

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Pentecost 13

August 30, 2020

How To Act Like The Church

Romans 12:9-21

You don't need me to tell you about Judith Martin's book — *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*. Many of you have already read it. Some have read it several times. A few have underlined portions for their children or husbands. Miss Manners has strong opinions.

For instance, if you have not yet sent a thank you letter for any gift you received more than twenty minutes ago, Miss Manners has no mercy on you. You are also in trouble if you sent your thank you via e-mail or pre-printed cards. There is, in Miss Manners' world, no such thing as a thank you note. You must begin your thank you letter with a "burst of enthusiasm" and make sure it "names the present with a flattering adjective." When one of her gentle readers confides that she has only green ink with which to write, Miss Manners tells her that she must save all her letters until Christmas.

The use of tacky note cards and green ink are not the only subjects about which Miss Manners expresses strong feelings. The only excuse for declining an invitation to be a pallbearer is "a plan to have one's own funeral in the near future." Don't wear black to a wedding. If you're in deep mourning you shouldn't come in the first place. Even the young are expected to act with extreme manners. When a six-year-old reader asks what is important enough to tell his mother when she is talking to company, Miss Manners

provides a short list that includes "Mommy, the kitchen is full of smoke."

Good rules come in handy. We have unwritten rules that help things go smoothly at our church. What would Judith Martin include if she wrote *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior at Our Church*?

If you are in your 80s, you must come to Sunday school early. If you are in your 60s, be on time. If you are in your 30s, people will be glad if you show up at all.

You may take coffee to Sunday school. If you bring Starbucks, pour it into a different cup so you won't look uppity. Bring the donuts when it's your turn — if at all possible Krispy Kremes.

Adults never promote to another Sunday school class. It only makes the other people in the class feel bad.

Don't wear your motorcycle helmet in the sanctuary. You can wear flip-flops only if your mother approves. Don't bring popcorn or Milk Duds to church.

Children should be taught the sacredness of worship. This means no chewing gum, Game Boys or cell phones. Anyone whose cell phone rings should be stared at with utter disdain.

Try not to draw attention to yourself by singing louder than any six people in your section. The only acceptable excuses for not singing are life-threatening conditions.

If you only have green ink, it is perfectly acceptable for filling out an offering envelope.

Sing the doxology that's printed in the order of worship — not the one you wish we were singing because it's the only one you've memorized.

When faced with the question of what's important enough to whisper to the gentle worshipper seated next to you, it must be as crucial as, "Mommy, the sanctuary is full of smoke."

When speaking to the pastor after worship, begin with a "burst of enthusiasm" and a flattering adjective in relation to the sermon. After a particularly offensive sermon, use the side exits.

As far as I know, Miss Manners has never written rules for how to act like a church, but what do you think Saint Paul would say? We might guess that Paul would offer the kind of rules that churches write for themselves — requirements for getting on or off a church roll, the schedule for monthly business meetings, the budget development process, how to amend bylaws, and how many committees are not nearly enough.

If that is what we would guess, we would be wrong. Paul writes to the church at Rome — a church he may not have ever visited — to tell them how to act like a church. The rules he lists don't have anything to do with policies or procedures but have everything to do with what it means to be the body of Christ.

Paul writes, Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold tight to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing concern. Put others above yourself. Be willing to let them have the credit.

Be enthusiastic. Never let up. Be the kind of Christian who is always hopeful. When things go badly, look at it as a chance to do something a different way.

God has no interest in a self-serving church filled with people who care only about each other, so extend hospitality to strangers. Go out of your way.

Don't go around badmouthing people who aren't nice to you. Speak well of them. Find something you can approve, and say so to others.

Join in the fun with those having fun. Join in the tears with those who are crying. Love makes room for other's sadness and gladness. Don't be so preoccupied with yourself that you can't accept people where they are.

Live in harmony with one another. Don't be stuck-up. Treat people equally. Pay no special attention to the wealthy. Talk just as much to the poor. Love doesn't show partiality.

Never return evil for evil. Don't take silent revenge for imagined or real insults. If it's possible, live at peace with everyone. The way to overcome evil is with good. Let your love be genuine.

When Paul writes rules for how to act like the church he sounds like my mother. Be kind. Be sweet. Love everybody. Don't say mean things. Make sure visitors feel welcome.

Paul's hope was that members of the church would love so much that others would want to be a part. It doesn't always work like that.

When Paul writes, "let love be genuine," he understands that we're capable of being disingenuous.

Sometimes people get turned off the church, because they hear the beautiful words about love, peace and joy, and expect to find them exhibited, but instead they find the world's attitudes — arrogance, prejudice, and fear. It's hypocrisy for the church to treat people as less because they look different. Let your love be genuine.

If you pay attention at our church you will see people listening carefully to one another, being amazingly generous, and working with a love that transforms the church.

In the early church Christians greeted one another with a holy kiss. You won't see much of that today, but some of us hug. Love happens in the church and then spills out of the church.

This is John Austin Baker; "Love begins as love for one or for a few. But once we have caught it, once it has taken possession of us, and has set up its own values in the heart of the self, there are no limits to those it can touch, to the relationships which it can transform." In the church we learn to love each other so that we will learn to love strangers.

Every church is guilty of welcoming some more than others. We all fall short of loving like Christ. Welcoming strangers is risky. We could end up misunderstood, hurt, or laughed at. As someone said, "The problem with others is that they aren't us."

Sometimes strangers seem too old, young, poor, rich, tall, short, clean, dirty, mean, sweet, black, Hispanic, or white for us to be a friend. Our church is usually wonderful at welcoming strangers, far better than most, but we also

know that some come and don't come back because they feel unwanted.

If we are to act like the church, we have to have Christ's view of strangers.

We have to be so delighted to be Jesus' friends that we love anyone who wants to be part of the family.

You are at work, school or in a worship service. It is late in the morning and you are thinking about the afternoon, how much you need to get done and how little interest you have in doing any of it. You have too much to do for someone your age. It is not fair, and you are not appreciated nearly enough. You are on the edge of feeling sorry for yourself when you see someone you haven't noticed before. It could be someone new, but you're not sure. She looks confused, but maybe she always looks confused. Nine times out of ten you'd ignore her and move on, but on this occasion something about her bewildered look makes you wonder if you should say something. She doesn't seem quite at home. She looks like an outsider, waiting to be welcomed. Then, quite uninvited, the words of Paul pop into your head: "Let your love be genuine. Extend hospitality to strangers." You realize that this is one of those moments in which we become Christ's church. The measure of who we are as a congregation is how we love those who are left out. Gradually hope emerges inside your heart. The self-pity you were feeling only a moment earlier gives way to God's love. You're not sure exactly what to do, but you will offer a word of welcome, you will act like the church.