

“A Place at the Table”

Sermon on Sunday, September 1, 2019

Based on Luke 14: 1-14

Guess who is coming to dinner? That was the title of one of film history’s iconic movie’s, a reel from 1967. On its 50th anniversary in 2017, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. They said it was “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant”. It also happens to be significant for the gospel we just heard.

“Guess who is coming to dinner?” features the daughter of a well-to-do white family, Joanna Drayton, coming home from a vacation to announce her intentions to marry a well-to-do black physician, John Prentice, played by Sydney Potier. The plot thickens as Joanna invites John home to dinner to meet her parents who (Oh mom, I forgot to tell you...) don’t know yet that he is a person of color. At the same time John’s parents arrive at the airport to attend the dinner and to meet Joanna and her family who, as they learn upon arrival, are white folk. As movies often do, this production addresses a taboo topic of the time, a societal issue that was in the conversation in 1967. That same year, the last seventeen states had just made interracial marriage legal. The taboo was officially lifted, but people’s minds work in their own time zone and sometimes minds are like a clock that has stopped ticking a long time ago, like the clock in my office, you know. Cathy Simcox tried to fix it, someone else did, to no avail. Minds are like that sometimes. No matter the arguments, they won’t change.

So, you can imagine that this movie struck a chord in many communities in 1967, especially in the American south. One of the most talked about subjects or perhaps one of the most intentionally not talked about subjects of the time was openly portrayed on the big screen and was, within the movie’s own plot, discussed awkwardly at one of the most familiar places: the dinner table. Can you think of an important conversation you recently had over dinner?

Dinner tables have always had a special role in culture. Just think of the importance of the Thanksgiving meal for your family. Or think of how much thought and agony wedding couples devote to the question of who sits where and with whom at the wedding reception. Think of the tabloids’ favorite dramas. What does it mean that Meghan Markle and Prince Harry did not sit right next to the queen but maybe Kate and William did? And in your family? The patriarch or matriarch of the clan may have a favored seat that is not to be taken by anyone else! Yes, even in our times of equality the seating arrangements at a table can reflect dynamics of power and importance. Certainly that was the case in Jesus’ time. “Guess who is sitting where at the dinner table?” is the question raised in Luke 14.

And then it happens, the unexpected. I am thinking I know where this story is going, but just when I leap to conclusions, Jesus takes a different spin on it. I am thinking he’s gonna change the seating arrangements. The Jesus of my imagination allows the least prominent guests to sit next to the host and relegates the bigshots to the end of the table. Wouldn’t that fit the Magnificat that Mary sings at the beginning of the gospel, praising a God who lifts up the lowly and sends the rich away empty? And support the story of the rich man and Lazarus, also offered in this gospel, whose places are reversed in the afterlife... But interestingly, very interestingly, this story becomes a teaching lesson not about social justice or about rich and poor, not about anything revolutionary in fact, but about something altogether different: humility. Just when I think I have Jesus figured out and start dogmatizing and politicizing his message in my head,

he gives me something else to think about. He says to me, "Pastor, humility is even more important than social change. Take that!"

In this beautiful story there is none of this "I deserve a better place at the table" mindset. There is none of this "Use your elbows and let people know who you are!" Instead, Jesus suggests, if you begin in a fairly humble place and show that you accept your place at the table, (after all, you are given a place at that table!) you may well be promoted. And if you rush to the best seats in the restaurant, like I did when I first came from Germany where people routinely select their own seats, the hostess may have to call you back and say, "Who are you? That seat is reserved, sir!" And by using this example as a teaching story, Jesus encourages us to be patient and humble and conquer the world with kindness and yes, humility.

Of course, true humility is a rare trait and one that is often underestimated in its subtle capacity to melt hearts and win people over. But I have seen it, and although I don't consider myself as a "humble" person, unfortunately, I have seen and witnessed how humility, paired with other skills and gifts, can be enormously effective. I have also found that sort of humility in some of the writings and speeches of the Civil Rights era leaders who proposed social change in a strong way, who fought for a seat at the tables of society, but often held back on the more aggressive rhetoric, who preached non-violence and patience, who showed up but didn't shove their way to the table, who showed enormous dignity and self-respect but did not develop outsized pride. In hindsight we can say, these humble leaders were very effective and we can be grateful for their witness.

In reflection of this Sunday's gospel passage and people's desire to take the best seats in the house, David Sellery, an Episcopal priest from Connecticut, focusses on the devastating dynamics of pride. In baseball terminology he writes, *"Pride is Satan's curve ball. More souls have gone down swinging at that sucker pitch than any other in his repertoire. Satan can throw it so well because it's his oldest weapon. He's been practicing it since the Garden of Eden. It is the original sin that brought down Adam and Eve. It is the gateway sin that opens the door for a host of evil, from petty snobbery to genocide. It is the singular sin that Jesus identifies for condemnation over and over."*

Further down in the same piece, Father Sellery adds, *"Give pride enough time and enough encouragement and it will morph into a pattern of selfish behaviors... spiraling ultimately to total self-absorption. Consumed by pride, in time every form of sin becomes a permissible, personal privilege. Through proud eyes, there are no lies; if I am the arbiter of truth. There is no greed; if I believe that I deserve something more than you do. There is no lust; if other people exist for my pleasure. In the terminal stages of pride, the only God I ever need smirks right back at me from my mirror."*

I am using this lengthy quote because I believe it is 100% true and because I could not possibly say it any better, and because it is an important compass for our discernment of true Christianity in our time. The descent from pride to self-absorption and delusion is something that Jesus taught against over and over again. For Christ, it was always about the kingdom of God, not me. It was always about the Holy Spirit, not me. It was about doing what is right in the eyes of God, not me. It was about God's agenda, not my agenda. We can embrace that spirit, inhale it and exhale it wherever we sit at the table. Because, it does not need reminding that, without any exception whatsoever, we all have a seat at God table. So, be blessed, enjoy the meal and your voice shall be heard. That's what Christ tells us this morning. **Amen.**