

Good manners

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

I once told a story from the pulpit about road rage that evoked as much response as anything I have ever said. I told about being in the left lane on Michigan Avenue and needing to move to the center lane and then the right lane in order to make a right turn at Chestnut. Simultaneously, a young woman in a BMW was moving from the far right lane to the center. I should have yielded, but I didn't. I accelerated aggressively and took the place. At the light, she pulled up beside me and lowered her window. It seemed she wanted to greet me, so I lowered my window. And she let me have it, in a stream of obscenities. I began to get angry. Only the possibility that she might be a member of my congregation prevented me from responding in kind. Instead, thanks be to God, I smiled and said something innocuous like "Have a nice day." As she drove away, she gave me the one-finger salute.

What a way to start the day! It wasn't that many years ago that her language and gesture would never have been used in public. Nevertheless, I have since concluded that the incident was my fault. I didn't have to lay down the gauntlet by beating her to the spot. I also participated in the lowering of courtesy and general good manners. If I was going to complain, I would have to clean up my own act.

I was reminded of Paul's instructions in table manners found at the end of the 11th chapter of 1 Corinthians. There was a lot of conflict and divisiveness in the Corinthian church, and at least part of the problem was the absence of common courtesy. Even at the table they shared weekly in their Lord's memory, some were elbowing their way to the head of the line and eating all the good food. Others were drinking too much and making a spectacle of themselves. Paul's advice is almost parental. Take turns. "My brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home."

That instruction always reminds me of church potluck suppers and how important they can be for the life of the faith community. Apropos of Paul's advice, the good food does go first at a potluck, and those who hold back and let others precede them are often left with a plate of bean salad and jello, the roast beef and ham having

long since disappeared. I can recall years ago offering the prayer of thanks at a church supper and seeing, out of the corner of my eye, two little boys—my sons—surreptitiously edging their way to the table with the fried chicken.

In J. B. Phillips's wonderful translation of Corinthians, "Love is not rude" is translated, "Love has good manners." The 13th-century mystic Julian of Norwich wrote eloquently and powerfully about the infinite courtesy of Jesus, who "nourishes us with himself, with the utmost courtesy," who opens the doors to the banquet hall and holds a seat at the table for all who would come. We are not in charge of the invitation list to the banquet; Jesus is. Our responsibility, as someone once said, is to mind our manners.