

Lent 4 – Year C

It is often the Collect of the day that directs my ruminations on the readings for a particular Sunday. Today, I thought, was going to be a stretch. The Collect spoke of Jesus as the true bread – and asks that we be given that bread always, “that he may live in us and we in him.” But food really does end up being a part of our Scriptures for today. The Israelites have crossed the Jordan river and entered the Promised land, finally. And there, they eat the fruit of the land – even though “parched grain” may not sound terribly appealing to us. It was a celebration, indeed.

But it is here that we must have another discussion about perspective. The Rev. Mary Frances Schjonberg, an editor for the Episcopal News Service, says this:

What about the Canaanites, though, whose crops the Israelites take for their celebration? The Israelites are invaders camped outside of Jericho. Soon they will lay waste to the Canaanite city, in the name of their God. They will kill every human being except Rahab and her friends who spy for them. They will kill every animal. They will drag off all the gold, silver, iron and bronze, declare that it all belongs to their God and deposit it in their treasury.

This story is part of our heritage as Christians. Yet, what if those are not the Canaanites, but instead are Oglala Sioux or Cherokee?

The story from Joshua might sound different if we recall what the people who came to this Promised Land did to the American Indians. There has been much thievery and death committed in the name of God and of religion.

What a different story we hear when we change the perspective from which we look, yes?

In today's gospel passage, we have food showing up again. The return of the prodigal son is celebrated with a *great feast*. The son, who has taken off with his share of the inheritance and squandered it - is welcomed home with open arms by his loving and forgiving father. That is often the focus of reflections on this parable.

Yes, the return of the prodigal son is celebrated with a great feast – much to the dismay of his older brother. From *his* perspective, there is something unfair about all this. He has worked hard all his life, done what was asked of him, been the faithful son. The inheritance he is expecting when his father passes on is something he has earned. Why should any of it be shared now with this one who wasted what he had, who did not work to keep the farm going, who did not do his part? Why should anything be shared with the brother who returns?

Here before us, in the second son, is resentment displayed perfectly. And if it sounds familiar, it is because we all harbor it. The resentment comes from our misplaced sense of entitlement and fairness. In *our* understanding of fairness, people should get what they deserve. If you've worked hard and accumulated much, it is yours to enjoy. And if others have less, then they haven't worked hard enough. If you have earned a higher social status, then you are entitled to the benefits that come with it. It is odd, of course, that we use that same word – entitlement – to belittle those who, for whatever reason, must rely on others for what they themselves are unable to earn.

I am fairly well convinced that, once again, this parable Jesus tells of a father and two sons is about the nature of God. That, after all, is always what Jesus is about – revealing God to us. But the story is not so much about God's forgiveness as about God's love and mercy - and the lesson that "fairness" is not a part of the picture.

Remember where Luke places this parable. We are told, at the very beginning,

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Translation: If he is really a religious person, he would recognize that we are the ones who have kept and guarded the laws of our religion. We are the ones who have earned our places in the synagogue. We have *earned* God's favor, because we have kept the covenant of the law. But this Jesus, he welcomes sinners and eats with them. He *EATS* with them.

There – in their words – is the same resentment we see in the elder son. Jesus welcomes those who have squandered what they had. He breaks bread with them. And so, in that context, Jesus tries to make it clear: The kingdom of God has room for those who have “earned” it – and those who have not. Because forgiveness and acceptance are not about fairness, but about love – unconditional, unearned love. That is the nature of the God Jesus reveals to us.

The God Jesus reveals to us is, I think, not the God we would always choose. Because this God is not concerned with what is fair, or with who has earned something, or with who deserves what. We are grateful for that when we can see ourselves as the undeserving ones – but we easily forget that nature of God when we look at others and say, “They’re only coming here to get what we have. They’re not even citizens and they don’t “deserve” any “entitlements.” It comes back to that matter of perspective. Am I the one in need – or am I the one judging others in need?

It is right and a good and joyful thing, to quote from our preface, that in our Collect we acknowledged Jesus as the true bread, that we prayed God to “Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him.” But it is a bold prayer, and one we should not pray lightly. Because the true bread is given for all, not just some, not just for those we think belong or those who have earned it. The elder son, feeding on his own resentment at his father’s violation of “fairness”, walked away from the real feast. We are not told if he ever returned to it. We cannot hold in our hands both resentment and the bread that gives life. God gave the Israelites manna daily – a bread that would only spoil if hoarded. When Jesus gives himself as bread, it is to be broken and *shared*. And when we speak our “Amen” to the Body of Christ held out to us, it is both our prayer and our acknowledgement that Christ lives in us, and we in him. In accepting the Christ, we have to let go whatever else we’ve been holding, so that we can embody the mercy and love at the heart of God.

Amen.

- [Joshua 5:9-12](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)
- [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)
- [Psalm 32](#)

