragement. In our “Holy Manners” we read that we must have the courage to help one another stick to our “Holy Manners.” In churches, though it happens in other circles, the rule to be polite sometimes overrules all other rules. It’s not polite to say, “I’m sorry I do not think you have heard me,” but it *is* sometimes necessary to say that. We need to remind each other at times that we have committed to these “Holy Manners,” and I need you to try harder and I too will try harder. This is the courage it takes in Christian community.

And it takes great courage to be compassionate. James says that “religion at its purest is alive when we care for the orphans and the widows in their distress.” That is where religion is alive: the caring for those who are disconnected or isolated or hurting. And so, we serve, and we share our offerings, we are generous with our forgiveness, sometimes we bridle our tongues.

I want you now to look at these “Holy Manners” and as you have with Karen’s question pondered which one of these perhaps come easily to you, which ones come with more difficulty for you. I’m going to invite us now into prayer focusing in on the top seven words (on the pink insert).

Let us pray,

God, you call us to be doers of the words and not hearers only.

So many cultures lift these things as values and our church has chosen to try and live them out in all we do. You have given us gifts within us and each of us can do at least one of these “manners” easily and we thank you for that. We thank you for the ease which comes from you. Perhaps for us it is respect, respecting others, respecting ourselves. Or humility, patience, open mindedness, courage, compassion and treating ourselves with kindness.

But just as one of these or two even come with ease, oh God, because of our own personalities and quirks and quarks, one or two of them come only with great practicing. We thank you for the grace you give us so we may continue to practice these. And we lift up now the one that is difficult, the one that we will seek out in the coming months to practice:

to be respectful, to bring and live humility, to have patience, to be open minded, to be courageous, to have and use compassion, to treat ourselves with kindness.

As you hold us, oh God in your grace and love, help us to truly mind and be mindful of how we treat each other. Remind us you always walk with us, that you are our helper in all we seek to live out. Bless our intentions oh God, with your strength as we seek to continue to follow Jesus our Christ. Amen.