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 with Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Sidney Poitier and Katharine Houghton playing the main characters.

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. In the story, 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 down to putting their 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. Therefore, we are of equal value as God's creatures, brothers and sisters in the deepest sense because God created each one of us and has 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 exactly the same abilities and talents.

To the contrary, we Christians believe that God has created us with a beautiful diversity. Some of us are of lighter color, others of darker color. Some are short, others are tall. Some are good athletes, others are talented in other ways. Some have a high I.Q. others a lower I.Q. Some are rich, others are poor and many are in the middle. Yet, according to our faith, we are equal in value as far

as God is concerned. We are all invited to God's banquet table.

But in practice that's not the case. Within the Christian community throughout its history, there has been and continues to be considerable controversy and debate as to 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 that old 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 the 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 teachings. 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 they were watching him closely? What were they looking for? Did he have unacceptable table manners? Did they want to catch him exhibiting some inappropriate behavior? Would he violate one of the religious laws?

What they weren't aware of was that he was also watching their behavior closely because Luke reports that he noticed that many of the guests quickly chose the places of honor, those seats nearest to the host and hostess, the head table. These particular guests simply assumed since there were no place cards at the seats that the places of honor were for them. They probably took a quick glance around the room and were convinced that no one present was more deserving than they. So without a trace of modesty, they took their places and let the rest of the people invited scramble for other seats.

The seating of guests at a dinner party can be a

problem especially when many of the people invited believe they are celebrities and more deserving of honor than others. One host at a dinner party recently solved this problem by putting all the names of the guests in a box and then let each one draw out a table number and seating themselves accordingly. Some of those invited didn't care very much for that method. They found themselves seated at a table with people they thought were below their social standing.

What did Jesus do when he noticed the guests vying for the places of honor? He told them a story. He said, "When you're invited to a dinner party, don't automatically sit down at the seat of

highest honor. It might happen that a more distinguished guest than you has been invited, someone you don't even know or someone you have always thought of as being less important than you. Then your host or hostess might be forced to say to you in front of everyone else, 'I'm sorry, but you are going to have to give up your seat for this guest.' And with considerable embarrassment you will have to sit in the lowest place. "No," said Jesus. "It is better when you are invited to go and take a seat in an inconspicuous place so that when your host or hostess arranges the seating, you might be the one who is pleasantly surprised. She might say to you, 'Come now my friend, I have a much better seat for you.'"

Then he added the punch line, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Following that he had some advice for the one who had invited him and the others. "When you give a party, do not only invite your friends and your 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 for the feast of God, God's banquet. When you are invited to eat at God's table, there you will

find a wide circle of diversity and inclusion. You will meet and eat with people you least expected. Guess who's coming to dinner!

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

These actions and stories disclose spiritual truths which are 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.

This story speaks to us on two levels. First, in our human day to day relationships, there is a lot of practical and helpful advice. Jesus pokes fun at us for trying to think we deserve automatically the most honored spot.

Perhaps some of you have been embarrassed at one time or another in this matter of 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.

One of life's most puzzling questions continues to be–what is it in our human nature that causes us to want to exalt ourselves, especially when we do so by trying to put others down, or by surrounding ourselves with products which we believe will let others know how important we are? Ask yourself: why do you want to see yourself and have others see you as being superior to someone else? What do you gain from that? Is it of lasting value?

In his actions and teachings, Jesus reversed our usually accepted 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

humble being exalted and the exalted humbled.

At the same time that we are always comparing ourselves with others and in the midst of our increasing social stratification with its passion for wealth and prestige, note the contrast of the teachings of Jesus–"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 completely indifferent to any person's economic or social or political position. He treated rich and poor alike. He attached no importance to social registers or to

political power. He was most often criticized for eating with sinners, with outcasts and other people considered by most to be undesirable. In eating with them he was expressing 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 or celebrity worship. This story gives us an insight into the nature of God's creation and God's relationship to us and the way in which God's community operates.

It reminds us that there is no place for our kind of

false pride in our status, for thinking of ourselves as being superior 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 being inferior. What worries me as much as anything in these days are those among us who feel that they don't deserve to be seated at God's banquet. They know they are invited but do not 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 their feelings of unworthiness?

During my 45 years of ministry, I have been made

very aware of the many people who are depressed, who think of themselves as having little or no value. I know that for those who suffer in this way, the welcoming banquet of God can seem like a far off dream.

Depression is an illness which can produce such despair and hopelessness so that the sufferer feels 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 who must handle depression, whether it be a response to a difficult life occurrence, or a clinical illness, are contending with such hopeless despair and sadness, that any invitation to God's

banquet is likely to be turned down.

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 most revealing is the 139th Psalm in the 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

God holds out the chair at the table especially for those who have been wounded by the difficulties of life. 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

metaphor most frequently used for the astounding love of God in the midst of our human experience is a feast, banquet or party. It's not a doctor's office or 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.