

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

“See! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

Matthew 8:14-34; Luke 19:1-10; Revelation 3:20 ¹

Have you ever heard of the Delany sisters? Sadie and Bessie Delany grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, the children of former slaves. Their father moved his family to New York State, where he eventually became the first African-American Episcopal Bishop. Sadie later became the first African-American woman certified to teach Domestic Science in the state, and Bessie became the second African-American woman to secure a license to practice dentistry in New York.

Both sisters lived to be over 100 years old, and they told their story in the delightful book and Broadway play, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years*.² The play is set in Sadie and Bessie’s kitchen as they prepare Sunday dinner after morning worship.

As we meet them in the play, Sadie is 103 years old, and Bessie is 101. They welcome the audience into their home in Mount Vernon, New York as they prepare lunch in remembrance of their father’s birthday. The audience experiences the conversation as if sitting at the kitchen table while Sadie and Bessie fix lunch.

Jill and I saw the play at Actors’ Theatre in Louisville, feeling very much at home as Sadie and Bessie baked a ham, stuffed a chicken for roasting, and made ambrosia and pound cake. While we listened, captivated, Sadie and Bessie told the story of their remarkable lives, beginning with memories of their childhood in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The play had been going on for a while when Jill leaned over and whispered, “If those weren’t two black women, they could be your parents. They’re talking like your parents talk—saying things your parents would say, as your parents would say them—and they’re preparing lunch just like your Mom would do it.”

And it was true. My Dad is from Raleigh, too, and I was born there. Jill’s insight helped me understand why it was that I felt so at home sitting, as it were, “at their kitchen table.” Keep that image in your mind as we continue.

In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* some years ago, actor Kyle Chandler was asked several finish-this-sentence questions, one of which was, “I’d give anything to meet ____.” Chandler answered, “I’d love to meet God Almighty. I’d like to share my favorite meal with Him, and I’d let Him do all the talking.”³ It’s such a kitchen table kind of conversation that is our focus this morning.

Although it is not our primary text this morning, one of the most famous “kitchen table” conversations in the Bible is the one Pastor Andrew read for us a moment ago. In fact, Jesus’ conversation with Zacchaeus may be one of the most famous luncheon conversations of all time.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 8, 2020.

² Amy Hill Hearth, Sarah Louise Delany, and Annie Elizabeth Delany, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years* (New York: Dell, 1993).

<http://havingoursay.com/index.cfm?pagename=theplay>

³ Cheryl Lavin, “Fast Track,” *Chicago Tribune Magazine* (March 2001).

Although Zacchaeus was trying to hide from view up in the Sycamore tree, “*when Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. ‘Zacchaeus!’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! For I must be a guest in your home today.’*”

There are several things to note here. First, sin causes us to hide from God, as it always has, ever since the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). Second, Jesus finds us when we hide; and third, Jesus knows our names. Jesus had never before met Zacchaeus, but as very God of very God, He had known Zacchaeus since before the creation of the world . . . and He knows your name, too.

Another key thing to note is that Jesus told Zacchaeus that He “must” be a guest in his home that day, right NOW. Zacchaeus suddenly discovered that he had a divine appointment that he never saw coming. Zacchaeus had hoped just to glimpse Jesus as He passed by; but now Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus’ house for lunch! Can you imagine his surprise and joy? And because Zacchaeus was notorious and hated, the crowds grumbled.

No self-respecting citizen of Jericho would have anything to do with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was “unclean” within and without. No Jew would have even entered Zacchaeus’ home, much less sat down at table with him. But Jesus did.

We’re not told anything about their luncheon until much has obviously already taken place. What do you think they talked about? Bruce Larson, when wondering about this, wrote:

What do you think happened? Luke tells us a condensed story. They go home and they sit and eat a luncheon banquet, I’m sure. If you were a novelist, how would you describe the conversation? Who does most of the talking? Do you think Jesus is a boring know-it-all who tells Zacchaeus all about God and conversion and prayer and where to worship and all that?

Do you think Jesus becomes the great inexhaustible fountain of wisdom, which He was? Or do you think that when you’re in the presence of God, He sits and asks you, “*How are you doing? Tell me about your life. How did you get so rich? Do you have any friends? How do you and your wife get along? Do your kids love you? Talk to me.*”

I don’t know what happened, and you don’t know what happened, but I have a feeling that when you sit in the presence of unconditional, ultimate love, which Jesus is, He makes you the agenda: “*Tell me about you.*”

Isn’t that beautiful? What do you think you’d do if Jesus came to *your* house?

That question reminds me of one of my favorite books as a child, *If Jesus Came to My House*, by Joan Thomas.⁴ I’m going to resist reading the whole thing to you, but here’s a little bit:

If Jesus came to my house and knocked upon the door, I’m sure I’d be more happy than I’ve ever been before! If Jesus came to my house, I’d like Him best to be about the age that I am and about the height of me.

⁴ https://smile.amazon.com/If-Jesus-Came-My-House/dp/1626542023/ref=sr_1_1?crid=13MXF0QOFVXIT&dchild=1&keywords=if+jesus+came+to+my+house+book&sprefix=if+jesus%2Caps%2C161&sr=8-1

I'd run downstairs to meet him, the door I'd open wide, and I would say to Jesus, 'Oh, won't you come inside?' I'd offer Him my rocking chair—it's such a comfy seat—and at the pleasant fireplace He'd warm His little feet.

My kitten and my puppy dog would sit beside His chair and they would be as pleased as I at seeing Jesus there. Then I would put the kettle on to make a cup of tea, and we would be as happy and as friendly as could be.

And that brings us to what is really our text this morning, Revelation 3:20:

“See! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

Whether at Sadie and Bessie's place, or Zacchaeus's place, or at my house or your house, there's just something special about eating together, especially in the kitchen. We invite people to eat with us because we like them and want to know them better.

When Anna asked to bring a young man named Matt Cumbow over for dinner for the first time, Jill and I knew that we had better pay attention. And when Nathan brought Lisel Adams home from Oregon, we paid attention once more!

The dinner table is an intimate, holy, mysterious, transforming place, and one of the many things that aggravated Jesus' critics was his choice of people with whom to eat. The truth of the matter is that those with whom Jesus ate were a motley crew: tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen, the religious right and the religious left.

Don't invite people over for dinner unless you're prepared to see them in new ways. The Pharisees kept telling Jesus, “You've got to be *careful* with whom you eat. You've just *got* to be careful.”⁵

In order to make the point I hope you'll remember this morning, I need to ask you to turn in your Bible or in the pages of your memory to four scenes in the eighth chapter of Matthew. In my Bible, all four of these events happen on one page. I'm going to focus on verses 16, 27, 29, and 22

In Matthew 8:16, after Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, He then healed many demon-possessed people, and after that we're told that He healed “*all the sick.*” In 8:27, after one command from Jesus stilled a raging storm, His disciples looked at each other in wonder and asked, “***Who is this man? Even the winds and waves obey him!***”

In 8:29, demons screamed at Jesus, “*Why are you interfering with us, Son of the Most High God? Have you come here to torture us before God's appointed time?*” And in 8:22, Jesus told one of His followers, “*If you want to follow me, follow me now.*”

Try to imagine these four scenes. You know these stories. You could tell them yourself. But try to imagine what it must have been like to be there when they actually happened.

In the first scene, Jesus came to Peter's house, where his mother-in-law was sick with a high fever. Jesus didn't recite a formula, cast a spell, or do a ritual chant. He simply touched her hand, and the fever left her. Doctor Luke's account records that Jesus “*spoke to the fever, rebuking it, and immediately her temperature returned to normal*” (Luke 4:39).

⁵ Willimon, Sunday Dinner, p. 45.

It's interesting to note that not only did the fever disappear instantly, but Peter's mother-in-law was able to get up at once and prepare dinner. Now if you've ever had a high fever, you know that even when the fever breaks, you're still "limp as a wet rag" for a long time afterward. But when Jesus spoke the word of healing, both the illness and its normal after effects were removed.

In the second scene, Jesus and his disciples were in a fishing boat, making their way across the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee, 680 feet below sea level, is known for its fierce and unpredictable storms. When such a storm suddenly threatened to sink their boat, Jesus simply "*rebuked the wind and waves, and suddenly all was calm.*" And the disciples wondered in astonishment, "**Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him?**"

Once they had crossed the now-calm lake, Matthew tells us that Jesus was accosted by two demon-possessed men⁶ who screamed at Him, "*Why are you interfering with us, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Have you come here to torture us before God's appointed time?*"

Now when ordinary folk talked to Jesus, they addressed him as "Lord," "Teacher," "Son of David," or "Master." But those possessed by demons called him "the Holy One of God," "the Son of God," or the "**Son of the Most High God.**"

While He walked among us, Jesus cloaked His eternal majesty and power in human flesh, but the spirits knew who He was. They knew that He had come to destroy their power over us, and that He would eventually destroy them. And they feared Him.

In the last scene, when a man who had witnessed Jesus' miracles asked, "*Lord, first let me return home and bury my father,*" Jesus responded, "*Follow me now. Let the dead bury their own dead.*"

Most scholars believe that the point here was not that the man's father was already dead. He may not have even been sick. The man was probably asking to wait to follow Jesus until such time as his father eventually grew old and died, to which Jesus answered, "*If you're going to follow me, follow me now.*"

These vignettes remind us that although Jesus *appeared* to be a Jewish carpenter—and in one sense that was certainly true—the deeper truth was that He was and is the Lord Christ, with power over disease, power over nature, and power over every spirit, whether good or evil. He has the right to command our loyalty and our obedience: **He is the Lord Christ**, our Resurrected and Soon-Returning King.

These are the realities we need to keep in mind when we hear Him say, "*Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.*" **The voice may be calm and the knock respectful, but the One at the door is He who is the Star-Breathing God, by whose Word of Power the fires of distant galaxies burn at this very moment.**

It is this same Jesus who says to us, ⁹ "*I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. . . .*" ¹¹ "*I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. . . .*" ¹⁵ "*I no longer*

⁶ Mark and Luke mention only one man, perhaps the man who did the talking (Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). This is one example of the value of multiple gospel accounts that agree on essentials but sometimes differ in non-critical details. In a courtroom, for example, if all the witnesses agreed with each other in every detail of their stories, the most likely conclusion would be that they had colluded with each other. Where there is agreement on essentials but difference in details, there is more likelihood that the witnesses are telling the truth.

call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me" (John 15:9-15).

As Zacchaeus did on that long ago afternoon, we, too, have experienced God's forgiving transformation in our lives, and that reality alone is sufficient to bring us to worship. It is moving to remember that Jesus knew Zacchaeus's name, even though He had never met him, and that Jesus loved Zacchaeus, even though he was a cheat and a traitor.

This means, of course, that Jesus knows our names. This means that Jesus doesn't care where we've been or what we've done. Jesus loves us, and has a standing offer to transform our lives.

Jesus found Zacchaeus even though he was hiding; and Jesus can find you, too, if you'll let yourself be found. Remember that Jesus has come to seek and to save those who are lost, those who are broken, those who are hiding, those who are willing and ready to let Him change their minds, hearts, behavior, and destiny.

We didn't read the account, but Jesus met another man in Jericho before he met Zacchaeus. This other man's name was Bartimaeus. As with Zacchaeus, Jesus knew Bartimaeus's name before He ever met him. Jesus knew everything that had ever happened to Bartimaeus, and Jesus asked him, "**What do you want me to do for you?**" (Luke 18:41).

Friends, I say this to myself and I say it to you: The only person in the entire universe who can set us free from the power of Sin is Jesus. He's come into our world to find us. He's come to forgive us, but He wants us to invite Him over for lunch, invite Him into our lives and say, "Lord, I am struggling with this area. Will you please by your grace set me free from its power?"

The Good News of the Gospel is that it's never too late to change. We don't have to be locked into what we have always been and done. You are not a prisoner of your track record. *You can change.* That's what the Gospel is all about.

So how are things at your house? Need some company during this COVID Quarantine? Jesus is at the door. Are you going to try to hide, or are you going to invite Him in?

If you invite Him in, He is going to ask you, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" And what will you say, *then?*