

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?!

Mark 7: 24-37

September 5, 2021

Perhaps your family has had a “guess who’s coming to dinner” encounter similar either to the first (classic) movie of that name, with Sidney Poitier, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn; or similar to the 2005 remix with Ashton Kutcher, Zoe Saldana and Bernie Mac? Where someone brings home a person very different from the family of origin, to become part of the family.

Growing up, I thought I might have one of those encounters with my family, and actually had a few, before the final encounter, when I brought my (now) husband home. I brought home close friends from Germany, from Africa, my LGBTQ friends...but it was this blond, blue-eyed white boy from Oklahoma who captured my heart and soul. Such a surprise to me! By outward signs someone very like me, but on so many levels he was very different, and not what I expected to find for my true love: he was, well, white, and blond and blue-eyed and from Oklahoma! He was a veteran of the Army and rode a motorcycle! So different from what I had imagined, and yet, on so many levels our hearts were aligned. He was a lifelong United Methodist, and was the co-director of the local homeless shelter (where we met). He loved children and camping and pets and reading and gardens. He was vegetarian, as I had been for a while. I finally had to admit that the pros outweighed the cons, and my head had to accede to my heart. Who knew that I would have such a struggle with myself over who is coming over to dinner?!?! Funny how our prejudices and assumptions can stand in the way of making deeper connections! Yet in this case, thank goodness, we were able to overcome my preconceptions and work our way into a marriage that has blessed my life and my ministry in ways I would never have dreamed of, and has broadened my understanding and experience of God’s love, healing and grace in profound ways.

When we have difference thrust upon us, in a surprise encounter that is not one we have anticipated or prepared for, it can take a while to find the level of comfort that allows for a relaxed, civil conversation. When you are the one choosing to seek out an encounter with someone different, you are more prepared, and more comfortable and ready to have a civil conversation.

I think this explains in part the difference between these two encounters Jesus had with foreign women that we looked at last week and this week. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus was more prepared and initiated the conversation. With the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus was surprised and was trying to avoid any encounters with the public. In fact, Jesus was fatigued and stressed out from hostile conversations with the Jewish authorities over the past week or so, over Jesus' definition of what is clean and unclean. Jesus had traveled to Tyre in Gentile territory to get away for a while. He needed rest, and instead, was hunted down and "accosted" by this foreign woman asking him to heal her daughter of a demon.

At this point, Jesus is not even sure how he's going to turn around God's mission to the Jews, but he knows he doesn't have any energy left over to carry out a Gentile mission as well. Now, according to Jewish tradition and slang, Gentiles were often called dogs (as in wild dogs). According to Greek slang of the day, Greeks called women dogs - back then even! So then on two counts, this woman rates as a dog according to the crowds in Jesus' day. No wonder then, with his fatigue and the cultural bias of his day, Jesus resorts to insult to try and shut her down. But Jesus does soften the insult to "pet dog" instead of wild dog or female breeding dog— but still it's an insulting rejection, even in those terms. The woman must be desperate – she's probably tried everything else to heal her daughter, and this "foreigner" Jesus is the only hope she has left. So she shrugs off the insult, because her daughter's health is more important, telling Jesus that even dogs can have crumbs. Jesus acknowledges the woman's logic, and goes on to bridge the barriers of race, culture, and gender, to channel God's healing to her daughter.

Of course God's love is bigger, and broader than all of ours! We are so often limited by our learned prejudice and our culture's barriers. But God's love is available for everyone; and even if the Jews are first; they are then to be the light to the nations, as the prophets say. Like Jesus shares with the Samaritan woman, soon everyone will worship God in spirit, from anywhere and everywhere. God is bigger than any temple or place, and not limited to communicating only with a specific gender, race or age. Everyone is welcome to dinner with God, and no one will be relegated to just the crumbs!

After healing the Syrophenician woman's daughter, Jesus goes on to heal another Gentile he met on his way through Sidon, back to Galilee; a deaf man brought to him by friends. We read how carefully and respectfully Jesus heals the man, in private. Quite the contrast to his argument with the woman in Tyre! Perhaps that conflict shaped his willingness to be more open to Gentiles?

So, guess who's coming to dinner?! Jesus in these two breaches of custom, both the woman and man, has now put the whole world at God's table. As the early church recalls these stories, they see that plainly, their mission cannot be limited to just the Jews either; certainly Paul and other disciples are right to reach out to Gentiles as well. What is clean and what is unclean is being revised by Jesus' ministry on several fronts – foods to eat, dishes, handwashing, foot washing, family traditions and foreigners are all reviewed in light of God's love and mercy, and the call to love one another in word and in deed. Love is the new arc of justice in God's kingdom, and this love is to be lived out, not just spoken.

So as we look at whom we will welcome to our dinner tables – at home or at church, for whom are we setting the table? Only those who look like us? Only those in our economic class? Only those who can invite us back? Jesus talks about all these things in other stories – in fact, he is very clear that we should invite folks unlike us, who cannot return the favor. These are the guests God wants us to invite, because they will bless us with a fuller experience of God's love, as we share bread and table together. This has amazing implications for our family life – how broadly can we define family?! Friends from every continent, across the spectrum of gender and orientation, from various cultures – all are God's beloved, and can teach us about God's beauty and grace and mercy. And this teaching has marvelous implications for our ministry and mission work as a church, too. The more widely we welcome and share food with ALL of God's people, the more of God's beauty and creativity we can celebrate in our worship and outreach as well. Do we dare to answer the call from God and Jesus: to love others, let go of our resentments, forgive others and care for the needy? Or will we hand it off to someone else, as done in our skit for today?!

Our children and even we ourselves, are experiencing more diversity at school, in our workplaces, in our communities. We are recognizing that the more we are

different on the outside, the more our inner workings are the same. Love is love and our differences are enriching! And while our diversity may cause us to express things differently, the underlying themes will be very similar...we all know pain and suffering, and yearn for healing and peace. We all belong to God, and yearn to belong to each other.

So how will we lengthen and broaden our reach from UMCG, to include persons very different from us? We can do this very easily now in cyber space! Our mission team is connecting online with UM mission work in Kenya and Bolivia, as well as the Caribbean. With UMCOR, we can help to seat refugees from Afghanistan at table: and, families in Haiti, in Louisiana, and out west, can all sit at table and be fed after disasters. Our help is needed at Hesus House again, to serve our guests at table there. Through our Northern Illinois Conference connections, we hope to support the community outreach of some of our Chicago churches. Can we also help to welcome working class folks to Geneva, and speak up for housing that is accessible to all income levels? Our mayor of Geneva pointed out at a recent Chamber meeting, that we should be able to house those who work for us, within our community. What an opportunity that would create, to share God's love around our dinner tables together!

Who is coming to dinner at your house this week? Will it be someone who can teach you more about the length and breadth and height and depth of God's love, in all its creative diversity of expression? I hope so! Remember to look and listen deeply, and you can be amazed by the grace God offers to you, through them! Thanks be to Christ, God is still and always, seeking to bless us through others, and others through us. Let us celebrate this now, at the Lord's table, as we share in Holy Communion together.

Amen...and amen!

Rev. Lisa Telomen, UMC of Geneva