

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

Sermon, March 14, 2010

Texts: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; II Corinthians 5:16-21

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner was a 1967 film starring Sidney Poitier, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn, with Hepburn's niece Katharine Houghton playing the leading role of "Joey." The film was groundbreaking for its positive representation of the controversial subject of interracial marriage, which historically had been illegal in most of the United States, and in fact was still illegal in seventeen states up until June 12 of the year of the film's release. Interracial marriage was more or less legalized by the June 12, 1967 Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. The plaintiffs in that case, Mildred Jeter Loving and Richard Perry Loving, were residents of Virginia who married in June 1958 in Washington, DC. They traveled to DC to evade Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, a law enacted in 1924 banning marriages between any white person and any non-white person. (Mildred Delores was of African and Native American descent; Richard Loving was Caucasian. She was born in 1939, and passed away a little less than two years ago in 2008. He was born in 1933, and passed away at the age of 42 in 1975). Upon their return to Virginia after the wedding, they were charged and convicted with a violation of the Racial Integrity Act. Nine years later, in 1967, the Supreme Court decision vacated that ruling; you might say it was literally a Loving decision.

Six months later, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was released. The movie tells the story of Joanna "Joey" Drayton (played by Katharine Houghton), a young white woman who has had a whirlwind romance with Dr. John Prentice (played by Sidney Poitier), a black man she met while in Hawaii. The plot centers on Joanna's bringing her new fiancé to dinner to meet her parents (played by Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey) at their upper class American home in San Francisco. The film depicts the discomfort of both sets of parents as they deal with this engagement. The film is also notable for being the final of nine hugely successful on-screen pairings of Tracy and Hepburn; Spencer Tracy died just seventeen days after filming ended. Their romantic relationship, which neither would discuss publicly, had lasted over twenty-six years. In Tracy's final speech of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Hepburn's misty eyes and flowing tears were genuine ... they both knew he was gravely ill, and that this would be the last line of his last film, that he had not much longer to live. Katherine Hepburn never saw the completed film; she said the memories of Tracy were too painful. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was released in December 1967, six months after his death and six months after the Loving decision.

In the opening of our Gospel reading, the Pharisees are grumbling: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Such intermingling of religious leaders and "sinners" just didn't happen; it was entirely inappropriate. We get our word "companion" from Latin "com" (with) and "panis" (food, or bread); in its original meaning, a companion is someone you eat with. Jesus, apparently, was the companion of sinners; this caused the religious leaders to grumble and mutter, "Guess who's coming to this fellow's dinner. He welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus responds by telling these religious leaders three parables. In the first story a shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep to go out and find the one that is lost. He searches the wilderness, and on finding the lost sheep he says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost!" In the second story, a poor woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She tears the house apart looking for it, moving the furniture and vacuuming under the beds. On finding it, she also says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost!" After both stories, Jesus says that even heaven rejoices when the lost are found and restored. He then launches into the third parable, subtitled in our pew Bibles as "The Parable of the Lost Son", but it really should be subtitled "Parable of the Lost Sons." For this is just as much, if not more so, a parable of the second son as it is of the first. Both these sons have serious issues, both are in a snit with their father and both act out in very different ways. The parable really is "A Tale of Two Snitties."

The older son comes in from working out in the field, and when he learns what is going on and who's coming to dinner (v.27), the older son refuses to participate in the festivities. He says in so many words, "My brother is back? Why celebrate that? That squandering, loose-living, irresponsible brat deserves something all right, but it certainly isn't a banquet! I don't want to eat with him. He deserves to be back in that pig-pen he wound up in!" This older brother doesn't want any reconciliation here. So, he refuses to go in and join his family for this dinner, this celebration. He thinks it's entirely inappropriate. Now, on one hand, he does have something of a point. What would happen if everyone acted like the younger son and no one like this older brother? What would happen to our traditions, our homes, our economy, our churches, if everyone just quit their job, liquidated their assets, and ran off to some far off land like, oh, Connecticut and squandered it all at Foxwoods? This older son represents much of what we value: responsibility, hard work, perseverance, dependability. However, he is also representing an attitude we shouldn't value. His is the attitude of a disgruntled household employee, not a loving son. Verse 29, he says to his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders." Now, "slaving" is hardly descriptive of a warm relationship toward the father. This is the attitude of a household servant, an employee, a hireling who is probably always grumbling about the "boss" behind his back, one who is doing all he does because it's a job, not a privilege nor a joy nor a calling, and certainly not out of love and devotion.

Note, too, he refers to his brother as "This son of yours" rather than "my brother." He, in effect, seems to have emotionally removed himself from the family. For him, apparently, having roast goat and drinks with his real buddies is an occasion for joy and celebration; the return and reconciliation of a brother is not. He does not delight in the things that cause his father joy. The one real difference between the older and the younger brother is that the younger brother was estranged and rebellious and left home, while the older brother was estranged and rebellious while staying at home and ostensibly living by the rules. Jesus is speaking rather pointedly to the Pharisees in this depiction of the older son who doesn't want any reconciliation, this one who wants "justice," not mercy or grace. I like how someone defined these three terms: justice, mercy and grace. Justice is getting what we deserve. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. And this father in the parable, like our Heavenly Father, is a father who wants to extend grace to his wayward offspring.

Now, it's easy to be hard on the Pharisees, but not so fast. I think it's safe to say that all of us here look forward to heaven and sitting at a big dinner in heaven with all the saints; that's the grand banquet, the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. We can and do look forward to seeing and sitting next to that particular loved one at the Heavenly Table, a loved one who was so important to us but departed from our loves all too soon ... a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, a dear friend, a beloved teacher. That's easy to look forward to, sitting at table with those we love. But how about sitting at the Table next to the person who has hurt you, or the person at the office who just seems to have it in for you, or next to that drunk driver who killed your loved one, or next to some other person you'd be just as happy to never have to see again? What about sitting down next to that "younger brother"? And just as a bit of an aside -- Imagine if this elder brother had met his returning brother before the father; what if the older brother got there first? Do you think the younger brother would have been discouraged or encouraged to come on home? Has anyone ever been discouraged from returning to the Father's house because he or she met one of us "older brothers" first? Just a thought.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner may have predated many of you here this morning, but perhaps more of you have seen the Academy Award winning film *Places in the Heart*. On one hand, it's a bit of a depressing film and, I think, in parts overdone, but on the other hand (and especially in the ending) it is a powerful portrayal of the truth behind this parable. I apologize for doing two movie reviews in one sermon, but after 25+ years of ministry (and after preaching on this passage seven or eight times in my years here with you), I'm always looking for new ways to enhance understanding of this very familiar parable. *Places in the Heart* is the story of a young woman (*played by Sally Field*), widowed within the first few minutes of the film, struggling against seemingly insurmountable difficulties and outright evil in everyday life of central Texas during the 1930's. Forces work to take away the only thing her husband has left her and her two small children ... a small family farm. Brutality, lynchings, infidelity, racism, greed and duplicity are all woven into the lives of those who make up the community tapestry of the story. Now, if you don't want to know the ending, you may want to leave now or stop up your ears ... but the film ends with a communion service, an observance of the Lord's Supper. And guess who came to this "dinner." At first the camera shows you a couple who is being reconciled as the words of I Corinthians 13 are read; throughout the film this husband had been a very unlikeable philandering creep, but in the end becomes repentant. Then the camera shows a few of the good folk in town. Next, some of the not-so-good, as it shows the banker and others who conspired to try and take away the farm and intimidate this woman's helpers and benefactors. The camera continues to move to follow the tray bearing the cups of wine. There is the faithful black farmhand Moses (*portrayed by Danny Glover*) who helped plant and grow and harvest the cotton crop so the widow might pay her mortgage; next to him, the blind boarder. The plate passes to the children, then to their mother. And then ... we see that Sally Field's character is seated next to her late husband. As you are trying to take this in, the plate moves to the young man seated next to him; it is the lynched boy who shot her husband... he is seated there as well. They commune and each responds: "the peace of God." All are gathered as *companions* at Table, to share the bread and cup of salvation. Suddenly this is more than a Sunday morning church of a small Texas town; this is a picture of the kingdom. This ending gives a look at life the way God looks at it. In Jesus Christ, God has done something to enable everyone to come to His dinner. He has gathered us up in all of our diversity, with all our forgiven faults, and tied us together through the grace of Jesus Christ, creating His peace. As Paul expresses it in our Epistle reading: "So from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view ... in Christ, God was reconciling us to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us ... and God has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

Jesus hopes His Pharisee listeners will see themselves in the angry, sullen older brother in the courtyard, who would prefer to see those sinners "get theirs" rather than be restored, and He invites them to turn ... turn and join this grand Gospel ministry of reconciliation. And Jesus asks His audience throughout the centuries, "How do you respond when you see someone coming to the Father's house for dinner? Do you begrudge their being there, or will you come to the dinner and help pass out the hors d'oeuvres?"

For God the Father is inviting all to come to His house and join all the company of the redeemed gathered as companions of His Son, our Savior. Amen.