"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner"
Sermon by Verdis LeVar Robinson
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading
"Who is Welcome," from *Voices from the Margins* by Rev. Dr. Kristen Harper

Sermon

Who has seen the classic movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* Well, it debuted in 1967 and was very controversial but timely. It starred Black American actor Sidney Poitier, the first black actor to receive an Oscar for a leading role, in a romantic comedy in which he desired to ask the father of his lover for her hand in marriage. Very traditional. However, she was white and from an upper-class and liberal-minded white family.

The film was one of the few films of the time to depict an interracial marriage in a positive light, as interracial marriage historically had been illegal in most states in American. In fact, when the film was finished, it was still illegal in 17 states—mostly Southern states—until all anti-miscegenation laws were struck down by the Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* in June of 1967.[1]

In an interview many years after its release, Sidney Poitier reflected on how possible it was to make a film like that in American at that time, "It was close to impossible. Primarily people, the industry was not ready for such that type of film," he said. But in talking with the director, Stanley Kramer, he quoted him saying, "I would like to make a film like this not because it is going to be sensational, not because it is going to be provocative, but because I am a film maker in America and this is part of America, and if I use this format, I can speak to the humanity in people."[2]

To make a long story short, the romantic comedy showed how each person navigating their relationships with each other and their feelings on the matter eventually bowing to the power of love, including his parents and her mother, with one holdout, her father. However, in an honest exchange between his mother and her father, her father was convicted of something. He was reminded that love is love. Is love, is love.

Before the families adjourned to the dining room for dinner, the father gave a moving monologue saying that although the pair would face enormous problems ahead due to their racial differences, they must find a way to overcome them, and he will approve the marriage, knowing all along he had no real right to stop it.

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[1] For more information, see: https://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-movement/loving-v-virginia
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4DPe3YWLvs

But it was deeper than that. In his message of affirmation, he said "There is nothing, absolutely nothing that your son does not feel for my daughter than I did for Christina [who was his wife for over 20 years]. The only thing that matters is what they feel and how much they feel for each other. And if it's half of what we felt, that's everything."[3]

It was a classic and poignant moment where everyone witnessed with tears in their eyes the power of love that was more powerful than fear, more powerful than prejudice, more powerful than disappointment. Love came to dinner that evening.

It left me with a message that in cultivating relationships, honesty and openness are key players. Honesty- authenticity and being true to who you are, who you have become. Being honest with your feelings but being open to the power of love. Open to the love you have for yourself and open to the love for whomever you are cultivating a relationship with. Honesty and openness are key players.

In honor of LGBTQ+ history month, African American poet, and an openly gay man, one of my patron saints, James Baldwin, once said, "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out."[4]

Where does that take you? What do you feel or see when you hear that? "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out."

For me, it speaks to the experience that I had in growing in relationship with myself first and then with others that I care about and making sure to hold them close in faith that my heart won't be broken by them. To hold them, but also to be held by them in love and care, to hold and to be held in authentic reciprocity. Then and only then will I not worry about the sea engulfing us, the waves of life splitting us apart, and extinguishing the light between us. The flame that we burn in hearts for each other.

Pandemic time is teaching us so many things about our relationships. What have you learned? For me, my friendships were weeded out and realigned. I had to prioritize those that are essential over those that are convenient or strategic. Some didn't last some didn't grow. Others with authentic reciprocity did. Maybe it took a slowing down to realize this.

Well, friends, next Monday in addition to being Indigenous Peoples' Day, it is also National Coming Out day. I want to tell you a brief story in which, I, too, had a *guess who's coming to dinner* experience. At the age of 32 years old, I was bringing some one home to family dinner for the first time. It was a Thanksgiving dinner 11 years ago. It was a bold and courageous move as I was essentially coming out to my family as my guest for dinner was not of a different race but of the same gender. My first boyfriend. Two years prior, I had resigned as minister in a black holiness Pentecostal church, began to live my truth, joined a UU church and now had the audacity of bringing a gay lover to dinner.

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4zhM7Z3zL8

[4] James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," *Contributions in Black Studies,* Vol. 6 [1983], Art. 5.

It was somewhat a blur, but I believed in the power of love- authentic reciprocity of relationships, to get me through that day. For you see my father is a holiness Pentecostal preacher like I was, and who are two of sisters. My brother is retired from the Air Force and my nieces and nephews were raised in the church just like their parents. A church that believed that my lifestyle was a ticket to hell. My mother had dementia, so the children oversaw the planning and the food, and I cannot cook. But he could. He made the best baked ziti, and I do have the recipe if anyone wants it. But my family inhaled it. But I can still remember everyone's reaction when I introduced him.

My father smiled and shook his hand. And even showed him his Hawaiian guitar. My sister's smiled and welcomed his contribution to the meal and begged for the recipe. My brothers smiled and talked to him as well. All smiles so far. Even my nieces and nephews gravitated to him…I think me nieces thought that he was FINE. Lol They all instantly became fb friends with him. I was shocked and amazed. Was this the power of love?

The only holdouts were my brother in laws. They did not greet him or talked to him. They both sat on the couch in den next to each other with their arms folded looking down when I entered the room. I could tell that I was ruining their thanksgiving. But at least I knew how they really felt. It was hard and sad to see, but I did not lose faith in them as James Baldwin warned. And besides, honesty is a key player. And their honest reactions were key. Now openness that's a different story. Nevertheless, I expected my whole family to be like them, but they weren't. It felt amazing. I felt seen, heard, and held for the first time in my life.

Now, I realize that this isn't true for everyone. I seemed like it was easy for me, but it wasn't. I didn't know what to expect and worried that it would be a very short visit. But years later, it turns out that one of my sisters who I had come out to many years before had warned everyone weeks prior- "guess who Verdis is bringing to dinner! He is bringing his boyfriend." This allowed them time to reflect on their love and care for me. To sit with it and their own feelings. It wasn't a shock or surprise. But it reminds of a biblical scripture from the *Inclusive Bible* of first Corinthians 13:4-8a:

> Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, and it is not snobbish; it is never rude or self-seeking; it is not prone to anger, nor does it brood over injuries. Love doesn't rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices in the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure. Love never fails.

The portion of the text that really speaks to me is, "Love doesn't rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices in the truth." That is how we were able to grow in relationship. Their religious beliefs told them that I was wrong, but love rejoiced in MY truth.

But living and being honest about my truth was no easy feat. It was not, as it is not for many queer people in our society that is still largely against what is deemed normal, what is deemed right, what is deemed sacred. Some never cultivate relationships with families. Some never even accept themselves.

It was difficult as a minister of the gospel to live my authentic self. What gave me the audacity, the courage, the strength, the power to do so. I was first welcomed by a chosen family. My UU family. I was welcomed literally with open arms.

The pride banner proudly displaced in the front of the church welcomed me. But the church ladies during coffee hour affirmed me. After hearing where I came from and me jokingly telling them that my previous faith believe that I had a sinful, evil spirit in me compelling to live an immoral life of sin and degradation. They physically held me, and whispered affirmations in the ear, and told me that nothing was wrong with me, that I was loved, and that I was safe.

They embodied the first principle- The inherent worth and dignity of every person; We believe that each and every person is important.

Not only that, but I was able to go on a journey of healing or self-exploration with the fourth principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In other words, we believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in their own lives.

These principles and living them gave me hope, gave me courage, and strength to live my authentic self and heal. It gave courage to discover what was important and who was important to be to hold them close and be held. For if not my biological family, then definitely my chosen church family.

Unitarian Church of Montpelier, you are a welcoming congregation. That same spirit I felt years ago, I feel here. I first came to visit for the first-time last March, no one knew it would be the last time that you all would be together for a while, but the love I felt was evident. The Black Lives Matter flag blowing boldly in the wind, welcomed me. The pride flag blowing in the wind, welcomed me.

I, this morning, feeling comfortable and held to be able to share authentic self with you, and your openness to it, affirms me and will continue to cultivate our relationship with each other. I know that our heart is breaking at times. I know that things are not the same as they use to be, but the Rev. Gretchen Haley says:

> What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other.

Let us continue to be honest and open with each other. Let us continue to hold each other in care and support and be held by this community. Let us continue to welcome and affirm everyone who comes our way. And let the spirit and power of love keep us together, and let love guide the way.

Amen, Asé, and Blessed Be.