

The Sinner's Feast

Luke 15:11-32

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On Sunday, July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 landed on the surface of the moon. Most of us are familiar with Neil Armstrong's statement when he set foot on the moon, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." But few people know about the first meal eaten on the moon. When Armstrong returned to the lander for the evening, his compatriot Buzz Aldrin took out a communion kit given to him by his church. He read from John 15, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, bears much fruit." Wow! That was the first meal on the moon.

We have been exploring the meaning of dining with the Lord in Holy Communion. The Cross is the place of hope, forgiveness, peace, healing deliverance and freedom. And sinners come to Holy Communion because it is a meal of freedom and because they want to say "thank you."

Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the lost son, is one of the most familiar and well-loved of all the parables Jesus told. But have you considered it from the standpoint of food? The story describes four meals—three meals that actually happened and one that never did. The first meal is in Luke 15:13 when the younger son "squandered his wealth in wild living." This is a meal of lust and covetousness; of pornography and alcohol. This is a selfish meal centered on pleasure, centered on grabbing your share of life. We are all familiar with this kind of food, because most of us have chased after it all our lives. Some of us had it for breakfast this morning. Wild living is not necessary just what happens at the bar on Friday night. It can be the quiet selfishness that infects so many American homes, careers and businesses these days.

The second meal is in Luke 15:16. The young man is in the pig sty and longed to fill his stomach with bean pods, but no one even offered him that much. This is a meal of hard times. It is really just wishful thinking, because nothing actually gets consumed. It is about hunger and starvation. It is a meal of natural consequences. The young man's own choices led him to this desperate place. Many people get to this meal and never leave. They pity themselves. They cannot get a job because they cannot drive. They cannot

drive because the court took their license away. The court took their license because they abuse alcohol, and so they drink even more because they cannot get a job. They see themselves as helpless victims of someone else's actions. Instead of taking personal responsibility, they blame. They blame the living, they blame the dead, they blame God. They do not really want to leave this table, they just want everyone to feel sorry for them. Some, of course, wake up—they come to themselves, and realize there are still important choices to be made, important choices like repentance.

The third meal is the one at the heart of the story. It is the meal the Father orders up in Luke 15:23: "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate." This meal is a gift. The younger son did not buy it or choose it. He could not have even expected it. It is given to him. It is a meal of free grace. It is undeserved, unconditional love.

This is a meal about death and resurrection. In Luke 15:24 and again in verse 32, the Father proclaims, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

In 1992, a Los Angeles County parking control officer came upon a brown El Dorado Cadillac illegally parked next to the curb on street-sweeping day.

The officer dutifully wrote out a ticket. Ignoring the man seated at the driver's wheel, the officer reached inside the open car window and placed the \$30 citation on the dashboard. The driver of the car made no excuses. No argument ensued--and with good reason. The driver of the car was dead. The officer, preoccupied with ticket-writing, was unaware of anything out of the ordinary. He got back in his car and drove away.

Many people around us are "dead in transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). What should catch our attention most is their need, not their offenses. They do not need a citation; they need a Savior. And this meal is for them! Too many of us religious types are condemning the people of the world for their bad behavior. But this makes about as much sense as writing tickets for dead people. What the world needs is resurrection, not condemnation.

Some of us at this point are worried about permissiveness--about the way the preaching of grace seems to say it is okay to do all kinds of terrible things, as long as you just walk in afterward and take the free gift of God's forgiveness.

While you and I may be worried about seeming to give permission, Jesus apparently was not. He was not afraid of giving the prodigal son a kiss instead of a lecture, a party instead of probation; and he proved that by bringing in the elder brother at the end of the story and having him raise pretty much the same objections we do. The older brother is angry about the party. He complains that his father is lowering standards and ignoring virtue--that music, dancing, and a fattened calf are, in effect, just so many permissions to break the law. And to that, Jesus (through the father's voice) answers only one thing: "Cut that out! We are not playing good boys and bad boys any more. Your brother was dead, and he is alive again. The name of the game from now on is resurrection, not bookkeeping." (Paraphrased, of course.)

This is a meal about resurrection, life transformation, and new beginnings. Do you think the younger son could have possibly be unaffected by the Father's extravagant welcome? Do you think he would not have become a grateful, hard-working member of the family after this display of love?

The fourth meal in the story is the one that did not happen. It is the one the elder brother wants in 15:29, "...you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." What kind of food is this? It is the meal of resentment. It is the meal of pride, the meal of I-earned-it-all-myself. It is the meal of religious bookkeeping where everybody gets what they deserve. There is no grace in this meal. Nothing is given. It is all about me. And for this reason, it is not so different from the first meal of selfishness eaten by the younger son. It is exclusive. It is only for the select friends of the proud.

There is nothing proud about Holy Communion. It is a sinner's feast. It is the Father's extravagant gift to us, commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ted was five years older than Janet, finished college before her, and started to work in a city hundreds of miles from her. They always seemed to be at different places in their lives. But they had been dating for seven years. Every Valentine's Day, Ted proposed to her. Every Valentine's Day, Janet would say, "No, not yet." Finally, when they were both living in Dallas, Texas, Ted reached the end of his patience. He bought a ring, took Janet to a romantic restaurant, and was prepared to reinforce his proposal with the diamond. Another no would mean he had to get on with his life without her.

Ted summoned up his courage. Knowing that Janet had a gift for him, however, he decided to wait. "What did you bring me?" he asked. She handed him a box the size of a book. He opened the package. It was a cross-stitch Janet had made that simply said, "Yes."

"Yes!" it is the word that God, in his tireless pursuit of the sinner, longs to hear. When sinners come to the table of our Lord, they are saying yes to the Father's heart which has been searching, inviting and waiting.