

**“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”**

**Luke 14:1, 7–14**

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Many of us, at least those of us who are a little older, know and love the film “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” The cast alone makes it worth watching – Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, and Katharine Houghton, among others. It tells the story of an interracial couple meeting the extended family and encountering resistance from both sides, black and white, though more from the fathers than the mothers. The white parents think of themselves as progressives, but being kind to black people is not like having your daughter marry a black man. And the resistance is clearly based on race. Sidney Poitier’s character is a physician, he is a kind and ethical man, but he is black.

I will not give anything else away about the plot, even though I have been known to ruin the ending of films, I just want to hold up the tension this film portrays, created by the person coming to dinner with your daughter being of a different race, and note that up until the year this film was released, 1967, interracial marriage was still illegal in seventeen states. That’s difficult to imagine; in my lifetime, it was still illegal; not just challenging, but against the law, until the case of *Loving v Virginia* on which the Supreme Court ruled on June 12, 1967.

I remember Ali asking me, when she was in elementary school, if back in the olden days, when I was a kid, we could buy ice cream at the store. She was eating ice cream at our kitchen table in Winston-Salem, thinking about how old her dad was, and she wondered how we got ice cream in the Stone Age. I informed her that we could get ice cream at the store way back then, we even had electricity and indoor plumbing... But we still thought people with different-colored skin should not marry.

Of course, we have only allowed women to vote in this country for just over one hundred years. The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, and some people to this day think women should not be allowed to vote! That is difficult to imagine in the year 2025...

but the point is “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” was a jolting and prophetic film when it was released, worthy of all the awards it received.

Yet Jesus’ words in our reading from Luke are even more jolting and prophetic in his time and in ours. The story begins with Jesus going to the home of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath. Jesus is the startling guest at this dinner, though we should note that he has a good relationship with some Pharisees. They don’t all fall into the category of “evil enemy.” Previously he has been warned by some Pharisees that Herod wants to kill him (Luke 13:31). Now he is invited to dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees.

In verses not included in our reading, Jesus heals another person on the Sabbath, a man with dropsy, or what we would call edema. Then, he observes where people are sitting and recommends not sitting in the places of honor so as not to be humiliated by being relocated to a seat of lower status when an honored guest arrives. We might think of poor, unaware first-time visitors here who made the mistake of sitting in one of the front balcony seats where three distinguished older ladies in the church used to sit every Sunday. It was not a pretty scene when the first of those ladies arrived and discovered people in “their” seats.

Anyway, after urging humility in one’s choice of seats, Jesus goes on to tell the host of this meal who to invite to special meals like this. It is more than a bit presumptuous for any guest to do so, but this is Jesus. “Do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Jesus tells the host to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind — those who cannot return the favor, but also those who are marginalized by society and forbidden from participation in religious life, the worst of the down and out, all of whom are presumed to suffer as a result of their own failures and shortcomings. Jesus doesn’t say, “Be nice to these poor people,” or “help them out a little, if you can.” He says, “Invite them into your home, to your table, to break bread with

you.” It is beyond a simple act of kindness; it is more intimate, more enduring, more startling. “Guess who’s coming to dinner,” he says, “not just someone of a different race, but the outcasts of society.”

Obviously, there is a lot to unpack here. Jesus is not just playing Mr. Manners of the first century, getting fussy about etiquette. The use of the word “banquet” tied to the resurrection of the righteous points to the great messianic feast where all are welcome. But Jesus is also talking about how we relate to one another amidst all the diversity of this world, who we include in our friendship in this life. He is calling for more than a hand-out or kind gesture, more than a momentary act. He is calling for something intimate and enduring. It is jolting and prophetic.

So, where do we begin? Perhaps with the question of whom — whom would Jesus include in the list of people we need to invite to our banquet table? Who is rejected today, especially by faith communities, vulnerable and outcast, in need of community? There are some obvious answers — immigrants and refugees, LGBT people, those who have struggled with addiction, anyone who has served time in prison. We don’t generally blame people for physical maladies anymore, but we are still judgmental about mental health challenges as a society, and we struggle to welcome the disabled or differently abled in practical ways.

These are just some obvious answers to the question of who we need to make a special effort to include. Naming specific groups of people can be limiting, but we have to begin with something tangible to get Jesus’ point. It’s not that we shouldn’t invite friends and family. The reading from Hebrews talks about showing hospitality to strangers, remembering those in prison, as if we were in prison, remembering those being tortured, as if we were being tortured. But the author begins by saying, “Let mutual affection continue.” The Greek word *philadelphia* means brotherly love. Continue to love your brothers and sisters but reach out to these others too, Hebrews says. Jesus would agree.

So, we have named some people to include, but how do we include them? In part, literally at a meal, by inviting the stranger and outcast to break bread with us. This is the mission of *A Place at the Table* on Hargett Street, which some of us have been connected to since before it

opened, and we now support as a church. It is a “pay as you are able” restaurant which not only helps feed people who have food insecurity but invites people from different walks of life to sit down at the table with each other. It is a wonderful embodiment of Jesus’ teaching, a great way to meet people we might not meet, and the food is terrific.

I also think of a family in the church I served in Richmond, Virginia who took Jesus’ teaching to heart. They would invite people in the community, often loosely connected to the church through some ministry, to have a meal with them in their home — not just any day of the year, but at Christmas. That’s when isolated people feel the most left out, so they included these friends in their Christmas celebration. This may not be something we would consider, there is no one way to live out this calling, but a part of what Jesus is saying applies to actual meals.

Yet he is also talking about more, this is a parable; his calling is to an ongoing lifestyle of inclusion and interaction with others, especially those in great need. Isolated, one-off acts of kindness have some value, but they are also limited. The trouble is they are easy. It’s a part of why some partnership mission work is so attractive. We go over there and do good work for a short time but then return home to our normal lives without having the “over there” stuff affect us here. There is value in doing work in other needy places, like Honduras, and some of this work is designed to be ongoing and relational, like that of Sharefish, but the goal is to form human connections that endure and enrich all parties.

In one setting where I served, we were intentional about this approach. We were planning a Backyard Bible Club in a housing project in another part of the city, with a focus on peacemaking, but we didn’t want to have a feel-good week, only to return to our happy homes. And so, we pledged to work with the children and youth for at least a year.

We invited them to our annual trip to a pumpkin patch in the fall. Most had never seen a farm. And we returned to that community for numerous events. We didn’t just share a few lessons and play a few games for a week in a summer. We built relationships that endured.

Of course, our calling in all this is to build relationships of mutual respect which requires that we check feelings of superiority at the door.

Jesus concludes his comments on where to sit at a banquet by saying, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” But is it difficult to restrain our tendency to look down on others we seek to help, as the old Kris Kristofferson song says, “Cause everybody’s gotta have somebody to look down on.”

There is an old Ziggy cartoon wherein our little friend looks down at man lying in the gutter, apparently drunk, and says, “There, but for the grace of God, go I,” whereupon the man looks up at Ziggy and says, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” How do we confront this unattractive human tendency we know exists within us?

There is no simple solution. Remembering that it is by grace alone that any of us is part of God’s realm can help, but it can also help to experience the other side of social discomfort.

In the early 1990s, I was invited to share a formal lunch with a few people honoring Dame Christian Howard, a member of the British royal family. She was a fascinating lady in her seventies who was an early advocate for female priests in the Church of England. She had come to Warrenton at the invitation of Fletcher and Bobby Wolfe, who had just moved up from Atlanta, to give lectures on her home, Castle Howard, as a fundraiser for a ministry called Emmaus House in Atlanta. She called this fleecing the rich to help the poor.

The Wolfes’ chef prepared the meal in their home, a splendid spread complete with fine champagne, and I confess that I was more than a little uncomfortable. I had not eaten with royalty before, and I didn’t want to make a fool of myself. I felt a bit like the character Vivian in *Pretty Woman*... But not long into the meal, Dame Christian put everyone at ease with her down-to-earth manner. She adjusted her undergarments numerous times... and then, realizing the asparagus was difficult to cut, she picked it up and ate it with her hands. I let out a sigh of relief and enjoyed the rest of the meal.

Social discomfort is not pleasant, none of us likes it, but there are things we can do to put others at ease, beginning with paying attention to them and keeping any tendency toward arrogance in-check. It’s one thing to invite people to dinner, literally or figuratively; it’s quite another thing to make them feel welcome. Jesus calls us to do the latter.