

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Psalm 23
Luke 7:36–50

In 1967, Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn made their ninth and final film together. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, the famous pair played Matt and Christina Drayton, a wealthy newspaper publisher and art gallery owner in San Francisco. Self-identifying as progressive thinkers, they had always proclaimed and instilled in their daughter Joanna the ideal of racial equality. Their theoretical commitment to equality, however, was shaken by Joanna's unexpected real-life crossing of racial boundaries when she returned from a vacation in Hawaii with a fiancé—a *black* fiancé, played by the wonderful Sidney Poitier. The rest of the movie is about Matt and Christina's struggle to determine if their cherished ideals can actually take on flesh and allow them to cross boundaries, not just in terms of dinner guests but in the reshaping of their family circle.

In a very real sense, the entire Gospel of Luke asks the same question as that old movie—"guess who's coming to dinner?"—and the answers it gives are no less shocking than the ones that confronted the Draytons. In fact, this theme of hospitality is so prominent in Luke that one scholar has described the Lukan Jesus as *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend*, particularly in his relationship to the religious establishment of his day.¹ And the number one criticism leveled against Jesus by these religious folk in Luke is that "he eats with tax collectors and sinners" (5:30; 7:34).

So hospitality, or table fellowship—"who eats with whom?"—is a big deal in the Gospel of Luke. "Hospitality" comes from two Greek words—*philos*, friendship-love, and *xenos*, stranger. Together, *philoxenia* (φιλοξενία), they mean "love of the stranger" or "loving the stranger as a friend." And in Luke, Jesus is both the Stranger and the Lover of the stranger; he is both the invited Guest and the Host who invites. In terms of his meal-time habits, the Lukan Jesus is consistently seen either actively crossing boundaries or validating the boundary-crossing behavior of his table companions.

¹ David Gowler

❖ ***Jesus the Lover and Host.*** Jesus, the Son of God, comes as a Host who embraces the human stranger in boundary-crossing hospitality. God takes on human flesh and human limitations to invite us into intimate fellowship with him. This is the role of God that we heard about in Psalm 23, the inviting God who prepares a table for us. In fact, the entire biblical story of salvation, the narrative of God seeking to redeem and restore humanity and creation, can be envisioned as a saga of three Meals--the Passover, the Lord's Supper, and the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. In all three, God is the wooing, inviting Host. From the very beginning, hospitality (the welcoming embrace of human strangers) is an essential element in the biblical portrait of the heart of God. In his Gospel, Luke shows Jesus living in that God-shaped, hospitable way in the interim between the era of the Passover meal and the institution of the second meal, the Lord's Supper. And in Acts, Luke gives the church a picture of how to live in Jesus-shaped hospitality between the second table (Communion) and the final table (the Marriage Feast of the Lamb). A question that should press in upon us during this month of mission emphasis is, what will it look like for us to love the stranger in a way that reflects the example of Jesus and the hospitable heart of God?

❖ ***Jesus the Stranger and Guest.*** But Jesus, the Son of God, also comes as the boundary-crossing Guest, the Stranger in our midst. He came among us as a poor child of poor parents in a poor corner of the great empire, and was forced to spend his first years of life as a refugee in a foreign land. Jesus was well acquainted with the role of stranger, which made him deeply empathetic to the strangers and outcasts who became both his hosts and his table companions during his lifetime. This is a reality that should stop us in our tracks—that the eternal Son, very God of very God, is willing to sit as our Guest at our tables, whether those tables are found in formal dining rooms or in corner nooks of local coffee shops or around an open fire in a tent city.

In Luke's Gospel, there are five meals in which Jesus plays the role of Guest. In the first and last of these, he is the guest of a tax collector, a person who existed on the fringes of polite society. For the three meals in between, Jesus is the guest of Pharisees, the representatives *par excellence* of the good, religious folk of the day. Jesus accepted hospitality from people in both groups. In each meal setting, Jesus has some pretty trenchant words to say about his mission

and the people he hangs out with. Today, we're focusing on the first of his meals with a Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50), and I want to zero in on two key questions that Jesus asks his host during that meal.

First, let's recap the story up to the point of Jesus' questions. In Luke 7:34, Jesus has just acknowledged the label that has been put on him by the Pharisees: "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Interestingly, Jesus does not challenge their assessment of his habits of table fellowship or his choice of table companions. Instead, in Luke's telling of the story, the next thing that happens is that Jesus is invited to dinner by one of those same Pharisees—and he accepts the invitation. In the midst of that dinner—which almost certainly did *not* include "tax collectors and sinners" on the guest list—a disreputable woman enters the room. Characterized by both the narrator and Jesus' host as a "sinner," this woman shocks the group with her extravagant gesture of love and gratitude to Jesus. While she is kissing and anointing Jesus' feet, we get a glimpse into the mind of Jesus' host, who says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner" (v. 39). At this point, Jesus addresses his host by name, thus personalizing the point he is about to make: "Simon, I have something to say to you" (v. 40). That "something" is a story, a little two-verse parable about a creditor and two debtors, one of whom owed nearly two years' wages and the other who owed an amount corresponding to two months' pay. The story ends this way: "When they could not pay, he canceled the debt for both of them" (v. 42a). And then Jesus asks his first question of Simon.

- Jesus asks Simon to interpret the parable, with this question: "***Which of them will love him more?***" (7:42). This question pushes Simon to acknowledge some very important things. First, it clearly pushes him to acknowledge that *both* debtors in the story were unable to pay and thus were in need of forgiveness (debt cancellation). The point was unmistakable—Jesus' host stood in as much need of grace as the "sinful" woman to whose presence he objected so strongly. Second, it urges him to recognize that the natural response of the forgiven is grateful love. When Jesus asks, "Which of them will love him more?", the answer is so obvious that Simon must—reluctantly!—respond, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt" (v. 43a). Jesus affirms Simon's interpretation: "You have judged rightly" (v. 43b). And with that affirmation he is clearly forcing Simon to consider the truth of the

accusation he and his crew have made against Jesus—he is indeed a friend and table companion of tax collectors and sinners, a category which includes *them*! **FINISH this!**

➤ ***“Do you SEE this woman?” (7:44)***

When God has crossed unthinkable boundaries to welcome us to his table, when he has offered us a lavish hospitality that completely reshapes our stories and redeems our souls, how can we respond? I want to suggest a trio of possibilities in terms of our “love of the stranger,” something we’ll call a “stoplight application.” During Lent this year, I participated in a 40-day generosity challenge called “40 Acts” (40acts.org). Each day’s challenge was arranged in a stoplight pattern, with three progressively more challenging options. **Green** meant “this is pretty simple, go for it!” **Yellow** meant, “Pause to think this over, it may be a little harder!” And **Red** meant, “This could be super-challenging, so stop and give it some serious thought!” So, in the spirit of that “stoplight application” pattern, let me offer us three concrete and specific ways to respond, three practical ways to practice Jesus-shaped hospitality.

See, name and engage the invisible, unnamed and ignored.

Who are the strangers whose lives intersect with yours on a regular or at least frequent basis, but whom you never really look at and whose names you don’t know and whose stories remain a mystery to you?
The paper delivery person or the mail carrier, the clerk at the pharmacy, the server at your favorite restaurant, the janitor in your building?
This week’s challenge: see a face, learn a name, listen to a story.

Open your table.

Take a risk—open your home and your dining room table to someone outside your circle of family and close friends.
(Or if you’re not a cook, invite this person out for coffee or a meal.)
Cross a boundary—discover the grace of God in the face of a stranger!
(And perhaps that stranger will become a friend, maybe even a sister or brother.)

Keep it real!

Identify honestly the group of “strangers” that is most likely to raise your eyebrows or your blood pressure!

Ask: How could you SERVE this group? (Make sure your answer is action-oriented, concrete, specific, measurable—you’ll know when you’ve done it!)
Be prepared to cross boundaries and to be blessed in ways you could never have imagined.

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