

“Round Table Manners”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 2, 2022 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 37:1-9; Luke 17:5-10

A long time ago, in a land far, far away, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table roamed the land, far and wide, to bring order to the realm and to search for a holy grail. The legends, old and new, tell us that these noble warriors -- Bedivere, Galahad, Gawain, and Lancelot, to name a few -- during their journeys faced much danger and overcame great challenges, including, in a modern telling of their tale, a confrontation with the dreaded Knights Who Say “Ni!”

Arthur’s knights numbered somewhere between 12 and 1,600. The stories disagree with one another about their number, but they all tell us that the knights gathered together around a round table (I would love to see the incredible round table that could seat 1,600 knights!), which was a symbol of the egalitarian nature of their fellowship; the table was round, without a head, so that all who were seated at it would be seen as having equal status. Unfortunately, the Knights of the Round Table did not always see each other as equals, and they struggled not only to keep peace in the realm, but to keep peace amongst themselves. Due to their bad table manners, especially in the form of destructive antics, like Lancelot having an affair with the King’s wife Guinevere, their fellowship eventually dissolved, and they split into rival, warring factions.

I bring up these old stories today as we gather on this World Communion Sunday to contrast the round table of Arthur’s knights with our own table, around which we gather today with many of the over-two-billion followers of Christ around the globe. Our table is big -- much bigger than any imagined by the Arthurian storytellers -- and around it are gathered a diverse people of every kind.

Welcome at our round table are lofty nobles who love to ride around on horses, but also, equally welcome, are the lowly servants of nobles and anyone else who was not welcome at Arthur’s table of elite warriors. All people are welcome at our table, and our table is truly round; at it, all people -- no matter their status, shape, or size -- are offered an equal seat. We welcome all to this fellowship of equals because Christ has welcomed us all to the table and has called on us to continue his work of offering an extravagant welcome to all.

Both of today's scripture readings from the lectionary give us some helpful guidance concerning life at our table. In our lesson from the Psalms, we are encouraged to have good round table manners in the form of not seeking to enact wrath on the others around us, even when we think they are deserving of it. And our lesson from Luke, in which the disciples ask for faith, follows a message he gave them about the need to forgive one another. Jesus tells the disciples to trust in God, even just a little, to have a forgiving and serving spirit, for that is their duty as disciples of the one who gave his life as the servant of all. These are the round table manners that the first disciples were to have, and they are the same manners that we are called to have as we sit at our round table: We are to be a people who welcome all to sit at the table, and who offer to each other while seated at the table not wrath but forgiveness.

If only we had this kind of faith. If only those around the world claiming to be Christians would be an army of forgiving servants rather than wrath-filled crusaders, mulberry trees and mountains would be moved and the world would be changed for good. If only more of us celebrated the inclusion of all people and worked to dignify all people, not to denigrate those who differ from us or that we don't understand, the world would become more verdant and beautiful. If only we could increase in love for one another here, our household of faith would enjoy more of God's peace and joy.

As we gather around the table this morning to receive the sacrament of holy communion, let us rededicate ourselves to building a more holy communion with our siblings of faith around the world and here in this room. Let us go beyond just hearing a message of inclusive and forgiving welcome, let us take it in, consuming it so that it nourishes us and becomes part of us. May Christ live in us, change the world through us, and bless us and the world with peace. Amen.