

Feasting and Fasting: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Psalm 42 and Luke 14, 1, 7-14

Fifth Sunday of Lent, April 7, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent. This is the holy time leading up to Easter, which just two weeks from today.

Lent is a time for spiritual renewal, a time for honest reflection on sin, and new openness to God's grace.

In other words, Lent is a time for us as Christians to get back on track. It's easy for us to lose the way, to drift, to sleepwalk through life.

Lent gives us an intentional time of almost seven weeks to change our habits, to strengthen our faith, to be renewed as followers of Jesus, as people called Christians.

One way for us to be strengthened and renewed is through prayer. On Wednesday evenings, we are gathering for supper at 5:30 followed by a 40-minute worship service at 6:15, focusing on prayer and a psalm.

Psalm 42, which you just heard, is the focus for this coming Wednesday, our final gathering. I encourage you to read and reflect on this psalm over the next few days and then join us for dinner and worship on Wednesday.

Psalm 42 reminds us that we hunger and thirst for God, so it makes a nice link with our Lenten theme on feasting and fasting.

During this season, our theme is focused on feasting and fasting, our deepest hungers.

- I have invited you to fast, to give up food for a day, or certain foods for a week or two, or whole season. If you haven't fasted yet, it's not too late.
- I've encouraged you to eat a little more slowly, thinking about where your food comes from, giving thanks for the hands that provided it.
- We had fish for dinner last night, and I found myself wondering where that fish came from, who caught it and processed it and transported it.
- I've suggested that we be mindful of good nutrition—for the sake of our bodies and for the good of the planet. A few weeks ago I mentioned Michael Pollan's Food Rules, and I've heard that his words have prompted some good discussions.
- I have reminded you to pray before eating. We've provided these resources for you to help you with your meal time prayers. If you don't have one, please pick one up.

- And I've encouraged you to remember that while you eat, many people in the world don't get good food every day. To help us remember and to make a difference, we've asked you to put a nickel in these fish banks every meal.

The gospels as a whole and especially the gospel according to Luke have many teachings and narratives about food.

Our reading for today is set as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, as tensions mount with the religious and political leaders. Once again, we see conflict around a meal. Listen for God's word.

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷ When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" is a classic movie from 1967, starring Katharine Houghton and Sidney Poitier, along with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.

Houghton is white, and Poitier is black, and when they announce their engagement her parents, they aren't thrilled. His parents aren't happy either. But they share a meal together.



Sitting down to dinner together with “new” or “different” people can be a bit awkward and challenging, as we see in this movie.

But by the end of the meal and end of the movie, the white father, Spencer Tracy, gives the couple his blessing, and makes an impassioned plea for their well-being.

It was actually Spencer Tracy’s final movie; he died shortly after filming. Not a bad message to end on.

Other movies show people from different backgrounds finding common ground.

In “Places in the Heart” from 1984, we see people dealing with poverty, grief, and racism. There are plenty of meals in that movie and at the end people come together in church from very different backgrounds and situations, for a mystical communion gathering in church.



We find this theme of different people coming together inspiring in movies and books—but in real life it’s rare and hard to do!

Jesus show us the way.

Jesus spent a lot of time at meals in the gospel, and many of those meals were with people who had otherwise been ignored or forgotten, people who wouldn’t expect to be at the same table with a religious leader or important person.

He made a point of repeatedly letting the religious and political leaders know that the poor, the hungry, the sick, the foreigners were all important to him.

Some scholars use the phrase “great reversal” to describe this theme in Luke’s gospel.

- Mary spoke of God lifting up the lowly and filling them with good things.

- Jesus began his ministry by saying God had anointed him to bring good news to the poor.
- Jesus taught that the poor would be blessed and the hungry would be fed.
- Faced with a hungry crowd, Jesus told his disciples: You give them something to eat.

Over this season of Lent, I've tried to be more mindful of the food we eat and of people who are hungry. I've found myself thinking about food waste—about how much food gets thrown out for all sorts of reasons.

I remember being stunned to see the food waste in my freshmen year at college. I went to a large dining hall, where with the standard meal plan, you could take whatever you like.

In that dining hall, it was not uncommon for someone to take a burger, a sandwich, and a piece of chicken, eat a bite of each and throw the rest away.

My parents raised me to eat the food on my plate, and I still do that pretty much every meal to this day.

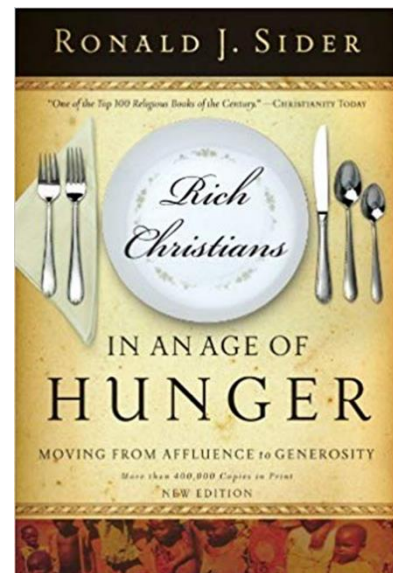
In my Sociology 101 class, I was learning about world hunger, so I was dumbfounded to see all this waste. And so in my English 101 class, when we had to write a research paper, I researched food waste.

All these years later, I still remember the numbers: at one large midwestern school, with about 50,000 students (not Wisconsin), the food services people threw out about 8,000 pounds of food every day.

It was around that time that I read *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Originally published about 40 years ago, it's been reprinted and republished many times.

In a clear and convincing way, the author Ron Sider spells out:

- the situation in the world,
- what the Bible says about hunger and justice,
- and what we as Christians can and should do



Too many of us, myself included, forget or just ignore the ongoing reality of hunger. We somehow get used to the idea and get complacent about the reality that there are millions of people who don't have enough to eat.

While world hunger has lessened in recent decades, there are still millions of people who don't get enough to eat on a regular basis, even here in Madison.

We have two teenage boys. Two tall (taller than me) and athletic teenage boys. They eat a lot.

I can't imagine what it would be like to not have food to give my children.

I know many people in this church are concerned about hunger.

So I'm glad that we as a congregation are doing a lot of things to share food.

Not only are we collecting coins in our coin banks which will go to the Presbyterian Hunger Program (hint hint), but we are also:

- Collecting fruit for kids at Glenn Stephens Elementary
- Working together with other churches in the "Feed My Starving Children" program earlier this year
- Feeding hungry people at the Grace Episcopal Men's Shelter, and supporting The River Food Pantry and the Second Harvest Food Bank.

And beyond the church, I know families in this congregation support food drives at neighborhood supermarkets and with scouts, and people volunteer at various places, and people even pay for the car behind them at the drive thru.

The reality for the vast majority of us here today is that we are very well fed—with food, with love, with opportunities. I believe that God feeds us for a purpose.

One teaching of Jesus that keeps me on my toes is Luke 12:48

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.
(NRSV)

Great gifts mean great responsibilities. (*The Message*)

I think we can paraphrase this verse to say:

We are fed, so that we can feed others.

God gives us food and love, with the expectation and responsibility that we share the food and share the love.

So here we are at the communion table. In just a few minutes we'll receive the bread of life and cup of salvation.

It's not a lot of food and drink, but this meal that Jesus offers us will nourish sufficiently so that we can leave this place to share food and love and justice and hope with the world. Amen.