



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
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CROSSFLIX SERIES – “GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER”

August 14, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Luke 14: 1, 7-11

Today is my last sermon in this summer’s Crossflix series. Dave will be preaching for the next few Sundays as we attend family gatherings the next two weekends, and then over Labor Day weekend I’ll be taking Josh back to Boston. He’s up in the balcony -- be sure to give him a hug and wish him well for his sophomore year.

One of the best parts about him being home: the ability to share a meal together, whether I’ve cooked or we’ve gone to eat at a place that he can’t find in Boston. Because there’s just something about breaking bread together that binds us to one another; that reinforces our relationships as family.

In this morning’s Crossflix film, we never quite see the characters share a meal together, but we know that is always their intent, and the depth of their relationships is apparent. How many of you have seen this classic film? I confess I hadn’t until just last week – and I loved it. Young Joanna and a slightly older widower, the renowned Dr. John Wade Prentice, meet in Hawaii, have a whirlwind romance, and decide to get married. But first, they stop in San Francisco to have dinner with her parents. In this first clip, we see Joanna describing her finance to her mother Christina, when he walks in. A word of warning: the language of this film was appropriate for 1967, so please bear that in mind when one particular word is uttered in context.

Our Gospel reading this morning also revolves around sharing a meal. If you think about it, many of Jesus’ stories center on food, and cooking, and eating together. In this one, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man, a Pharisee, who has put together an elegant feast. Everyone who attends wants the best seat in the house, to be deemed the most important invitee; to be considered the most excellent guest ever. In other words, the guests believe it’s more important to be “seen” by others as important to the host rather than to simply enjoy being together, or the dinner itself.

Jesus often uses food as a metaphor for power, the sort of power that can either build up or destroy a community.¹ Mark Trotter once told his congregation at First UMC San Diego that this particular parable of Jesus is one that gives us a clue about not just this life, but the life to come.

Jesus' statement, "When you are invited to a marriage feast," is the clue, because the marriage feast was one of the metaphors for the Kingdom of God... When the Kingdom comes it will be like a great banquet, a marriage feast.

Jesus says, don't count on what you count on now, counting then. Don't count on what you think is important now, being important then. All this jockeying for position. All this self-aggrandizement. All this wanting to be in the right place. All this wanting to be number one, being on top. None of that is going to count.

... at that banquet, at that time, the appropriate place for all of us is at the foot of the table. At that banquet, in that Kingdom, the appropriate stance for everybody is humility.²

Christina and Matt, Joanna's parents, were faced with both Dr. Prentice and their need to live with humility. They were wealthy, educated, liberal white folks who used their newspaper to promote their values. And when they came face to face with Dr. Prentice, the only possible objection they could have with this wealthy, famous, educated and worldly physician was that he was an African –American. I read one movie review that stated that the character of Dr. Prentice was written so that his race was the ONLY possible objection that Joanna's family could raise. And the conflict that would ensue if they did so, given their openly progressive, civil-rights oriented stance in the San Francisco community.

Christina and Matt were clearly struggling to have their actions catch up with their intellectual beliefs, and that was apparent in the film. But what was of most interest to me was seeing just who served as the voice of prophetic reason.

So what exactly are the beautiful thoughts that Jesus gives to us? Here are a few.

First, that we are to welcome everyone into our community, no matter what, with our actions as well as our words. The community of Jesus [is to reflect] mutual love and compassion, not only for one another, but for the outcast, those who are vulnerable, the sick and the poor.³

Our role, as followers of Christ, is to show hospitality. We're to welcome all, and we're to especially go out of our way to welcome those who are deemed unsavory and undesirable.⁴

Second, we must not confuse a powerful social location with an authentic personal identity.⁵ Think about high school, where you ate lunch was a marker of your popularity, right? It's true for adults too – when we go to a restaurant we want to make sure we get the best table, or be seated where we will be seen.

In the words of the Gospel, we think that where we sit around the table makes us more or less important to one another, and to God. But Jesus tells us, the church, that we are to not care a bit about who sits where around the table, because our identity doesn't come from our status. Our identity, our worth comes solely from the fact we are God's beloved children, made in God's image. And what is pleasing to God is when we refuse to play the world's game of "who's got the best seat at the table" but instead offer the seat we have to someone else. That's how we lead, with humility; that's how we transform lives so that all are welcome around the table of Jesus Christ.

Christina was the first to realize that she needed to lead with humility, and truly welcome John with authentic hospitality. And with that decision, there was no one who would harm her family – or family to be.

Now that wasn't a great example of reconciliation, I know. But the character of Hilary represents the person who cares more about where she is seated at the table than practicing hospitality. It's a fine line we are called to walk. As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to be servants to others, not judges of others. That's tough. It's hard not to be judgmental of those with whom we have disagreements about theology or the practice of our faith. Here's the difference: when we live as servants, as followers of Christ, we don't allow those disagreements, those concerns of the world to control us. We concentrate instead on who God has called us to be; we focus on how best we can love God and one another, on those actions that bring forth wholeness and healing and the kingdom of God on earth.

Ultimately we either choose the way of the world, or the way of God. And when we put the two up side by side one, our choice becomes clear, as Matt finally realized in his closing monologue:

What a powerful speech. Amen? Forty five years later I wonder if this film was being remade today, if Dr. John Prentice could instead be Dr. Jane Prentice, same everything else.

It seems to me there are learnings from this film and from this Gospel lesson, that can inform us as we work to bring forth marriage equality for all God's children.

First, that the church – and we as Christians – must reclaim our place as the moral center and leader of the discussion. Think about it. It was the Catholic priest who spoke not just truth to power – but spoke common sense – when he blessed the pending marriage of Dr. Prentice and Joanna. What was the bottom line for him? Love, pure, plain and simple. That must be a clarion call for us as well. All that matters –all that must matter – is love, no matter whose, no matter what.

Second, we must show hospitality to those who will never ever reciprocate. Our Gospel lesson warns us that we are to welcome not just those who will respond in kind, inviting us to their homes, but to welcome those who can or will never respond with the same sort of hospitality.

While most of us will choose to interpret that as we should welcome the homeless, the stranger, the mentally ill among us – I see it as that and more. We are called to extend hospitality to those who disagree with us on marriage equality; not only those who vandalized our banner earlier this year, but also those in our denomination, in our civic communities, in our families. It won't be easy; authentic hospitality rarely is. But the only way that change will come, that marriage equality for all God's children can be realized, is if we do the hard work of loving those who disagree with us. Just as Matt finally realized, either we're in all the way or we're not in at all.

Finally, only when we as the church reclaim the moral center of the discussion and show hospitality to those who disagree with us can we be an effective witness to those who have left the church – or more precisely, those whom the church left behind – because of who they love, or who someone they know loves. We know from our demographic work on our mission field that there are thousands of "mildly churched" folks here in our community – people who grew

up in a church but stopped going in large part due to the lack of inclusion and hospitality especially towards LGBT folks.

God has called us, brothers and sisters, God has put us in this place, at this time, to demonstrate authentic hospitality in our community; to set the dinner table not just for ourselves but for those guests we are waiting for – those we don't know but who desperately want to feel God's powerful love and hear the good news: we are all created in God's good image and God's love knows no bounds. Amen? And that in this place, our actions match our beliefs: we believe in following Jesus Christ not just with our head and our hearts, but with our hands and our feet.

And God will bless our efforts, and multiply them. Let me give you one closing thought. We use social media to share what God is doing in this place, and I don't know if it was through our FB page or the Twitter machine or our website or whatnot, a woman named Bonnie Jacobs in New Jersey found us. She's a graphic artist who has been looking for the inclusive love of God in Jesus Christ, manifest in a community for years. Based on our mission statement, the info on ministries we send out, and some of the sermons she has heard, has created this beautiful glass mosaic for us. Bonnie is part of our extended fellowship, and will be with us on Labor Day weekend to present it in worship. It really reflects who we are: a diverse congregation with hands outstretched to God in service, in authentic hospitality, as family that breaks bread together and welcomes all God's children to the banquet feast.

Amen.

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¹ Daniel Clenedin, *A Spirituality of Food: The All-Important Metaphor for Power*," essay on www.journeywithjesus.net, 23 August 2010, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20100823JJ.shtml>

² Mark Trotter, *Moving On Up*, from *Collected Sermons*, 2007, www.christianglobe.com

³ Rick Marshall, reflecting on preaching Proper 17, August 29, 2010, <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearc/2010-08-29/proper-17>

⁴ From a blog posting by Rick Morley, *a garden path*, <http://rmcmorley.typepad.com/a-garden-path/2010/08/proper-17c-guess-whos-coming-to-dinner.html>

⁵ Clenedin.