

Texts: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

It seems a bit odd, doesn't it, that during Lent, a season of fasting, we hear God's invitation in the words of Isaiah to come and eat and drink. Come to the feast! Even if you have no money, Isaiah declares, come and buy and eat. So often in the Bible, God's steadfast love and care is portrayed through the image of food. Think about it: from the abundance that God provided in the Garden of Eden to the manna and quails that God provided in the desert. From the table set by the Good Shepherd in the presence of our enemies in Psalm 23 to the picnic of five loaves and two fish that were shared by 5,000 people. From the first time that Jesus sat down to eat with people from all walks of life to the last time he sat down to eat with his disciples and commanded them to remember him in bread and wine.

But then comes the clincher: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not food, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" That question stops me in my tracks. Because that is the question of Lent. What are your priorities?

Time and possessions. The two poles of modern life. A few years back, when I was helping out with Vacation Bible School, the kids took a look at a series of photographs that had been taken of different households all around the world. Families in Japan, England, Russia, Kuwait, Thailand, Peru – all brought everything they owned out of their houses and put it in their yards to be photographed. The kids examined the photos and we all remarked on what we noticed: People in poorer countries own animals. People in richer countries own washing machines. In the Middle East, people own lots of couches and carpets. All over the world, it seems, people who have very little find it necessary to own a television set.

People these days, as well as in Jesus day, acquire things. But what gets us into trouble is when we begin to worship our stuff, our achievements – instead of worshipping God. That is the meaning of idolatry.

There is a book on my shelf called Your Money or Your Life. The subtitle is “Transforming your relationship with money.” One of the exercises that the authors instruct you to do is to spend a month keeping track of everything you spend. Every single penny. After a month, you begin to notice some patterns. For example, I spend quite a bit on coffee at the Bean Broker. I don’t spend as much as I used to on clothing, because I no longer wear a suit to work every day. After tracking your expenses for a month, you invited to figure out how many minutes or hours you actually have to work in order to be able to purchase whatever it is that you want to purchase. It is an eye-opening exercise.

So why do we spend our money for that which is not food and our labor on that which does not satisfy? One of the articles that I read this week talked about it this way: Never give the best of yourself to someone or something that can never love you back. Think about what that means: what in your life nourishes you and what is just filler?

The invitation of Lent is to set priorities. To turn away from the things that are just filler, and to turn toward that which is satisfying and rich.

St. Augustine, who lived in the 5th century, spoke about human sinfulness in a way that made a big impression on Martin Luther in the 16th century, and which still resonates. The Latin term he used was ‘curvatus in se’ – curved in on oneself. When we think we are the center of our lives, we begin to contract and constrict. We can’t see anything else but our own desires. And when we try to hold on to that desire, our hand forms a fist. You can feel the tension in your arm as you close your hand, grasping tightly, holding on to – what?

But when you relax and open your hands, they can be filled. God fills our open hands with the things we need to live: food and shelter, homes and families, jobs and vocations, sunlight and air.

I remember a conversation that took place when I was a development officer for North Carolina State University. The Dean and I had just asked a successful alumnus for a large gift of money to establish a scholarship. “The problem,” this man said, “is that I know you and I trust that you will use this money for the purpose that you say you will use it. But someone will be the Dean after you, and someone after that, and both you and I will be gone. And the problem is that I have to trust that someone I don’t know will still use this money for the purpose that I give it.”

Exactly. That is exactly what faith is. Trust in the face of not knowing. It is trust that God will provide, even though we don’t know the future. Trust like that is hard.

While it may not be quite as apparent, God’s invitation this morning also has a sense of urgency about it. “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways...let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy upon them.” Come! The dinner bell is ringing. Don’t let the food get cold!

In this week’s Gospel, Jesus tells a story about a fig tree, a gardener and a landowner. Year after year, the tree does not bear fruit. What good is a fruit tree like that? The landowner wants to cut it down. But the gardener refuses to give up. He asks for one more year and offers to tend to the tree and fertilize it specially. If that doesn’t work, then you can cut it down, he says.

This *is* a parable about God’s grace. This *is* a parable about the day when each of us will stand before God’s judgment and Christ our gardener will ask for mercy for each

one of us. But we don't have forever. The invitation of Lent is to set priorities for our lives. The invitation of Lent is to begin to focus on what matters the most. The invitation of Lent is to ask yourself what it is that holds you back from receiving the full and abundant life that you are being offered.

I do not believe that God wants to destroy us the way that the landowner wants to cut down the fig tree. But I also believe that the invitation we are being offered is an urgent one because Jesus knows how quickly we lose our focus, how quickly we turn back to the un nourishing filler, how quickly we curve back in on ourselves and try to hold onto our desires with clenched fists. How quickly we waste our money and our labor for that which does not satisfy.

God wants each one of us to have new life. God invites each one of us to a banquet feast of rich food and wine. Here it is in front of you, spread out at God's own table.

The invitation of Lent is to embrace God's call on your life. The invitation of Lent is to bear rich fruit. The invitation of Lent is to live with open hands.