

September 5, 2010  
Fruits of Blessing  
Luke 14:25-35

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*Memory Food*

Well, this is certainly not the reading I would have chosen as families begin to come back to church after summer vacations, when we have our Fruits of Blessing service and look forward to Will's return next week and the beginning of Sunday School. Today we do not want to hear this unfortunate section of Luke's gospel in which Jesus seems to be telling his disciples to hate their families. All I can say is that it's a good thing he never settled down to serve one community. He would have been an appalling parish minister. Exhorting people to hate their families does not seem to mesh with a gospel of peace and love.

So what do we do with this passage? I've struggled with this over the past week. I've wondered if I could get up here and say something along the lines of: "Well, you know what Jesus was getting at, it's hard work being a disciple. Even though he said you must hate your family, he didn't really mean it." I could soft-pedal this reading and excuse it because of its context or antiquity. I thought of being pretty honest and telling you that I appreciate what Jesus was saying but know that we will all fall short in this regard, that these words are for people in another time and place and not really for us.

But they are for us, today, for us who live lives of some order and predictability, lives dedicated in one way or another to reaching for security. Jesus speaks to us, questioning our attachments, priorities and loyalties. One of our greatest needs as human beings is to feel secure, to know that we are loved and valued. Beyond that, let's be honest, we also want some semblance of financial stability; we don't want to be homeless. And if we don't feel loved and if we find ourselves on the brink of some steep financial cliff, our lives feel like a free fall. I don't know anyone who thrives on insecurity, unless the fear of failure and rejection leads one to destructive behavior. In that case, living on the edge becomes in a warped way a substitute security. But for most of us, the security of strong relationships is paramount.

There is an old story about a carpenter who received an invitation to dine with the King at the palace. The carpenter was beside himself with excitement and packed his satchels, loaded up his donkey and headed to the King. Along the way, of course, he became tired and decided to rest for the night. So he built a little temporary shelter and slept safe from the cold and wind. Being a carpenter, though, he cared about the shelter. He awoke in the morning, looked up and realized that the roof could actually be tighter, that the room could be bigger, so he decided to make it a bit more secure and spend a couple days fixing the place up. Meanwhile, back at the palace, the King rightly suspects that the carpenter, simple fellow that he is, may have become distracted so he sends a messenger to remind the carpenter about the invitation. The messenger, who arrives somewhat mysteriously, remains with the carpenter, encouraging him to stay focused on the journey and not get bogged down by his little building project. It's not easy for the carpenter; he does get distracted and he forgets that the King, that God, is waiting for him.

We forget too. We forget that God is always waiting for us to accept the invitation to live in the grace of God. We get distracted by building things: houses, careers, investment portfolios, reputations; we even get distracted by the demands of building families. We forget that our children are gifts to us to raise and nurture and release to their own journey toward God. We think that if we can micromanage their lives and make sure they have enough (but not too many) activities, good food, fresh air, respectable friends and good grades, they will be fine. What Jesus is suggesting here is that they won't. All the scrambling and controlling and searching for security will not assure our children's future or ours. Only a life lived in response to God's invitation can do that. With characteristic drama, he paints a clear picture of the cost of discipleship. There are many passages in the Bible that seek to comfort the afflicted; this one, on the other hand, afflicts the comfortable.

In spite of what I said earlier, it is worth stepping back a moment and looking at the context of this passage and trying to see where Jesus was and, more importantly, where he was going. He was on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. He knew

full well the price he would pay; he knew what was coming. The crowds who were giddy on the power of his words, excited and thrilled about his preaching, had no idea what lay ahead. They thought he was going to an Empire, to a full and glorious reign and were falling in line behind him like folks at a homecoming parade, when in fact he was going to his crucifixion. He had to bring them up short, he had to bring them to their senses and let them know the true cost of discipleship. So what he told them was shocking, as so much of what he said tended to be. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Let’s not forget that Jesus was a good Jewish boy raised on the Ten Commandments, raised to honor his father and mother. He was not suggesting that they sever their relationships with their families but that they recognize their priorities and place their relationship with God above all else. Don’t think this is going to be a picnic, he is saying. Following me can be very dangerous and risky; you may lose all the things you hold dear, you may even lose your life.

In Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, “hate” is not primarily a feeling word. So when Jesus calls them to hate their families, it’s not the kind of emotion we feel when we scream, “I hate you!” The Aramaic word that Jesus is using suggests detachment; it is primarily a priority word. It means to abandon or to leave aside, the way a sailor needs to abandon a sinking ship or the way a general needs to leave aside distracting things to win his battle.

This is what we are called to do as well—to set aside the things that distract us from God, to place our relationships with each other in the perspective of our relationship with God. I had a professor at seminary who one day showed us his wedding ring. Inscribed inside his band and his wife’s were not only their initials and the date of their wedding but the phrase, “Under God.” What they attested to by this simple statement was that their relationship with God was primary, even more important than their love for each other. How can that be? I wonder how many people here could say the same. At first blush, I suspect, very few. I myself want to protest, “No, no. I know God through my love for my family.” But let’s talk about this.

When things go wrong in your family, when children struggle, teenagers derail, spouses cheat, parents become ever more needy and angry, an illness strikes, what governs your behavior then? To whom do you turn? How do you decide whether to flee or fight or reconcile? When you are so frightened that your son is heading down a path that will bring only sorrow and heartache, when your sister denies her alcoholism, your husband leaves you, your mother's mental capacity disintegrates before your eyes, your father dies, where will you turn? Part of what Jesus is saying is that you must be serious about your relationship with God; you must invest time and effort, because unless you know God's presence, you will cling in futility to your brokenness, to the shattered fragments of your life. You will weep and finger the shards rather than reach for new hope.

When we feel distraught and hurt, there is a temptation to lick our wounds, to pry apart the flaps of the incision and see just how deep the cut really is. Maybe even poke the tender flesh with a stick to see how much it hurts, by replaying what has been or imagining what landmines may lie ahead. This is where a decision has to be made: we can reach for the light or we can reach for the darkness. Jesus is warning his followers that unless they have committed themselves to lives of faith, the darkness will prevail.

When I'm struggling, I try to stop and pray and remember that God is with me. Maybe I call a friend whose counsel I value. I light a lot of candles, I go for a walk or a kayak, I read the Bible. I read poetry; I try to get beyond the fragments to God. I turn to people and places that feed me. I wouldn't, for instance, call Anne Lamott, one of my favorite writers, who is recovering from every addiction known to humankind except gambling. But she's sure she'll have a go at that sooner or later. I wouldn't call Anne because she'd be teaching me over the phone how to free base, get the foil, light the match....

We can be distracted from God by our sorrows and also by our joys, by big things and small. What calls you from God? Things can call me away from God. Sometimes when I sit down to pray and meditate, I am besieged by trivia. "Oh, I'll just put this load of wash in." "Did I turn off the coffee pot? I'll just get up and check." Finally I sit down

with my legs crossed, breathe deeply, try to relax and see that my toenails need cutting. Or I wonder if the dog wants to go out. I start to think of all the people I should call or visit or the sermon I should be writing or the unfortunate conversation I had with someone and I start feeling worse and worse. And pretty soon the great distracter *guilt* has come squarely between God and me.

Other things call us away from God. Possessions, gardens, jobs, houses and cars claim so much of our time that God gets the short shrift. Children's schedules can be so overwhelming that there is no time for dinner, let alone God. We think we're giving our children great opportunities with sports and music and dance, we say constantly how blessed we are but actually, if truth be known, some feel more stressed than blessed. Considering the hectic pace that families lead throughout the week, it's no wonder getting the kids out of bed on Sunday morning can be a struggle. Get your priorities straight, Jesus says. And he knows it won't be easy; he knows we will get distracted and forget. So he did something pretty brilliant: he instituted communion. He used food, the act of eating and drinking, as a mental and spiritual prompt. Remember me whenever you eat and drink, he said. He didn't say, "Remember me whenever you brush your hair or get dressed or have time to pray." He took one of our most elemental needs and tied himself to it. Obviously, using the other essential need, sleep, wouldn't have been effective: remember me when you sleep? I believe in the power of dreams and have often felt God was nudging me in sleep, but requiring active, conscious engagement in sleep simply wouldn't work.

Linking food to God is rich with nuance and meaning. Today we celebrate the fruits of the earth, the great blessing of fertile soil and an environment that produces—with a fair share of human endeavor—glorious vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy products, meat and fowl. But that's just the beginning because, as we are all becoming increasingly aware, the politics of food and hunger spread across the globe. In tying God to food, one could say that Jesus was the first localvore, the first to suggest that what we eat and how we eat it is entwined with issues of justice, equality and environmental stewardship.

And lest we fool ourselves by looking at this plenty before us and just thinking how lovely it is, let's recognize that eating is not simple; it is fraught with deeply personal issues. The obesity epidemic in this country is, I think, a symptom of a spiritual deprivation. On the other end of the spectrum, those who severely restrict what they eat are also expressing in their own way a spiritual loneliness and hunger. I'd wager there isn't a person here who hasn't struggled at some point with food: too much, too little, too sweet, too rich, too boring, too lonely. So Jesus says, remember me when you eat and drink; you are not alone.

The gospel passage that we heard today seems a harsh directive spoken to people who thought that being a Jesus groupie would be a walk in the park. If you follow me, he says, you will have to make choices and they won't be easy. It never has been easy for even at the end, in the garden of Gethsamane, the disciples, being wholly human, abandoned Jesus, choosing instead the distractions of the world. It sounds like doom and gloom but the irony is that it is good news. And the good news is that God has extended and invitation and sent a holy messenger in Jesus to make sure you don't get distracted along the way, that you remember that you are loved. Waiting for us is a feast of sumptuous splendor laid out by the One whose love knows no end, who waits for the first glimpse of your face with joy and expectation.

Amen.