

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

After this Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:27-32, NRSV)

“All hell done broke loose!”

With these words from his maid, Tilly, crusading white liberal newspaper publisher Matt Drayton gets his first inkling that something strange is going on. A few minutes later, he discovers that his 23 year-old daughter Joey has returned from her Hawaiian vacation with her new love, John Prentice. Furthermore, as if the news that she plans to marry this man isn't shocking enough, the new man in her life just happens to be black. So begins the classic film starring Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn and Sidney Poitier, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

As the movie unfolds, not only must the Draytons come to grips with the fact that their white daughter is in love with a black man, but also the Prentices must accept that their black son is in love with a white woman. In this great film, people on both sides of the color divide have to deal with the results of what happens when their self-proclaimed ideals regarding

racial equality are challenged by reality. Despite the fact that a few elements in the film are dated, it is surprisingly relevant for today's racial issues. I think it is fair to say that in many American homes today—be they white, black, Asian or Hispanic—similar scenes of shock would occur under the same circumstances.

One thing I found really refreshing when I watched this movie again this week was the character of the Monsignor Mike Ryan, who comes across as a caring, sensitive and wise minister. I'm always glad when there's a positive portrayal of the clergy in the media. (Nowadays on TV and in movies, the minister is usually some kind of sexual pervert or serial killer or both!) There's a great scene where he sits down with Matt Drayton (played by Spencer Tracy). The two men have been friends for many years and the Monsignor reminds Drayton that he has made a career out of advocating for racial equality and combating prejudice. When Drayton still chooses to oppose his daughter marrying a black man—out of fear for the troubles they will face as an interracial couple and because of his own deep-down prejudices, the kindly priest good-naturedly chides his friend:

“That’s very interesting, very interesting indeed, and rather amusing too, to see a broken down old phony liberal come face to face with his principles. Of course I’ve always believed that beneath that fighting liberal façade was a reacting bigot trying to get out.”

It's a great line, because it speaks a great truth. Each one of us, no matter what our principles, is still a human being, and as a human being we have prejudices. Perhaps (or perhaps not), we've moved beyond some of the racial issues addressed in the 1960's, but plenty of other prejudices remain—class, education, nationality, religion, sexual

orientation, political persuasion, etc. When our principles come face to face with our prejudices, it is time for self-examination.

In today's scripture lesson, we have another controversy over dinner companions. Unfortunately, the clergy don't come out looking so good in this one. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to be his disciple, and Levi throws Jesus a banquet and invites all of his friends to the dinner party. Some Pharisees, who are portrayed throughout Luke's Gospel as holier than thou know-it-alls,¹ criticize Jesus for hanging out with "those people."

These "good religious" folks are upset that Jesus is sitting at the same table with "sinners and tax collectors." The term "sinners" seems self-explanatory, but the "tax collectors" part may need a little bit of explanation. Israel at the time was an occupied land under Roman domination. There was no present reminder of this fact in the lives of everyday people than the taxes they were required to pay to Rome. Some Jews worked for the Romans as tax collectors and were seen not just as traitors but as blasphemers for working against God's plan for Israel. (They were even less welcome to a dinner party than Nassau County tax assessors.)

Jesus sees the bigotry beneath their spiritual facades and says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." There is irony here, of course, because the Pharisees and scribes probably considered Jesus' dinner companions as the sick ones when their own prejudices left them also in need of Jesus' therapy. They were sick too.

One thing you can say about Jesus: he knew how to party. I've heard it said that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is either at the dinner table, going to a dinner table or coming from a

dinner table.² You can tell a lot about a person by who they sit down to eat with. Jesus seemed to spend a lot of time looking across the table at the kind of people that “good religious folks” did not associate with.

Last week, here in this sanctuary, we gathered around a table. Sure, because of our church architecture and furniture, all of us did not gather around this altar table. (It’s tight enough with just the ministers and a few deacons.) Yet, spiritually we did share a meal together. I think one of the many reasons Jesus wanted us to continue the practice of communion was so that we would follow his example of sitting down to eat with people who are different from us—especially people that may not be welcome in more refined religious circles.

In addition to last Sunday being special because we celebrated Jimmy’s 10-year anniversary at this church, it was also special because it was World Communion Sunday. Our church, like churches around the world, celebrated communion in an effort to remember what we share in common as Christians—despite all of the doctrinal differences and disputes—we share a belief in Jesus Christ, through whom we experience the love of God. Members of our church stood up and shared their bread with us along with their cultural heritage. It was a time for our church to remember its connection with the greater Church throughout the world and to celebrate that in Christ we come as descendents from different nations who worship the same God. I hope some day, in addition to the Armenian, German, Greek and other families who shared bread last week, that we can have Iraqi, Israeli, Palestinian, Cuban, Afghani and other families share bread. What a great symbol that would be that the bonds we share in Christ are greater than the agendas of politicians.

Another special thing happened last week. Our children came and sang *Jesus Loves the Little Children*, which has that great line “red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” That reminds me of yet another great line from *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. It occurs when Christina, Matt Drayton’s wife played by Katherine Hepburn, talks with him privately. She tells her husband:

“She’s just the way we brought her up to be. She asked her questions and she listened to our answers. We told her it was wrong to believe that white people were essentially superior to black people—or the brown or the red or the yellow ones for that matter. People who thought that way were wrong, sometimes hateful, usually stupid, but always wrong. That’s what we said, and we said it, we did not add ‘but don’t ever fall in love with a colored man’.”

That’s the trouble with kids. You teach things like love everybody no matter what they look like, no matter where they come from, no matter how much money they have or don’t have, and then they actually end up believing it. We adults know better, don’t we?

Jesus taught us to become like children if we want to see the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:3).³ Perhaps it takes the literal-mindedness of a child to combat the rationalizations adults pick up over their lifetimes. No better rationalizations for looking down on other people can be found than those often handed out by the church. It’s a sad fact, that Christians can find all kinds of “good” religious reasons to judge and then condemn others. The Church excels at keeping its dinner party exclusive.

Still another important thing happened last week, Armen Dildilian and I spoke in fellowship time. Armen asked me in his usual kind manner, “Did you announce to everyone that we practice open communion at our church?” It turns out that Jimmy did mention it at the beginning of communion, but I had indeed forgotten to mention it during announcements. It’s something I try to make a really big deal about, because I’m so proud to serve in a church that sets absolutely no restrictions on who can come to Jesus’ table for dinner. As Armen said to me, “That’s what it’s all about.” He’s right. Celebrating what Christ has done in our lives with everyone present—regardless of their religious background, religious beliefs or lack thereof— regardless of whether they are church members or non-members— regardless of their political beliefs, whether they vote Republican, Democrat or even for Ralph Nader—regardless of what clothes they are wearing—regardless of where they live—regardless of how much or how little money they make—regardless of what language they speak—regardless of the color of their skin—regardless of whether they are gay or straight—regardless of whatever they have done or not done in their lives. All are welcome at Jesus’ dinner table!

You’ll hear about it a lot more in the coming weeks, but our denomination, The United Church of Christ is starting a national television ad campaign to air in prime time on major channels. The campaign is called, “God is Still Speaking,” because we believe God still speaks to us today and every day. One of those ways is through people who may be different from us. An ad from the campaign portrays a church with a rope line out front and bouncers like a nightclub. The bouncers check their list and accept some folks into the church and refuse entry to others. Then the picture fades to another church that allows everyone in. The ad declares that in churches like ours, there is no such barrier out front. All are welcome here.⁴

I am proud to be a minister that serves in a church that does not place barriers between people and God. My hope is that we will always be a welcoming place to everyone, especially to those who are not welcome elsewhere.

The problem with welcoming everyone to dinner is that it is often uncomfortable. It demands that we stretch ourselves to understand people who are different from us. It means setting aside our own expectations that everyone must think the same way we do. It means admitting that we also suffer from the sickness of prejudice and elitist thinking. We are all sinners who stand in need of Jesus' cure of grace and love.

Sometimes as we gather around Jesus' table, we may look across and see people whom we would not normally be with. At times, we may even feel so uncomfortable that we want to yell, "All hell done broke loose!" But if we follow Jesus and seek to welcome all to the party, we may just find that in fact it is just the opposite. All heaven done broke loose—and it happened at church of all places. Amen.

Rev. Chase Peoples

The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost, October 10, 2004

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God who welcomes everyone, you have set a place at your table for all of us. Give us the courage, the wisdom and the humility to never stand in the way of those you have invited to share in your grace. Help us to learn from those we dine with, especially those people different from ourselves. Cure us. Feed us. Amen.

¹ It worth noting here that the portrayal of Jewish religious figures in the Christian Gospels is far from objective. Usually, when the Pharisees and scribes appear they function more as stock antagonists rather than as real people. The history of Christian anti-Semitism is a long and bloody one, and portrayals like the one in this scripture passage have been used to justify barbarous crimes. That's why I prefer to see the actions of the characters in the Gospels who criticize Jesus as reflecting the behavior of all self-righteous people everywhere, no matter their religion, rather than as a portrait of Judaism—contemporary, ancient or otherwise. A nice presentation of the controversies between Christians and Jews in the first century CE comes in John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 134-159. One of the best discussions of the negative portrayal of Judaism in the New Testament comes from Luke Timothy Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/3 (Fall, 1989): 419-441.

² My words are actually a paraphrase of those by Robert J. Karris. He writes, "[In Luke] Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal." Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian, Luke's Passion Account as Literature* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 47.

³ Two helpful articles about Biblical perspectives of children in general and Jesus' perspective in particular occur in the April 2001 issue of *Interpretation*: John T. Carroll, "Children in the Bible," 121-134; and Dawn DeVries, "Towards a Theology of Childhood," 161-173.

⁴ You can view the ad yourself at www.stillspeaking.org/resources.