

“The Gospel in Great Movies, Act II:
III - ‘Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner?’”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Human Relations Sunday

Luke 4:16-30

The other night I was meeting with a group in our church and we were discussing things that came up after we watched an episode of an old Andy Griffith show. The episode was called “Rafe Hollister Sings” and it was, if you want to know the truth, an old version of what happened when Susan Boyle sang on Britain’s Got Talent last year (it’s the clip that Don showed you one day when he preached). Like Susan Boyle, Rafe Hollister didn’t “look the part” when he won a singing contest, and the whole episode was about how everybody treated him along the way.

Well, after we watched the tape, we talked together about what it said to us, and one of the things it said to us is that things haven’t changed very much over the years. We still judge people, we still look on their outer appearance and make decisions about them before we know anything else, we still put up walls between ourselves and others, we still jump to conclusions before really getting to know people or situations.

It is ironic, or perhaps it’s not, that we happened to watch that episode this week, because this week in the United Methodist Church, we celebrate Human Relations Sunday. It’s one of the reasons I chose the movie I did for this morning - “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” - a classic movie from way back in 1967, which stars Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn and Sidney Poitier. I know that some of you will remember it, some of you have never seen it, and some of you have never even heard of it. There was a remake of it not so many years ago, a remake albeit with a slight twist - this version starred Ashton Kucher and Bernie Mac.

Let me tell you about “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” In the movie, Spencer Tracy is a wealthy newspaper publisher in San Francisco. His wife is portrayed by Katherine Hepburn. They have one child, a daughter named Joanna, who goes by the nickname Joey.

As the movie opens, Joey is just returning from a trip to Hawaii. When she does, she brings home a surprise that will rock everybody’s world. The surprise is

that when she was in Hawaii, she met a wonderful man and fell madly in love - so madly in love that they are going to get married. He's a little older than she is, he was married previously and had a son, and tragically his wife and son were killed in an accident. He is a gifted doctor who flies all over the world to consult and practice medicine. And, by the way, he's black.

So the beginning of the movie is all about everyone's reaction to that. And is it ever interesting to watch. Every single person is taken aback when they first see him. Some are more verbal with their reactions than others. The Draytons (that's the name of the Tracy/Hepburn characters) have an African-American housekeeper, and she is the most vocal of all in her opposition to their relationship. She actually confronts Dr. Prentice and asks him who he thinks he is . . . she has perhaps more trouble with it than anybody.

Well, the movie goes on and so does the drama. Seeing everyone's reaction, Dr. Prentice tells Joey's parents in secret that if they do not agree to the union, he will call it off. So the bulk of the movie is them wrestling with it. In the beginning, after the initial shock wears off, both Joey's and John's mothers support them, as does a family friend who's a priest. Both of their fathers, however, and of course, the housekeeper, are vehemently against it. And thus starts the wrestling with the whole issue.

It is an amazing movie to watch, not just because of the race issue with which they were dealing, but because I think it's a very, very good portrayal of how to deal with ethical issues. It contains, in my opinion, some very deep insights into wrestling with ethical and moral issues.

For one, it shows so very clearly, and no pun intended, that issues like these are not black and white - they are indeed gray. It's not who's absolutely right and who's absolutely wrong - there were so many different aspects to the situation. Too often, we make things absolutely right or absolutely wrong - or more to the point, absolutely right my way and absolutely wrong your way. Why, just turn on the television and you'll see it all the time. We seemed to have lost the color gray in our world. It is okay to see both sides - to respect both sides - to not have to have the corner on what you see as the truth all the time. If we could get away from that, we could begin to talk to each other civilly and walls could start coming down.

A second thing the movie shows so vividly is the power these situations have to tear families and friends apart. This family clearly was loving and caring and devoted to each other, yet the tension in the room at times was a foot thick. Ethical and moral situations can do that. Even people who care about each other can be on opposite sides of a situation, and if you're not careful, you can wound each

other and fracture your relationship as you deal with it. This movie, however, was an example of dealing with it in love.

Finally, a third thing this movie shows so well, is that, in the end, the whole thing is about people, not issues. The issue on the surface was race - a white woman and a black man - and their relationship in a time when those type of relationships were deemed scandalous. But the real issue, and what everyone in the movie came to discover, was two people - Joey and John. It was about them - and once everyone remembered that, they could deal with the situation and come to a resolution. Once again, in this day and age, we seem to forget the people behind the issues. Perhaps if we'd remember the people, we'd work more kindly on a resolution of the issues.

As I said earlier, the issues in this movie are age-old issues. Putting up barriers, judging people, making assumptions, dismissing people because we think we have all the answers - they're issues as old as humanity itself. In fact, those issues show up in today's Gospel lesson. And the person getting hit with that kind of behavior is Jesus himself. He's in his own hometown, mind you, and he's speaking, and the people don't like what he's saying. His own people! So angry are they at him, that they threaten to throw him off a cliff!

It doesn't appear that anyone tried to talk to him, hear his story, see beyond the black and white. In a true case of mob mentality, they turned on him and threatened his very life. You see, intolerance and indignity have been around for a long time.

Well, back to the movie and how it ends. After the initial presentation of the issue and the various reactions, the remainder of the movie basically takes us through everyone's journey to a decision. And once again, I think we can learn a lot from their experiences.

For one, every person was forced to confront himself/herself. At some point, every single person realized that what they were wrestling with was not the issue of race per se, it was their own attitude about it. In one scene, Katherine Hepburn's character confronts Spencer Tracy's character and says basically, "Why are you surprised that Joey loves John? Isn't that the way we raised her, to be loving and open and caring?" And later on, their priest friend confronts him, saying in essence, "It's not Joey you're angry with, you're angry with yourself!"

All along the way, every single person had to wrestle with himself/herself. It took courage to do that. It took being willing to admit that maybe they were wrong.

It took having the courage to change, which is the second thing I think we can learn from them. It takes a lot of courage to change - a lot - especially to

change our cherished beliefs and actions. And each one of them did that eventually. I don't know about you, but people today seem very resistant to change. Change is perceived as weakness. Changing one's position or one's actions is perceived as losing. We dig in our heels - it's my way or the highway. Why, changing one's mind about a subject was a huge point of contention in a presidential election! Everyone went on and on about how it was so bad!

The people in this movie, after wrestling with themselves, and really thinking through the situation, had the courage to change.

A third thing they did in this movie which is worth learning from them, is that they confronted in each in love - in love. They had some difficult conversations with each other, but they had them because they loved each other. As I said earlier, Hepburn confronted Tracy to remember the way they had raised their daughter. Later on, John's mother confronts Tracy about forgetting what it was like to be young and in love. The priest confronts him about getting so tied up in knots over the race issue that he can't see the joy of this young couple. But every single one of those confrontations was done in love - spoken in love and with love.

A true sign of a mature relationship is when you can confront one another - speak the truth in love. It is a hard thing to do, but sometimes we're called to do it - out of love for one another.

Finally, what brought everybody together in the end, was that everyone finally remembered that it was all about two people, not about an issue. It was about Joey and John, nothing else. And because all of them loved Joey and John, they gave them their support. None of them were under the illusion that it would be a piece of cake - far from it. Every one of them knew that they would have a difficult road ahead, but they were confident they could negotiate it because of their love for one another.

So I want to show you now the closing scene of the movie. All of them have spent time pondering the situation, talking with each other and themselves. Now has come the time when Joey's father, Spencer Tracy, has to render his decision, and all - the parents portrayed by Tracy and Hepburn, the bride and groom Joey and John, his parents, the priest, and the housekeeper - all are gathered to listen.

Show final scene of movie . . .

On this Human Relations Sunday, may this classic movie help us in our own human relations, and especially when we come up against those moral or ethical decisions where we have to choose whether to build up a wall or tear it down. May

we always choose the latter. May it be so.

Amen.