

Welcome across race

By [Luke A. Powery](#)

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For this Sunday's Living by the Word column, I focused on the theme of hospitality in the reading from Romans.

For my own sermon on this text, I almost went with the title "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" In the 1967 film—starring the likes of Spencer Tracy, Sidney Poitier, Katherine Hepburn, and Katharine Houghton—the daughter of a well-to-do white couple brings her fiance home to meet her parents, who do not know he is black. His parents also come to town to meet her; they learn she is white at the airport.

This might not be such a big deal today, but in 1967 it was bold to present a positive representation of interracial marriage. And it was risky, because interracial marriage had been against the law in most states and was still in 17 states. This movie presents a cultural taboo of that time—and it does so around a dinner table of strangers. It's an example of what it may mean to extend hospitality to strangers even when some of them may want to do evil to you.

Another reference point is Osha Gray Davidson's nonfiction book *The Best of Enemies*. Davidson tells the story of C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater, set during the 1960s and 70s in Durham, North Carolina. Ellis grew up in the poor white section of Durham and as a young man joined the Ku Klux Klan, eventually becoming the Exalted Cyclops of the Durham KKK. Atwater was a single mother and household domestic from a poor black section of town.

The book details how these one-time enemies came together to co-lead an effort to help Durham deal with problems associated with court-ordered school desegregation. These two people ultimately became friends and welcomed each

other—giving a concrete glimpse of Paul’s teaching, along with insight into the kingdom of God manifest in Durham's history.