

Lenten Stories: Feasting and Forgiveness

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Lent, the 40-day season of preparation leading to Holy Week and Easter, carries with it a mixed reputation. Remember that the 40 days commemorates Jesus' 40-day period in the wilderness, where he ate no food and was tempted by the devil. So part of that reputation is on point, Lent as a season that has been marked by a kind of deprivation, even punishment.

But we have taken Lent – even we Protestants – farther than Lent has suggested. Guilt, suffering, all the things that make religion less than appealing to some, can misdirect our focus. If we make Lent about that – giving something up with deprivation and punishment as its own end – then we miss the point. The point is a soul exercise, a season of time whereby we focus on Jesus' journey and how our journey aligns with his, a journey of honesty and truth-telling about our world and ourselves, a journey of discernment and introspection, a journey that prepares us for the pathos of a last meal, the trauma of a crucifixion, the unmatched joy of resurrection.

I spoke with someone the other day who has given up Facebook for Lent. That might seem trivial to some, not so much to others. For this person, Facebook took up not only too much of her time, but her energy, her focus, her capacity to think about the things she wanted to spend more time thinking about. She missed it a little, but not too much.

Others *take up* something for Lent, a new practice like prayer or reading or walking.

Some years back, when she was in high school, our daughter and I spent one Lent refraining from meat. We did it together, which was kind of cool. Since then, she has become a vegetarian full-time, "plant-based," the marketers now call it, with a little fish thrown in from time to time. I have maintained that practice for Lent each year. I do it not to deprive myself, nor punish myself. Fish is readily available when I want it, and I like it. You can tell it's Lent when all the fast-food places

highlight their fish sandwiches. I miss chicken a bit, and I don't really eat beef that much anymore. So no suffering, really.

What this practice does for me, however – and I am mindful that part of the point is not making a big deal out of it, calling too much attention, which I hope I am not – part of the point is that it allows me to focus, to focus on what I am literally consuming, to be more mindful of what I am eating, to be mindful of where my food comes from, who prepared it, its true costs, to be mindful of those who don't have the privilege to make such a choice, to be mindful of those with little to eat this day. When Lent ends, my aim is to continue that mindfulness, that awareness. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes, again, not so much.

If Lent is a journey, faith is as well. But success isn't marked by whether I eat a bacon cheeseburger or not. Success – and that's not the right word – faithfulness, spiritual formation, discipleship, is marked by that sense of mindfulness, of being centered in the Jesus story, finding my place in it, and allowing that story to lead me to actions, practices, that reflect joy, and justice, and reconciliation, that reflect the call of loving neighbor, to demonstrate compassion, to make a difference in a moment and world marked by warfare and division and brokenness.

There are biblical moments that show us what that looks like, and all this talk about food aside, many of them have food at their center. Think about that. Think about how food, physical nourishment, is a stand-in for God's providence, for spiritual nourishment. God providing manna in the wilderness. Jesus turning five loaves of bread and a few fish into a feast for a hungry crowd. The last supper we will mark in just a few weeks, when the symbol Jesus chose for his life was a meal.

And we get this morning's reminder from Joshua, a moment when the Israelites are fully settled in the land that God has promised them. They mark that gift first by observing Passover, unleavened bread to signify the wilderness journey, then by eating the crops that the land produced, a sign of safety and security and home.

And this...what we have called the parable of the Prodigal Son, but that really has three important characters. It is familiar to us, portrayed by artists over the centuries, acted out by youth groups, used as allegories in so many movies, from "The Wizard of Oz" to "Legends of the Fall" to "The Lion King."

Remember that the parable has a context, several contexts. It follows last week's parable about the fig tree, and the call to bear fruit. Between those verses and

these are healing stories and other teachings, a parable about leavened bread, about a wedding banquet, about salt. Food as necessity and food as visual aid, as object lesson.

His crowds were growing, but filled with the kind of people the reputable religious leaders weren't so sure about. Tax collectors, the lowest of the low. Other sinners. I always hope I would have found myself in that group, sin and all, the group eager to listen to what Jesus had to say.

But the Pharisees and scribes weren't so happy. Their complaint: he welcomes sinners and eats with them. HE EATS WITH THEM. It's one thing to associate with the riff-raff; it's quite another to sit down and break bread with them.

Jesus hears all of this. And rather than engaging in a debate about his theology or his behavior, he does what Jesus does. He tells a story. Actually, he tells several stories, though the lectionary committee long ago decided this Sunday to skip several of them. We skip the parable of the ninety-nine sheep and the one lost sheep. We skip the parable of the lone lost coin. Go back and read those this afternoon, and think about the lost and found, and how that may apply to this present moment.

Then this. A man with two sons. The sons would each ultimately receive half of their father's estate. But the younger son wanted his now. We don't know the background, but there are birth order scenarios abounding. Oldest child. Youngest child. At any rate, the youngest son gets his share, and goes off to a distant country. He squandered his property, we are told. Dissolute living, we are told. Our imaginations go wild. Predictability follows. A famine. No food. And especially no food, because, well, no money. He hustles for a job, feeding the pigs. Hardly glamorous. He even contemplates eating the very food he is giving to the pigs. But not quite. Not quite. He thinks of the food that his father's workers are enjoying right now. You can read into this – desperation, bitterness, regret, jealousy. He returns to his father, ready to beg to be treated not even like a son, but like a hired worker.

But before that can happen, this moment does. "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion – *filled with compassion* – he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Rather than all of the things we might expect at that point, the very human things, we get this. We get compassion. We get a fancy robe and a ring. We get a celebration meal – more on that in a moment. End of scene one.

Scene two focuses on the oldest son. Dutiful, he has stayed behind, working harder, we presume, doing the right thing at least by putting off the receipt of his half of his father's wealth. We don't have to imagine what he was thinking, because once he hears the party music and learns what is going on, his anger boils over. The father, who has already run to greet one son, now runs to greet another. And the oldest son unloads, with bitterness, with jealousy.

In a certain light, there is a reasonableness. After all, the ninety-nine sheep followed the rules; they didn't get lost. The son followed the rules. The father explains his reasoning, his joy. And the story ends.

We imagine some tearful reconciliation with the two brothers, with the father beaming over them. Maybe. But the story doesn't give us that. Perhaps the older brother remained unconvinced. Perhaps the younger brother backslid. Perhaps the father had second thoughts. We want a happy ending, and in the sense of the lost brother being found, we get it. But I like the open-endedness of it all because it invites us to become more than eavesdroppers, but active participants. Where are we in all of this? Who are we in all of this? The younger? The older? The dad? Parts of each, or different ones in different moments of our lives?

So much to explore, a lifetime of exploration. The separation of the younger son, and his return. The separation of the older son, and the open question of his return. The relationship between the two, and the hoped-for reconciliation. The role of repentance.

And the father, so clearly the surrogate for God. What does this say about God? And us, our perceptions of what we are owed by God and what deeper gift we actually receive. The often misplaced question of deserving and undeserving, which seems to be the question that Jesus' critics have always on their minds.

Chelsey Harmon asks some of our questions for us: "Will the older son join the party? Will he learn to turn his inner score card over to the Father and submit to the character, values, and way of looking at others in the Kingdom? Will we repent of the self-righteous stories we have told ourselves about what we deserve—and what others do not? Will we take some time like the younger son, to come to our senses, and return home to our Heavenly Father? Will joy and the celebration of love and the fruit of the Spirit be the hallmarks of our lives, or will we allow bitterness and anger to take root?"

We began with the matter of food, and perhaps in the face of so any possibilities we end there, for now. On Easter, after an afternoon nap, when I end my Lenten

practice, it will not so much a sense of being sprung from vegetarian purgatory. It will, I hope, be a deeper mindfulness of that which I am to receive, to partake, to consume. The younger son was at the point of eating pig slop. Instead, as he made a profound course correction, he was met by a sumptuous meal, his father's best. The older son saw that same meal as a lever for control, a bitter pill, not a symbol of grace. We know the younger son enjoyed every bite. I hope the older one could as well. Because the fattened calf is more than the actual food. Like a communion meal, it is a sign and seal of grace, of love, of mercy.

In his book "The Return of the Prodigal Son," the late Dutch priest Henri Nouwen writes: "The leap of faith always means loving without expecting to be loved in return, giving without wanting to receive, inviting without hoping to be invited, holding without asking to be held. And every time I make a little leap, I catch a glimpse of the One who runs out to me and invites me into his joy, the joy in which I can find not only myself, but also my brothers and sisters. Thus the disciplines of trust and gratitude reveal the God who searches for me, burning with desire to take away all my resentments and complaints and to let me sit at his side at the heavenly banquet."

May such faith grow in us, faith that allows us to forgive others, faith that enables us to forgive ourselves, faith that finds itself at a beautiful and ever-expanding banquet table, where we break bread together, giving love and receiving it, until all have been found and fed and welcomed home. Amen.