

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, August 29, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, your holy word, your living word has stirred within our hearts once again and has drawn us to this holy place. We each come with our own set of needs; we each bring our own baggage, but we all come to praise and worship your holy name. And so, gracious God, I pray that you will accept the offering of this worship service that you will find it worthy of your name. And that you will shape us as we worship and praise you to truly live as your people, centered and grounded and filled with your word. Jesus Christ our savior, Amen.

Sermon:

In a couple of weekends some of our youth are going to travel down to Ocean City, N.J. for what's known for many, many years – even when I was a young teenager in the church – as Ocean City Youth Weekend. And it is truly an opportunity to have our youth not only fellowship with other Christian youth, United Methodist youth from around the state of New Jersey, but is also a time, an opportunity to deepen their faith walk with God. And that certainly was my experience when I attended Youth Weekend many, many years ago.

Do any of you recall the film that aired back in 1967, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* Just lift a hand, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Good, I kind of figured not everybody would've heard of that, especially our younger people. But I first saw that film at Ocean City Youth Weekend and it had a profound impact on my life. This country was going through a lot of turbulent times in the 60s and most of them were centered around racial issues. And the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* helped us to take a

look at a piece of that turmoil that was part of living in the U.S., and I think its part of just living.

It helped us to take a look at our prejudices, our preconceptions that we have about people who are different from us. The film centered on a young biracial couple, very professional people. And the African-American was portrayed by a well-known actor, an accomplished actor, Sidney Poitier who was in medical school becoming a physician. And he was dating a young white woman, Caucasian, who he had met, they'd met at the university and so they have grown together in their love to the point where they've decided they want to get married and in the 60s that was pretty traumatic in the U.S. in this society. Today we see biracial couples and we don't think too much about it, but back in the 60s those who found themselves in love and were biracial had a lot of obstacles to overcome, to live with.

And so this couple decides we need to break the news to our families. And so, the young woman arranges for her and her friend to visit with her parents one weekend. And so they arrive, they've not announced to anyone that they want to get married or they're going to get married. They arrive at her parent's home and her parents are very polite to their daughter's African-American friend. They're welcoming of him into their home. He's coming to have dinner, to share a meal with them. And as the plot unfolds, the real purpose of this visit is revealed. And they announce to her parents that they plan to get married. And now all of a sudden the niceties and the politeness give way to the prejudice that was underneath the surface. And to add to the tension, this young woman announces to her parents that her husband-to-be parents are coming to dinner as well. And we get to see both sides of prejudice coming out.

This movie had a tremendous impact on me as a young man. Attending a high school where I had gone from a junior high where I was in a white majority – I think we had four or five black students at Linwood Junior

High School - to suddenly being at New Brunswick High School where I was in a white minority. And it really hadn't impacted me, but this movie when I viewed it at Ocean City Youth Weekend helped me to see some things that were not part of my life. And it helped me to understand people a little better. For instance, I remember my junior year in high school reading in the newspaper that there had been race riots at the high school and that seventeen youth were taken to the hospital because of injuries. Well it just so happens I was in the cafeteria when the fight broke out and the fight just happened to be between a black and a white, but it had absolutely nothing to do with race. Somebody had spilled milk on somebody else and it escalated to finally fists breaking out. And of course, each one of the boys their friends came to their side and so it became for the newspaper a white/black issue. But in the high school for those who were really there and really paying attention it had absolutely nothing to do with race. It's just the way it happened.

But this movie helped me to see some of the dynamics that were playing out in our society and some of the assumptions that were being made by people on both sides of the race division line. I share this little piece of my life because I do think it relates to what was going on at this banquet where Jesus found himself as a guest and where he uses the opportunity to educate those who were around him – his followers and his detractors – about a key value, a core value of the kingdom of God.

In God's kingdom, as Sue pointed out to our children, all are welcome. There are no divisions. And in fact, one of the key ways for us to draw closer to God is through humility. Not thinking of ourselves so much to the exclusion of every one else and also not losing our identity but humility that sees the worth and the value in each one, no one over another. And I believe that Jesus is using this story about the banquet and then saying when you give a banquet don't invite people who can pay you back and invite you to their homes, people who have means to and reasons to

invite you for a similar type of banquet in their home. Invite people who have no way to pay you back. Jesus is helping us to enter into a closer relationship with God. And I believe that was at the heart of Jesus' ministry. How do we become closer to God? How do we get closer to God? And one of the ways is to practice humility. To see the value of ourselves, but also not to lord it over people or to make it become a division or a barrier that keeps us from touching others lives and from others touching our lives.

"When we all get to heaven," a seminary professor shared with me, "we will all be in for a few surprises. Not the least of which will be that we will look at the heavenly banquet in the midst of all that worship going on and we will see people at the head table with Jesus that we don't even recognize. In fact the world does not recognize them because they have been the true humble servants of God whose actions and whose faith has gone unnoticed because of our blindness. And if we find ourselves in that banquet," this seminary professor says, "we will count ourselves lucky if we've made it just inside the door and we can barely see Jesus at the front of the banquet hall. We will count ourselves lucky just to be there."

Today, we're reminded of our faith journey and we're reminded that our faith journey is not something we practice here in this place or just in this place. It is something that has ultimate meaning for our lives and something that we take out with us into the world so that when we find ourselves in situations like that young woman's family and that young man's family in that movie found themselves, that God will have so shaped our lives that we will embrace the love that brings two people together; the love that breaks down racial barriers, social barriers; a love that can even break down religious barriers and allow us to truly live in God's love. So my encouragement for you and I think the encouraging word for Jesus is take this with you, let your faith be something you live daily. Let your faith make a difference in the way you live your life and

the way you interact with others. And one way to do that is to practice humility; to see the ultimate good that is in each one, and in some people it's harder to find than others, but to find that good and to give thanks to God for that good.

In Jesus' name, Amen.