

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 14:16-24

“Come, for everything is now ready.”

Food is an inescapable theme in the Bible. The Food Channel could spend years on the topic and never run out of episodes. From the beginning, there was food, right in the middle of it all. Food was God’s gift to Adam and Eve, as every day the Garden of Eden provided a rich harvest. And it was by food, the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that paradise was lost. After the Fall, Adam’s curse was that he would bring home food only through thorns and thistles, and by the sweat of his brow.

When the angel of the LORD, the preincarnate Son of God, appeared to Abram near the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18), Abram ran off to fetch some food: some bread, the fattened calf (a sort of reversal of the parable of the Prodigal Son), and, like a good Wisconsin Cheesehead, curds and milk. A visit from the LORD called for a feast.

Esau traded his birthright to Jacob, like trading a Mickey Mantle card for a Minor League wash-up, for some bread and lentil stew.

When Israel fled Egypt, God told them to eat. They were to eat Passover Lamb, roasted, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. As Israel wandered in the desert, God sent them manna, bread from heaven. And when they complained about manna, He sent them quail, quail coming out their nostrils.

When Moses sent spies into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, they brought back food: a huge cluster of grapes, so large that two men had to carry it on a pole between them.

When Elijah, persecuted by Ahab, fled to the ravine, the LORD ordered ravens to bring him bread and meat every morning and evening. When the brook he drank from dried up, the LORD sent him to the widow of Zarephath’s house. She was preparing to eat her final meal with her son, sure that, because of the famine, they would starve to death. Instead, the LORD provided a bottomless jar of flour and a jug of oil.

When we went to Germany this winter, I remember watching another table of Americans being served a pig’s head. I’m guessing by their reaction that they ordered off the German menu without knowing German. Sometimes acting without knowing what’s been written doesn’t taste so good. Similarly, when Israel disobeyed God and turned to idols and immorality, God allowed the Arameans to besiege Samaria (2 Kings 6). *“The siege lasted so long that a donkey’s head sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a quarter of a cab of seed pods for five shekels.”* Now, I’ve never had donkey’s head—although maybe that’s an idea for the church picnic—but I’m willing to bet you wouldn’t normally pay eighty shekels to eat one. Things got so desperate that one woman, without shame regarding what she had done, complained that another woman had eaten her child without cooking and sharing her own child the next day. Yet, one chapter later, when Israel had repented, and God allowed them to defeat and plunder the Arameans, *“A seah of flour sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley sold for a shekel,”* a steal for those of you not sure how to count your shekels (2 Kings 7).

Over and over again in the Bible, repentance is marked with fasting and deliverance is marked with feasting. Food is everywhere and part of every facet of life. What’s the lesson

in all this? When your wife makes your favorite meal, she's saying something. When you bring your wife breakfast in bed, you're saying something. When your toddler throws food at you, he's saying something. So also, when God talks about food, listen, because sometimes food isn't just food: it's a message.

Isaiah tells us in the first lesson that God will swallow up death forever. And how will God mark this great feat? With *"a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine."* And Jesus, He who would kill death by His death on a mountain, tells a parable about a great banquet. So listen up. There's more than food being offered here.

Luther writes:

Just as a hen or anything else is not kept on the spit and roasted in order to remain there permanently, but... [to be] placed on the table for people to eat and be nourished, to have their hunger satisfied and become stronger, so Christ, having suffered with terrible pain on the cross, was afterwards removed from the spit of the cross... that the whole world might have this food. Wherever Christians are gathered, there you find the table. The preaching of the gospel is the dish. The servers are the pastors. Christ is the food.

As seems to almost always be the case when God deals with food, there is both warning and comfort for us in this. Beware that you do not despise this food, take it for granted, or develop a taste for something less healthy. Those who will not come to the feast will not taste forgiveness. God's ultimate punishment for those who reject his invitation is to let them have it their way. And no punishment could be more frightening, for the way that seems good to the sinful flesh is always a path to destruction. You toss this invitation to your own peril

But there is also comfort. All are invited to the feast. There is no wondering, "Is this food also for me?" You have a spot at the table. Greatest and least are welcome in the Father's house. He will turn no one away. The only ones left outside are those who've chosen to remain there, and when the storm comes, they have no one to blame but themselves. But your invitation still stands. The table is still set. Christ is served up for your salvation. And every bit of it is free, which always makes food taste better. To each and every one of you, the Father calls, *"Come, for everything is now ready."*

By food we fell. By food we are picked up again. A visit from the LORD calls for a feast. Esau lost his birthright for a meal. By a meal, we gain ours. The Passover Lamb promised Israel's deliverance. The Lamb of God promises ours. Manna and quail preserved Israel on the road to the Promised Land. The Bread of Life preserves us on the path to heaven. Giant grapes, milk and honey, awaited Israel in the Promised Land. How much more awaits us in our Father's house! The persecuted prophet Elijah was fed by ravens and with flour and oil that never ran out. So also, our God sends food to His persecuted Church, not by ravens, but by called servants of Christ, and the cup of His grace is bottomless. We may deserve the donkey head and not the plunder, but Jesus has given us the victory over sin, death, and the devil. Jesus said to the five thousand He fed in the desert (John 6), *"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* Thankfully, I'm willing to bet that there are some out there who've never passed up a free meal. Why pass up this one? *"Come, for everything is now ready."* Amen.