Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?: Radical Grace at the Table
A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church
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Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner is a 1967 film about a young woman, Joanna Drayton, who goes home to San Francisco to introduce her family to her fiancé, John Prentice. Joanna is so excited to tell her mother all about this young man who has stolen her heart and all the things she loves about him, but when John walks into the room behind her, Joanna’s mother is shocked to discover that John Prentice is black. Likewise, John’s parents come into town for the dinner as well, and they are just as shocked upon arriving at the airport to discover that the young woman who has stolen their son’s heart is white. By the time they all get to the dinner party, the rest of the movie seems to be a game of musical chairs as different family members and friends share their reactions to the couple’s news.

While this might not be such a big deal today, in 1967, for a movie to portray interracial marriage in a positive way was quite bold. Historically, interracial marriage had been illegal in most states, and it was still illegal in 17 states until the same year the movie was released. In fact, it was just two weeks after Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner finished filming that the Supreme Court ruled in Loving vs. Virginia to strike down all state laws banning interracial marriage. But just because marriage became legal doesn’t mean it was even close to being accepted, especially in the south. In fact, several of the actors and the movie’s director actually received death threats when the movie hit theaters later that year.

At the end of the movie, Joanna’s father begins to outline for her and John all the challenges he believes that they are up against. He says, “Anybody could make a case – and a good case – against your getting married. The arguments are so obvious that nobody even has to make them...But no matter what kind of case someone could make against your getting married, there would be only one thing worse, and that would be if, knowing what you two are, knowing what you two have, and knowing what you two feel, you didn’t get married.” Others around the room are crying or nodding in agreement.

Then, in the final spoken word of the film, Mr. Drayton says, “Now, who’s ready for dinner, because I’m starving!” And after all of the tensions that we’ve experienced between them throughout the movie, Joanna, John, and their families gather around the table together for dinner as the camera pans out and the credits begin to roll.

It’s interesting to me that of all the ways that they could have written this movie, the writers chose to center it around a dinner table. Perhaps it’s because they knew that there is something so significant - so healing – so human - and something so sacred – about the table.

Our tables say a lot about us, don’t they? I’m sure every middle and high school student here could walk us through the different tables in their school cafeteria and which groups of people
sit where. And this isn’t just unique to our children and youth; it happens at every age and stage of life. I can still walk you through my college cafeteria and tell you where the freshman women sat, where the Sigma Kappas or the Kappa Deltas sat, where the athletes sat, and so on. Looking back, it makes me wonder how many people probably opted not to eat in the cafeteria if they didn’t belong to a particular group.

And years after they have finished school, even our friends who are in retirement homes can walk us through their dining halls, too, and tell us exactly who sits where and why. At breakfast, lunch, and dinner – everyone has a particular spot, and you dare not change it up.

There’s a Middle Eastern proverb that Jesus likely would have known that said, “I saw them eating, and I knew who they were.” And the proverb still rings true today, over 2000 years later. Our tables say something about us, don’t they? What do your tables have to say about you? What do they communicate about what you value? Or who you value?

What did Jesus’ tables meals have to say about him? That’s what we’re going to spend the month of November asking ourselves in our new worship series called Table Talk.

Interestingly enough, scholars have pointed out that throughout Luke’s gospel, it seems like Jesus is almost always going to a meal, at a meal, or leaving a meal. But the fact that Jesus is eating a lot isn’t as significant to me as the people with whom he is eating. Over and over again, Luke tells us that Jesus eats with “sinners and tax collectors,” which continually upsets the Pharisees. Bible scholar Robert Karris says that, “In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus [ultimately] got himself killed because of the way he ate.”¹ Fred Craddock says it this way, “In Luke’s gospel, nothing [is] more serious than a dining table.”²

Which brings up a good point about the context of the meal in the biblical text. In our culture, we don’t always treat meals as that significant except maybe at Thanksgiving or another holiday or special event. But people weren’t running to grab fast food in Jesus’ time or eating in their car between appointments. In Jesus’ culture, to invite a person to a meal was an incredible honor. It wasn’t simply a sharing of food, it was a sharing of one’s life. Which is why anytime Jesus is at the table, we ought to pay attention to what’s about to happen next.

In today’s text in Luke 5, verse 27, Jesus sees a man named Levi sitting at his tax booth and says to him, “Follow me.” So Levi gets up, leaves everything, and follows Jesus. Levi goes home and gives a great banquet for Jesus along with a large crowd of tax collectors and others who are sitting at the table with them. Meanwhile, the scribes and Pharisees seem to be hovering close by and complain to the disciples, saying, “Why do you all eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

It’s also important for us to understand the way that “sinners and tax collectors” were viewed in this culture. For the Pharisees to call Jesus’ dinner guests “sinners” was not simply a personal

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² Fred Craddock, Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
opinion about them or their lifestyle. This was a term that was used for those who had broken Mosaic law – and everyone in the community knew about it. Some people translate this text to say that they were “public sinners.”

Tax collectors, for instance, abused the system by requiring people to give an extra tax above the amount that was to be sent to the government. They added their own tax on top so that they could be sure to receive a piece of the pie, too.

Their sin was so public that everyone knew about it, and it excluded them from the synagogue. And given that the synagogue had such a central place in society, to be excluded from the synagogue was to be excluded from the entire community. Jesus was eating with and sharing life with people who simply weren’t welcome at any other table in town.

But, before we critique the Pharisees and scribes too harshly, we ought to do some careful internal investigation and ask ourselves, would you and I have said or done any differently?

For instance, think about a person who has taken advantage of you. Or perhaps they have taken advantage of other people. Maybe they create systems that oppress other people. Maybe they cheat or don’t treat other people fairly. You and I don’t tend to think highly of people lie this – and that’s who tax collectors were.

Or, consider the most “public sinner” you know. The person whose actions seem so counter to the way of God. Just when you think they can’t say or do something worse – they do the unimaginable. Just about everything they do just rubs up against you. Completely gets under your skin, not only because what they do is offensive to you, but ultimately, it’s offensive to your faith.

Now imagine Jesus being surrounded by this person and enjoying a meal with them and their friends. You and I might think, what in the world is he thinking that he would sit down with someone like them? Why wouldn’t Jesus want to sit down with someone like me?

In his book Meals with Jesus, Tim Chester says, “Can you see how [the Pharisees’] position [actually] makes good sense? Unless...Unless God is doing something new – so new that it doesn’t fit any of the old categories. Unless God is doing something so gracious that it takes us completely by surprise.”

You see, when you get down to it, that’s what’s so radical – so unbelievable – so completely counter-cultural about Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors – it’s grace. Grace that is downright offensive. Grace that is completely undeserved. Grace that just doesn’t make any sense. Grace that simply isn’t fair. But that’s precisely what grace is, isn’t it?

If it were based on being worthy or deserving – it wouldn’t be grace. If it were based on logic and reasoning – it wouldn’t be grace then, either. If it were based on what seems right and fair – no, that’s not grace at all.
When the Pharisees asked why he ate with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus answered with these words, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

When I hear those words, I suddenly realize that there’s a big problem with the way in which I have most often viewed this text, and that is this: The reality is that when I imagine this story, I don’t see myself sitting at the table with Jesus. I’m often the voice of critique in the background. But in order to see myself sitting at the table, I first must see myself as sinner in need of grace.

Sometimes, I think we’re so focused on inviting other people to the table that we forget that it’s only by God’s grace that a chair has been offered to each of us, too. If there’s anything Jesus’ table with tax collectors and sinners teaches us – it’s a radical message of grace upon grace upon grace. Overwhelming grace for sinners like me, and sinners like you.

I absolutely love how Frederick Buechner describes grace. He says,

“After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody's much interested anymore. Not so with grace, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like gracious and graceful still have some of the bloom left.

Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. (I would add that an extra hour of sleep last night was certainly grace for me). Most tears are grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody?

A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do...There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.”

Friends, may we, too, be overwhelmed by the grace of Jesus, who pulled up a chair for sinners and tax collectors and made room for them at the table. But may we first be overwhelmed by the grace of Jesus, who pulls up a chair for each of us. The seat is ours only if we will reach out and take it. Maybe being able to take a seat is grace, too.

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3 Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking
After all, the proverb said, “I saw them eating, and I knew who they were.” May we be known as people who sit at Jesus’ table – as sinners who have been saved by grace upon grace upon grace.