

“LET’S GO TO THE MOVIES!
III: ‘GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER?’”
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I Corinthians 13

Luke 6:37-38

As you all know, this weekend marks the fiftieth anniversary of the landing on the moon by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. Many of us remember being glued to our TVs watching it – it was such an amazing feat and the fulfillment of a promise made by a young, idealistic President before his tragic death at the hands of an assassin.

The moon landing happened at the end of quite a tumultuous decade in our country’s history. Coincidentally (or perhaps not) I found myself in two different conversations this week reflecting back on the 60’s. One was in a dinner group when we were talking about the air-raid drills we practiced in our elementary schools in the early 60’s. And the other was when I met with an old classmate as we planned her mother’s funeral. We got to reminiscing and remembered especially the year we were in 8th grade at Elkton Junior High and both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated.

Our country struggled with a lot in that decade, and one of the things we struggled with was race (a struggle that sadly, still continues today). But back then society was just beginning to talk about race and really struggled with it.

Which brings me to today’s movie, called “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” It was filmed in 1967, starred Sidney Poitier, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy among others, and it was about race. In case you haven’t seen it (and if you haven’t, I recommend you do – it’s a great movie), here’s the basic plot.

Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn are a wealthy couple living in San Francisco. He is a newspaper publisher, and they consider themselves progressive in their thinking. They have a daughter named Hilary, whom they absolutely adore, and who has been away awhile.

Well, one day Hilary shows up and she’s all excited because she’s fallen in love – deeply in love – so deeply that she is going to marry this man, and she’s brought him home to meet her parents. She tells her mother all about this while they’re alone – how she had met him only 10 days earlier, that he is a doctor, that he had been married and had a son, but both of them were killed in a tragic

accident. She tells her what a wonderful man he is, and how much she loves him, and how she knows that her mother and father will love him as well – and it's all a bit astounding to her mother, coming out of the blue as it did.

She turns around to tell her daughter exactly that when this man, portrayed by Sidney Poitier, walks into the room, and in the blink of an eye, literally, Joanna (the mother) sees that he is black and is astounded. Bear in mind, friends, that this was in the 1960's and interracial relationships were pretty uncommon, and people really struggled with the concept.

As a matter of fact, I remember the very first interracial couple that I knew of. She was a year ahead of me in school, and I'll never forget that when her best friend found out about the relationship, she turned away and never turned back. It was incredibly sad, but that's how deep feelings ran about it back then.

Now, back to the movie. The whole rest of the movie is about how everyone deals with the situation. The mothers of both Dr. Prentis and Hilary, though concerned for their children, were, while not thrilled with it, okay with their relationship.

Their fathers were another story. They were not in favor of it at all. All they could see was trouble ahead. And the movie is a series of conversations between them all, with sometimes raised voices and anger, as they tried to sort everything out. It was a very painful day for all of them, with each person doing a lot of wrestling with their thoughts and their ability to change and accept a new reality.

How did it end? Well, in the end, love won out. Not just the love between Hilary and John, but the love of all the parents who laid down defensiveness and their need to have their way in favor of their children whom they all loved so dearly.

So the clip you're about to see is near the very end of the movie, after all of these conversations and confrontations have taken place. All of the characters are in the room, and Spencer Tracy, who by the way had been told by her daughter's fiancée that if he didn't agree the marriage could happen, it wouldn't, speaks to all of them about the decision he's made. So take a look at it now.

Film Clip from "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?"

You know, one of the hardest things to do in life is to deal with issues that put up walls between us and others. Back in that day and time, like I said, the big wall was racism. Before that, there were others. Today, there are others still. Only now, it seems like the walls are higher and thicker, and proponents stand their ground with more intensity and anger. Certainly the growth of media from the 60's until now – all kinds of media – television, radio, print and of course, social media –

provide platforms for everybody to speak their mind freely and too often, angrily and hurtfully.

Too often, we are so certain of our standing on a certain issue that we defend it at all costs, instead of being open to even listening to the other side. We close our minds, and thus close our hearts as well.

And too often as well, we try to pick apart the opposition, put them down, or question their integrity, and sometimes, even their intelligence.

Friends, that's not the kind of life, that's not a way of acting, that Jesus espouses. So many times Jesus talks about how we're wont to point out the splinter in someone else's eye, while ignoring the log in our own. He talks about letting love guide our actions. He talks about respecting others. He talks about patience, forgiveness, understanding, compromising.

And he not only talked about it, he lived that kind of life. He talked directly to people, and listened to them, and even if he didn't agree with them, Jesus treated them with dignity and respect – and he asks that of us as well.

I think perhaps one of the reasons that the special session of General Conference upset me so much is that much of the time that kind of behavior was not displayed. There was a lot of ugliness, and accusations, and refusal to listen or compromise, even a little. It was not Godly behavior, and the world was watching and judging us.

I think that, for the most part, in our little corner of God's kingdom, we did better than that. In our listening sessions, we did listen to each other. People were able to share their thoughts without being shut down, and even if we didn't agree, we still were brothers and sisters in Christ side by side - and still are.

We know it's not easy. It still isn't easy dealing with issues that divide us. But can we not choose the way of love, the way Paul describes in that beautiful passage from I Corinthians, as the way we will live? Sometimes it will be hard, for sure, but God will surely give us what we need to do it.

Let me tell you how I know that. I am in a clergy support group that has been meeting for a number of years. It's a group for Women Senior Pastors of Large Membership Churches. There's only a small number of women in that category in our conference, and out of them, there are four of us who meet monthly. We've become very close over the years, and are there for each other.

But let me tell you what happened last year. As everything was gearing up for the special session of General Conference, groups on either side of the issue –

which was, of course, ordaining practicing homosexuals, and allowing same gender marriage ceremonies to happen in our churches – well, the groups on either side of the issue were, shall we say, arming themselves for the battle. The progressives, who are for full inclusion, had their leadership team, and the conservatives, who wanted things to stay as they were, had their leadership team.

And those leaders made presentations at our Annual Conference session. As you can imagine, it was intense. Both sides laid down their arguments and you could tell there was animosity for the other side, and definitely, no room for compromise.

Well, here's the thing. The woman who spoke for the progressives, was one of the members of this four person clergy support group, and, the woman who spoke for the conservatives, was another member of our group. Now, imagine how that was for our lunches. Suddenly, we four women, who dearly care for each other and have supported each other, were approaching those lunches with fear and trembling. It was so sad. At first, it was like we ignored the elephant in the room, we talked about everything but that, and left as stressed as we came.

After the special session of General Conference, it was really painful. Each of the two women actually talked to me and asked if I thought we should go ahead with our next lunch, and I said, "Absolutely! Because if we don't meet now, we'll never meet again. We love each other, and we need to do this."

And so we did. Little by little, we started talking about it. We did a whole lot of listening, and no, probably, those positions will never change, but neither will our care and respect for each other, because we are more than just where we stand on an issue, we are children of God, sisters in Christ, and we're trying to live as Paul said, "a better way – the way of love."

Everyday, you and I have the possibility of coming up against someone who believes differently than we do, or lives differently than we do, and we have a decision to make. Will we treat them as the enemy, and not engage with them, or will we reach across that wall and be willing to listen and maybe learn? No matter where you stand on any issue in life, it never, ever hurts to listen to someone else. Indeed, it will help both them and you.

Friends, my prayer is that, like those families in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" when confronted with a tough issue, we will open our hearts and minds, and act with love and grace. And most of all, that we will let the Spirit of the Living God guide us to wherever God wants us to go. May it be so.

Amen.