***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Text: Luke 22:7-23

Every Sunday we gather here to worship God, and front and center in this holy space is a table. Pretty much every church has a pulpit of some sort – some at the left, some at the right, some at the center. There is always a baptismal font somewhere, but in virtually all churches there is a table that sits at the center of the worship space. We call it the Lord’s Table or Communion Table, and it is not just a decorative piece of furniture. Whether it is set with trays and plates bearing bread and juice, or simply bears the open Bible, this table reminds us of who we are as a family of faith. Like the tables in our homes around which we gather as families to share a meal, this table holds a central place in our Covenant family life, in our Christian family life, as we remember the One who is not only our Lord and Savior, but also our brother. We are a church family who gathers at this table each week in remembrance of the risen Christ. Here we recall that table around which Jesus sat with his disciples to break bread and share a Passover cup when he spoke those words long ago:

*Take and eat; this is my body given for you.*

*Take and drink, this is the new covenant in my blood.*

*Do this in remembrance of me.*

Every Christian church has a table like this table, if not in styling then in meaning – a table central to our life and worship, a table around which we gather as brothers and sisters in Christ.

While such tables are symbolic of our unity in Christ as a family of faith, they also have been the locus of division among brothers and sisters in Christ across the centuries. I remember participating in a pulpit exchange with the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond some years ago. After reading the Gospel and preaching, I stood hand in hand with the priest at the table as the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving was offered and the Words of Institution repeated, and then as he invited the congregation forward the priest said privately to me, “You should go and sit in that chair over there while we share the Eucharist.” I wasn’t invited to the table, because I was not Roman Catholic. I could read the Gospel. I could preach the Word. I could pray. But I could not share in the bread and cup, for I was not considered one of the family, and while I knew that would be the case, I was surprised at how much it hurt to be sent away. By contrast the priest at the Catholic hospital where I did my chaplaincy work told us on our first day there, “We celebrate the Eucharist in the chapel at noon every day. I am not permitted to invite you to the table, but if you come, I will not deny you the sacrament.” What a gracious invitation that was!

As Presbyterians we can hardly claim the high moral ground on this issue. For many years “fencing the table” was a means by which elders of the church determined who was worthy to receive the sacrament, as if the church could make that determination better than God. Some of you may remember communion tokens which were granted as tickets to the table, given as an act of grace to those determined to be worthy to receive the body and blood of Christ, and withheld as punishment for unrepentant members. Grif Bonham recalled that tradition in the wink of an eye some years ago when he was serving communion here. He accidentally skipped a row as he was passing the tray, and someone whispered, “Grif, you must be getting old, you skipped us.” Without missing a beat Grif replied, “As an elder of the church it is my duty to determine who is worthy to receive the sacrament; I didn’t see anyone in your row worthy of receiving it.”

For most of our history only those who were baptized were invited to the table, in theory if not in practice. Recently a majority of presbyteries approved an amendment passed at last summer’s General Assembly which removes that barrier. All are now invited to the table – members and non-members, baptized and un-baptized alike – in recognition that this is not a Presbyterian table but the Lord’s Table, and the Lord can invite whoever the Lord chooses to invite. At this table those who do not yet know Jesus may experience his presence in the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup with the family of faith and so be led toward faith in Jesus as Lord. Here they may experience the love of Christ who sat and ate, not just with disciples, but with a host of folks who did not know him or even opposed him. Here we affirm the grace of God which is extended to all people, not just to Presbyterians, not just to Christians.

As Christians it remains a mystery to us as to how Christ is present in this holy meal. Roman Catholics believe it is by transubstantiation by which the bread and wine mystically become the body and blood of Christ. Lutherans declare the *real presence* of Christ in the elements, while Presbyterians affirm that Christ is present in the community that shares the sacrament. Baptists contend that it is a symbolic meal of remembrance, not of presence. In sum it remains a mystery. In his book *Angela’s Ashes* Frank McCourt recalls an early lesson about that mystery in Ireland. He writes:

*At the Mass people go up to the altar and the priest puts something into their mouths. They come back to their seats with their heads down, their mouths moving. Malachy says he's hungry and he wants some, too. Dad says, Shush, that's Holy Communion, the body and blood of Our Lord.*

*But, Dad.*

*Shush, it's a mystery.*

*There's no use asking more questions. If you ask a question they tell you it's a mystery, you'll understand when you grow up, be a good boy, ask your mother, ask your father, for the love o' Jesus leave me alone, go out and play.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Even when we are grown up, if there is such a time, Christ’s presence here remains a divine mystery to us. Yet, still we come, still we take, eat and drink in remembrance of him, for that is what he told us to do, what he invited us to do, what Christians have done at the Lord’s table for 2,000 years!

Here we repeat the words Jesus spoke. Here we remember him. But in doing so, we remember too that the meal he shared when he told the disciples to do this was a Passover meal, a meal recalling God’s saving action for the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. In urging the disciples to remember him each time they celebrated this meal, Jesus was connecting his saving act – his death and resurrection – with the saving act of God in Egypt long ago. Both brought freedom through death, both were acts of God, both are now remembered in a holy meal shared by those who believe in the God who is known as Yahweh, the Lord.

But it is noteworthy too, that sitting with Jesus at the table and sharing in that Last Supper was the one who would betray him. Jesus did not send Judas out and then break the bread and share the cup. He shared it with him. We should not think that this table is a place where only the saints gather, as if we all were in that company. It is a place where sinners are invited as well. And we can be thankful for that, thankful that we are not excluded by God’s grace because of the errors of our ways, thankful that God continues to love us and welcome us even when we stray, thankful that in remembering Jesus’ death and resurrection we may be moved to repent and be more faithful people, thankful that God does not give up on us but loves us without end. Because Judas was present at that table, we should never think that we are too sinful to be included, that we are too unworthy to be invited, that our faith is inadequate to justify a place at the table, for Jesus invites us all to come and receive this meal as a gift of grace, to come and be fed and perhaps to be changed, to come and experience his presence with us, even here, even now.

Dinner tables have often been places of inclusion and exclusion; slaves and servants ate in the kitchen while their masters dined at the table. Rules of etiquette delineate the proper order for seating at state dinners. Guest lists sort out the invited from the uninvited. The refusal to sit at table with someone is an act of rejection. Yet the table too can be a place where surprising things happen, where barriers are broken down, where miracles occur, where God’s presence is experienced.

Fifty years ago this year an Academy Award winning film entitled *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* debuted in theaters – some of you may remember it and many of you have seen it. The film stars movie icons Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn and Sidney Poitier, and it wrestles with questions of race and love as a young white woman brings her black fiancé home to meet her parents. In that year, 1967, it stimulated discussion and, in some corners, outrage as the movie challenged racial prejudices that had been rejected that same year by the Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia*, a decision that overturned laws prohibiting interracial marriage. As the movie title suggests, eating together as family was a flashpoint for the conflict as prejudiced parents were surprised and dismayed by the race of the man their daughter wanted to marry. It is a powerful movie and a classic title.

This summer I want to appropriate that title as the context for a sermon series drawing on a host of biblical passages centered on meals. At tables across the ages there are great biblical stories of redemption and betrayal, of miracles and mischief, of love and laughter, of hope and home. In the coming weeks we will journey from table to biblical table, but we will never stray far from this table which stands at the center of our Covenant life together, for this is the Lord’s Table, the table of the One who died for us and rose for us, the table of the one who invites us to take, eat and drink in remembrance of him, always in remembrance of him. And so we do. Amen

1. *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)