Sunday, September 2, 2001
GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER
Luke 14:1,7-14

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" is the title of a 1967 film starring Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Sidney Poitier, and Katharine Houghton. In this cinema classic, a young woman named Joey Drayton brings home her fiancé, John Wade Prentice, to meet her parents. The parents, played by Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, who had always thought of themselves as being without prejudice, are shocked to discover that their daughter's fiancé is Black. They are forced to reexamine their beliefs about who might be acceptable as a husband for their daughter. They learn that it is easier to be accepting of all kinds of people in theory, but when it comes to putting those beliefs into practice, it's a different matter.

In theory, those of us who call ourselves Christian say that we believe every human being is created in God's image and is therefore a child of God. We are of equal value as God's creatures, brothers and sisters in the deepest sense, because God created each one of us and breathed into us the breath of life. There are also many individuals who do not claim to be Christian who believe that all human beings are created equal and should be treated with respect and dignity. This concept of equality does not mean we all possess the same abilities and talents.

On the contrary, we Christians believe that God has created us with a beautiful diversity. Some of us are of lighter complexion, others of darker complexion. Some are short, others are tall. Some are good athletes, others are talented in different ways. Some have a high IQ, others a lower IQ. Some are rich, others are poor, and many are somewhere in between. Yet, according to our faith, we are equal in value when it comes to sitting at God's banquet table.

But in practice, that's not always the case. Within the Christian community throughout history, there has been, and continues to be, considerable controversy and debate about who is acceptable and who is not. This is especially true when we try to determine who is welcome at the Lord's Table in what we call Holy Communion or the Mass. But it's also true in many other ways. As in the movie Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, the movement from theory to practice is more difficult than we thought. What is true within the Christian community is also true in the secular world.

Jesus dealt with these same issues in his time. He was a frequent guest at dinner parties. As the Gospel of Luke shows in the story read today, he used these gatherings as opportunities for teaching. Luke writes: "On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely." Why were they watching him so closely? What were they looking for? Did they think he had bad table manners? Did they want to catch him violating one of the religious laws?

But while they were watching him, Jesus was watching them. He noticed that many of the guests quickly chose the places of honor — those seats nearest to the host. These particular guests assumed that the places of honor were meant for them. They likely took a quick glance around the room and convinced themselves that no one present was more deserving. So, without a trace of modesty, they took their places and left the other guests to scramble for the remaining seats.

The seating of guests at a dinner party can be a delicate matter. Sometimes, those invited believe they are more deserving of honor than others. One host at a recent dinner party solved this problem by putting all the guests' names in a box and letting each person draw a table number randomly. Some guests didn't care for that method. They found themselves seated with people they thought were beneath their social standing.

What did Jesus do when he noticed the guests vying for the places of honor? He told them a parable: "When you're invited to a dinner party, don't automatically sit in the seat of honor. Someone more distinguished than you might have been invited. Then your host might say to you in front of everyone else, 'I'm sorry, but you'll have to give up your seat.' And with considerable embarrassment, you will have to sit in the lowest place. No," said Jesus, "It is better to sit in an inconspicuous place so that when your host arranges the seating, you might be pleasantly surprised when they say, 'Come, my friend, I have a better seat for you.' For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Following this, Jesus gave some advice to the host: "When you give a party, don't only invite your friends and relatives — the people you spend most of your time with and who will invite you back in return. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." That will change the atmosphere of the party.

In these comments, Jesus creates a wonderful image of God's feast — God's banquet. When you are invited to eat at God's table, you will meet people you least expect. Guess who's coming to dinner!

God has invited people you wouldn't think of inviting. God has invited individuals with whom you wouldn't want to sit at the same table.

These actions and stories disclose spiritual truths meant for all of us. One truth revealed here is that honor at the feast of God cannot be taken or demanded; it can only be received as a gift. At God's table, the humble will be exalted, and the exalted will be humbled.

In our day-to-day relationships, there is practical and helpful advice. Jesus pokes fun at us for thinking we automatically deserve the most honored spot.

Perhaps some of you have been embarrassed at one time or another regarding protocol, and maybe your pride has been wounded because you thought you deserved a place of higher honor at a banquet or reception. Jesus pokes fun at us for paying so much attention to whether or not we think we get the recognition we deserve. Our culture places too much value on celebrity status anyway.

What is it in our human nature that causes us to want to exalt ourselves, especially when we do so by putting others down or surrounding ourselves with status symbols? Ask yourself: Why do you want to see yourself, or have others see you, as superior? What do you gain from that? Is it of lasting value?

In his actions and teachings, Jesus reverses our usual standards and values. His parables are designed to shock the smugness from us — parties thrown for prodigal children, prostitutes having precedence over those in high society, the last being first.

At the same time, while we compare ourselves with others and live in a society obsessed with wealth and prestige, Jesus teaches: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all.”

What gives added weight to his teachings is his own behavior. He was indifferent to any person’s economic, social, or political position. He treated rich and poor alike. He attached no importance to social registers or political power. He was most often criticized for eating with sinners, outcasts, and those considered undesirable. In eating with them, he expressed his full acceptance of them — and by demonstration, God’s acceptance.

This little story about a dinner party on the Sabbath also speaks to us on another level. It is much more than a lesson in table etiquette or the folly of status seeking. This story gives us insight into the nature of God’s creation, God’s relationship with us, and how God’s community operates.

It reminds us that there is no place for our kind of superiority in God’s community.

The opposite is also true. It reminds us there is no place in God’s community for thinking of ourselves as inferior. What worries me as much as anything these days are those who feel they don’t deserve to sit at God’s banquet. They know they are invited but don’t accept the invitation because they are certain they are unworthy. I wonder how many people are reluctant to come to a church like this one because of feelings of unworthiness?

During my 45 years of ministry, I have met many people who think of themselves as having little or no value. I know that for those who suffer this way, the welcoming banquet of God can seem like a far-off dream.

Depression is an illness that can produce such despair and hopelessness that sufferers feel cut off not only from family and friends but also from God. Depression can cause a person to believe that God is a long way off, if God exists at all. Those contending with depression, whether in response to a life event or as a clinical illness, face such hopelessness that an invitation to God’s banquet seems impossible to accept.

One of the things all of us know as we face the difficulties and problems of living is that some terrible things can happen to us on life’s journey. No one escapes the difficulties of the human experience.

Read the Psalms in the Hebrew scriptures. Many of them describe the despair and loneliness of the human condition. One of the most revealing is the 139th Psalm in which the writer admits that no matter how depressed or how much despair is a part of his life, ultimately he cannot escape God. He writes: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, (in hell), you are there.”

Listen to the first part of the 22nd Psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

However, in the Hebrew scriptures, this lament is followed by the faith and hope of the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

The story today from Luke's gospel tells us that those who have been wounded by the difficulties of life are still welcome at God's table. There is a chair at the banquet table waiting for those who have had the chair ripped out from under them because of depression, illness, or other kinds of difficulties in life.

God's love as expressed in Jesus is not only for the healthy and those who can claim a clean bill of mental and physical health and social acceptability. There are seats for the poor, the blind, the depressed, and the lonely at the head table.

Every time I read stories like this one from the Gospel of Luke, I am reminded again that the love of God in the midst of our human experience is a feast, a banquet, or a party. It's not a doctor's office, a politician's podium, or even a church service. God's community is like a big party where not only the socially acceptable and the well-behaved are invited, but a party where those who aren't normally invited to the parties we plan are given the best seats.

You are invited even though you might not consider yourself acceptable. You are invited, no matter what you have accomplished or what you have not accomplished in life.

Remember this, however, if you accept the invitation to be at God's table, you will also see some people you did not expect to be there, and you might even see them at the head table. Guess who's coming to dinner! Amen.