

In the name of the Father, who prepares the banquet
And the Son, who offers himself as the feast
And the Spirit, who bids us join our brothers and sisters at the table. Amen

Good morning. This last week marked our third full week in Lent, although the weather this week seemed to have skipped right ahead to Easter. It's hard to feel appropriately penitent when the bright sun, and blooming flowers and blossoming trees seem to be bursting with Easter Acclamations. To make matters worse, here we are on the 4th Sunday in Lent— in the midst of the greatest fast of the church year— and our scripture lessons are all about feasting. In our first lesson we join the Israelites, who, having finally crossed over the river Jordan, say "goodbye" to a 40 year diet of manna in the wilderness and "hello" to feasting on the produce of the promised land. In our Gospel lesson we join a Father and his younger son as they feast upon a fatted calf. A person might think that these lessons were appointed only to make our mouths water— to tempt and torture us as we embark on the latter leg of our Lenten fast.

Of course, if you're anything like me, one of two things has probably become of your Lenten fast by this point. Either 1) you still haven't even decided on a Lenten discipline to undertake this year or 2) the fast you chose on Ash Wednesday has already gone the way of most New Year's Resolutions. You've snuck a brownie, or snapped at your spouse, or switched on American Idol despite your good intention to replace your TV habit with some more spiritually edifying habit like reading the bible. In any case you may well have already abandoned your pursuit of a Lenten discipline for the year, hoping, with any luck, to try again next year with better success. Whatever the current state of your Lenten fast, I'd like to suggest that today's lessons about feasting are, in fact, calling us to undertake a fast of a different sort. And we don't need to wait until next Ash Wednesday to begin. The fast to which God's Word is calling us today has the potential to radically transform our lives— our families, our schools, our communities, and our Church— if only we embrace the challenge.

I often introduce the Gospel at the 9:15 service by reminding the children that the Gospel is *always* God's Good News for us, even if it sounds like bad news at first. Today's Gospel, usually known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, can definitely be one of those "sounds like bad news at first" Gospel Stories. It all depends on where you see yourself in the story. If you identify yourself with the younger son, it's relatively easy to see the Good News in the Gospel. You leave the Father, you make a series of really bad choices, you return to the Father, He welcomes you back with open arms and throws a big party in your honor. Pretty Good News.

However, if you, like me, more easily identify with the older son, it's a different story. Year after year you do what is expected of you— you stay close to home, you work hard, you follow the rules. And after yet another day of dutifully doing all the work around the place, you come home to find your Father throwing a party for your slacker brother who apparently just showed up because he was out of money. Really. If you take the perspective of the older brother, the story does NOT sound like very Good News.

When I hear this parable I often think back to the kitchen table of my childhood. I am the oldest of two girls, and my mom never let me have sugar cereal for breakfast. We ate Team Flakes or Wheaties. Maybe Golden Grahams on very special occasions. Then came my younger sister, Katie. As a kid Katie was, among other things, a very picky eater. She could go for days without eating just to spite my parents. Before you knew it, boxes of Cinnamon Toast Crunch started appearing in our kitchen cupboards. My mother was buying sugar cereal for my little sister and I was still eating my Nutri-Grain. Now granted, a daily bowl of Cocoa Crispies hardly constitutes *ōdissolute livingō* and being a picky eater is hardly comparable to devouring your father's estate with prostitutes. Nevertheless, when it comes to the righteous indignation of the elder sibling, in response to apparent parental injustice at mealtime, I can definitely relate.

And yetí I still believe that the Gospel is ALWAYS God's Good News for usí no matter where we find ourselves in the story. But *what* is God's Good News for us in this Gospel on the days when we find ourselves as the older brother? And how do we get there?

When I first read over these lessons in preparation for today's sermon, the words of a song started running through my head. Only later did I remember the tune to the song, and that it was, in fact, one of the communion hymns at my wedding.

I'm a gonna eat at the welcome table
I'm a gonna eat at the welcome table some of these days
I'm a gonna eat at the welcome table
I'm a gonna eat at the welcome table some of these days

I think that that song, that welcome table, suggests the key for all of usō younger brothers and older brothers alikeō to find our Good News in today's Gospel. Indeed, according to the Gospel, Jesus tells the Parable of the Prodigal Son in response to a Welcome Table accusation leveled against Him by the Pharisees and scribes. Now, despite their dubious reputation in the Gospels, the Pharisees and scribes were probably pretty good guys. They worked hard. They definitely followed the rules. But, like me and the Big Brother in today's story, they were all too frequently overcome with righteous indignation when it came to mealtime. So in the Gospel, the scribes and Pharisees notice that the tax collectors and sinners are coming to join Jesus at the table, and they grumble about him. *ōThis fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.ō*

The issue of table fellowship is always a big one. It's an issue that currently looms large in the churches of our Anglican Communion. Who, exactly, can we permit to join us at the Communion Table? And who, exactly, can we permit to preside at the Table? It's an issue that likewise looms large in our county, and country, and global economy these days. Who, exactly, can we permit to find a place at the American Table of Plenty? Can we conceive of a Global Banquet at which every person can find a place, or are there those whoō for whatever reason-- will inevitably be left out? The Gospel seems pretty clear. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. The Father kills the fatted calf and calls his entire household to feast with the younger son. The one who ought not even receive an invitation to the banquet becomes the guest of honor. Good News for the sinner, Good

News for the younger son, Good News for the outcast. But still we might ask, where's the Good News for the elder son?

When I tell our young people here at St. Stephen's about an upcoming youth event, their first question is always, "Who else is going?" It's the same when they talk among themselves. "Are you going to so-and-so's party this weekend?" "I don't know, who's gonna be there?" Our youth would much sooner risk missing a good party than risk partying alongside someone considered "uncool." They've been invited to the party. They might even really want to go. But their judgments about the other partygoers stand in their way of accepting the invitation. Isolation beats potential "contamination." Reputation beats relationship. Pride beats the party. Sound familiar? It's a lot like our Gospel. A lot like our lives.

In today's Second Lesson Paul writes, "From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view." Now, to regard anyone from a human point of view involves making a judgment based on outward appearances. Interestingly, in today's parable, the "dissolute living" of the younger brother is never defined, except by the elder brother. According to the elder brother's judgment, the younger brother probably "squandered his inheritance with prostitutes," but that may or may not be true. The story doesn't say.

Paul's admonition calls to mind a verse from the Hebrew Scriptures in which God reminds Samuel that: "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill puts it another way when she writes that "Everything [and I would say, by extension, everyone] we are given to deal with is the result of the creative action of a personal Love, who despises nothing that He has made. We then, cannot take the risk of despising anything; and any temptation to do so must be attributed to our own ignorance, stupidity, or self-love, and recognized as something which distorts our vision of Reality."

Back to our second lesson, Paul continues, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." God has given to you and me—and all the members of our Church-- the ministry of reconciliation! God has placed the message of reconciliation in our hands! What a privilege. What a responsibility. And what a challenge!

This message, this Good News, is of our reconciliation with God, but surely not with God only. For how can a person experience reconciliation with God apart from reconciliation with brother, sister, neighbor and enemy? 1 John tells us, "If anyone says 'I love God,' yet hates their brothers or sisters, that person is a liar; for if they do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, they cannot love God, whom they have not seen."

The Good News of today's Gospel, for younger brother and elder brother alike, is an invitation to reconciliation. The Father has prepared a great feast, a feast to which both sons are invited. But the younger brother cannot partake of the feast with complete joy as long as his elder brother is bearing a grudge and speaking judgment against him. And the elder brother cannot partake of the feast at all until he lays aside his judgments, puts an end

to his self-imposed exile from the party, and gladly joins in the feast alongside his younger brother.

God is calling us to be reconciled. To the slacker and the sinner and the ðuncoolö. God is calling us to join Jesus at the welcome table. The fast to which we are called today is to fast from all those judgmentsö about others (*and* about ourselves)ö that prevent us from heeding the invitation to join in the feast God has prepared. This fast is a costly oneö it will cost us the pride and bitterness and self-righteousness that cling to us like a second skin. The cost is great indeed, but the reward is greater still.

At the welcome table we will ultimately discover that heavenly banquet- that feast of unfathomable bounty- to which we have all been invited. But, in Godö goodness, we need not wait for the end times to find ourselves at the Welcome Table. We are offered a foretaste of that banquet at every table along the way, if we dare to accept it. And so I pray, beginning today, may we find every occasion to gather at the Welcome Table-- at our kitchen tables at home, at our lunchroom tables at school, at our boardroom tables at work, and at our Eucharistic tables at church. May we dare to fast from the judgments that keep us apart and enjoy a foretaste of the feast to come. The Good News is that *everyone's* invited. The question is, will you come?

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