

## **“THE BANQUET”**

Psalm 133; Luke 14:7-24

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Faith Ringgold was born in Harlem in 1930, where she grew up, went to college, earned a Master’s degree and taught art in the public schools. After nearly twenty years of teaching, she quit to devote herself to creating art full-time. In the eighties she shifted from painting to working with textiles. The work you see here was completed in 1988. The picture is acrylic on canvas and it is framed by fabric. Above and below the picture she tells a story that’s related to the scene she has painted.



“Church Picnic” is approximately six feet not-quite-square and belongs to the medium referred to as the story quilt, for which she is well known. Later she would also use fabric to create sculptures, costumes, and masks which she would use in performance art. Also she wrote and illustrated many children’s books.

A feminist and activist, she would use her art and fame to advocate for women and people of color, particularly in the art world. Many of her early paintings depicted “the underlying racism

in everyday activities” (Wikipedia). In an interview in 2022, she said, “My work is always autobiographical – it’s about what is happening at the time. I always do what is honest to me. I think all artists should try to be knowledgeable about the world and express feelings about what they’re observing, what’s important to them. My advice is: Find your voice and don’t worry about what other people think” (Wikipedia). She died just last year on April 13<sup>th</sup>.

I’m not aware of any personal connection she would have had to the story told in “Church Picnic,” but she would have been to many church picnics from her youth well into adulthood. This particular scene takes place in Atlanta’s Piedmont Park in 1909. According to Marcia Mendoza, this was a period of great growth for the city and the painting suggests more positively than is probably true that it was also “a time of renewal for the African Americans in the south” (<https://mendozamat2017.wordpress.com/2017/07/17/442/>).

It makes me think of the dinner guest in Luke’s story who responded to Jesus’ recommendations for hosting dinners by saying, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.” We come to worship to refresh our spirit, to lay down our burdens from the previous week and to ask God’s presence into the anxieties of the coming week. We experience God’s goodness and we lay hold of a love that sustains us. Worship is lively as it would have been for the Baptist congregation in Ringgold’s picture. But the living out of the gospel and embracing God’s values begins around the dinner table or the picnic blanket, if you will. Renewal is seen in the laughter and games of the children, in the delight of good food shared, and in the relationships developed and deepened in the conversations. Even if the life of African Americans was not improved in 1909, love could be found at the picnic. Renewal and hope is thriving in this scene.

By the Freedom Baptist Church sign at the center, Rev. Stillwood and Molly Mason in a pink dress are very much in love. Joy centers the painting and enlivens the faith community gathered there. This is what God wants to do for everyone. “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many” begins Jesus’ story. There it is: the great dinner – the church picnic.

I don’t know if Faith Ringgold has Jesus’ story in mind when she created this quilt, but there’s a curious coincidence between the two stories. There are a number of people who excuse themselves from the banquet. One must tend to some recently bought land; one wants to test out the oxen just bought, a new time-saving device if you will; and one has just married.

There is also someone missing from the picnic. At the upper right of the painting stands mama with her son, I believe, who is telling her that her daughter, Aleathia, is not coming. The story goes on to explain that when mama returns home to tell her daughter about the love between the Reverend and Molly that Aleathia is not pleased because she, too, is in love with the pastor, and had hoped to be his partner in mission work to Africa. Jealousy, disappointment or perhaps just a temporary sadness has kept her away from the picnic.

When I put the painting with its narrative next to Jesus’ parable of the great banquet, I see stories within stories. I feel the challenging question: “What is my story going to be?” It’s particularly challenging for me because quite often I don’t like a crowd. Parties don’t intimidate me

(anymore), but they do require lots of energy. So I understand about stories that excuse us from participation. We think of them as responsibilities, sometimes obligations: yard work, a job commitment, plans with the family. They're things that are really more important than the particular event we've been invited to. Property, work, and family; where we live, what we do, and whom we share our lives with: these are not little things, but they are not the whole story. When they stand in the way of accepting an invitation to the great dinner, we lose. What's the story that gets us to the banquet, to the picnic?



"Nighthawks" is a 1942 oil on canvas painting by American artist Edward Hopper. It portrays four people in a downtown diner late at night as viewed through the diner's large glass window. "In response to a query on loneliness and emptiness in the painting, Hopper said that he 'didn't see it as particularly lonely'. He said: 'Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city.' (Kuh, Katherine (1962). *The Artist's Voice: Talks With Seventeen Artists* p. 134). Some have suggested that Hopper was inspired by an Ernest Hemingway short story. Of more importance to me is that quite a few writers have built stories around the scene. I want to know the stories of these three obviously weary diners who have sought sanctuary in this well-lit diner where one imagines that the waiter's hospitality provides some solace from whatever troubles them.

Such a contrast to the "Church Picnic," where joy and love just leap off the canvas and yet in Ringgold's story there is one who misses the banquet, whose story has kept her away, one who is hidden from view. Hopper's troubled people are not hidden. They are "lit up" while being surrounded by darkness. They have found a place to rest, but not yet a place to thrive. Should they find the picnic, the banquet, they will surely have a story to tell.

In life we find ourselves in all manner of places, sometimes in the all night diner, seeking just some rest from the trials of the day, sometimes hidden away at home too hurt to enjoy the company of saints, and sometimes at the picnic where all is right with our soul. What's going to get us to the picnic, to the place of gospel living, where the love of God reigns and God's children live together in peace and harmony?



Around the table of communion, where Jesus is host, the church provides a place to rest your weary soul, if that is what you need.

Around this table, where the love of Christ is made know, the church provides food to nurture your faith.

Around this table, where the spirit of Jesus is celebrated, the church offers courage for gospel living.

Whatever your story, it matters to God. You're invited to dinner where wealth counts for nothing, but the poor are made rich. You're invited to dinner where work doesn't define you, but where meaningful work is to be found. You're invited to dinner where family can't box you in because you belong to God.

Here, at this banquet, there is a place to rest, a place to play, a place to heal, a place to work, a place to love, a place to thrive, and yes, even a place to party. Amen.