Sunday, March 22, 1998
YOU ARE ALSO INVITED
Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

In a time of fast food outlets and drive-throughs, microwave dinners eaten on the run, and snacks consumed while watching television or driving to a soccer game, we don't pay much attention to what we eat and how we eat it. Furthermore, in our increasingly informal settings, proper table manners are no longer a high priority. We don't even notice much anymore who else might be eating in the same restaurant with us.

Not too many years ago in this country, many eating establishments had segregated dining areas so that people of different racial backgrounds could not even eat in the same room, and some restaurants would not allow people with darker skin to eat in them at all. We were more concerned about such things then, almost worrying more today about whom we might have to sit next to in church.

However, in Jesus' day, where you ate, what you ate, how you ate it, and with whom you ate it were critical matters. This was particularly true among the Jews, for whom eating together was literally a religious experience. Because of its religious implications, there were strict rules about what took place around the table as well as before and after a meal. Cleanliness was especially important: clean dishes, clean food, clean hands, and clean hearts. A proper Jewish meal was a worship service in which believers honored God by sanctifying the most ordinary details of their lives.

In this kind of atmosphere, we can understand why Jesus offended many people with his table manners and his choice of table mates. Sometimes, he didn't wash his hands properly before eating, nor did his disciples. He seemed to eat whatever was put in front of him. His worst offense was that he thought nothing of sitting down to eat with people whose behavior indicated little respect for religious traditions. So his critics kept grumbling and complaining, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In those days, sinners fell into these categories: people who did dirty things for a living, such as pig farmers and tax collectors; people who did immoral things, such as liars and adulterers; people who did not keep the religious rules up to the standards of the religious authorities; people like you and me; and Samaritans and Gentiles.

What categories might we use today to define sinners, people with whom we would not want Jesus to sit down to dinner or associate in any way? An arms dealer? Someone with AIDS? A homosexual? A drug addict? An unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers? A woman who has had an abortion? A doctor who has performed an abortion? According to the New Testament, we would find Jesus eating with all these people. Would we then grumble and say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. Doesn't he know what kind of message he is sending? Why doesn't he obey the church rules? Who is going to believe he speaks for God if he does not keep better company?"

In response to this kind of grumbling and complaining, Jesus told a story. We call it "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." It should really be named "The Parable of the Waiting and Forgiving Father" because the focus of the parable is the loving and forgiving father. Remember, the story begins: "There was a man who had two sons."

But why did Jesus tell this parable to answer the complaints about his welcoming sinners and eating with them? Because at the heart of the story, it's also about eating together. This man with two sons has trouble getting his family to sit down at the same table for a meal and a party.

The younger son is so affected by his sense of unworthiness that he is prepared to eat the rest of his meals in the kitchen with the hired hands. The older son is so inflated by his sense of entitlement and his father's unfairness in welcoming his younger brother home that he will not eat with anyone who has not earned a place at the table. Both sons suffer from the illusion that they can be in relationship with their father without being related to each other.

As I was studying this story again this week, I discovered two elements in the parable that often get neglected. One is the party. It was the music and dancing that offended the older son. Of course, let the younger brother return home. Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing? Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not the fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing. Has the party canceled the seriousness of sin and repentance? We might even ponder whether, had we lived next door, we would have attended that party had we been invited.

We wonder, what kind of "family values" is the father communicating by throwing a party for such a renegade? What kind of virtue would that encourage?

Fred Craddock, in one of his sermons on this story, changed the ending of the parable and had the father slip the ring and robe on the elder brother, then kill the fatted calf in honor of his years of faithfulness and obedience. A woman in the back of the church yelled out, "That's the way it should have been written."

Some years ago, when I was leading a Bible study group, we were studying this parable of the compassionate father and the angry brother. Everyone in the group could empathize with the elder brother who stayed home. One person in the group said, "Why be good? I agree totally with the feeling of the other son. His younger brother took off, squandered his part of the family inheritance, lived a riotous life, and when he returned, he was given a lavish party. It's almost as if he was rewarded for his bad conduct."

Then another member of the group said, "It happens all the time. Read the newspapers. Someone gets in a lot of trouble, gets caught, then writes a book about it and becomes rich and famous. It isn't fair. Why be good? It doesn't pay."

And then another member of the group said, "The parables of Jesus contradict all known laws of fairness. There's that story about a farmer who hires people to work in the fields. Some start at sunrise, some at the morning coffee break, some at noon, some in the middle of the afternoon, and some an hour before quitting time. Everyone seems grateful and satisfied with employment until pay time, when those who worked all through the day under a hot sun learn that the sweatless upstarts who put in barely an hour get the same pay. It's not fair."

Then someone else said, "Not only is there unfairness in the parables of Jesus, but remember the criminal on the cross next to Jesus. That good-for-nothing barely sneaked in under the wire with his deathbed repentance, and yet apparently gets the same reward as someone who has lived a lifetime of goodness and piety. How would you feel if you were raised in an upright

Christian family, attended church regularly, and had established an exemplary home in the community, holding down a regular job, paying your bills on time, only to find that some johnny-come-lately with a deathbed confession is welcomed into heaven with a big party?"

Why be good? It's a question I hear frequently from both young people and older people. Goodness takes a lot of lumps, and that's been true for a long time. Years ago, the German philosopher Nietzsche wrote, "No good deed goes unpunished." It's no wonder people ask, "Why be good?" No one appreciates it anyway. I believe it was Leo Durocher who said, "Nice guys finish last." And John Barrymore said, "The good die young — because they see it's no use living if you've got to be good."

Why be good? Note the false assumptions at work here. In the case of the thief on the cross, we are assuming that he had more fun in life, got more satisfaction out of his life of crime than someone who lived a good and productive life. Why do we assume that doing wrong or leading a useless life is more fun and fulfilling than doing good or being faithful? Why do we assume that sin is more fun than righteousness? Is it really more enjoyable to lead a useless life?

The younger brother ended up living among the pigs and was so hungry he would have gladly eaten the pigs' leftovers. It was then that he realized what a fool he was.

Maybe the problem is our misunderstanding of the nature of goodness. It is more than simply obeying the rules. People who are "righteous" are those who obey the rules but go no further. They take great satisfaction in keeping the letter of the law and are inclined to be hard on those who do not. But they often do not extend themselves beyond what the law requires. They are not compassionate. They do not reach out. The righteous frequently become the self-righteous.

The priest and the Levite in Jesus' story of the good Samaritan were righteous people, but they left a wounded stranger to die in a roadside ditch because the law did not require them to care for him. The Samaritan, on the other hand, was called "good" by Jesus because he responded out of mercy, kindness, and justice. He went beyond what was required by the rules.

Fortunately, the human race, in its more enlightened moments, has thought better of the good than of the righteous. Most people, when they are reasonably free from insecurity and anxiety, tend to support the efforts of those who do good for its own sake. And the truly good people do good not for any hope of reward, but because doing good is its own reward. It's being true to our basic nature as beings created in the image of God. The truly good people are those who rejoice with God when a sinner repents and are glad that a party is being given.

The second element of the story that is often overlooked is that the father not only had two sons but loved two sons, went out to two sons, and was generous to two sons. He didn't love one more than the other. When the father saw the prodigal son returning, he ran to meet him. He did not wait in the house until the son got to the front door.

Later in the story, when the older brother got near the house, heard the noise of the party, and refused to go in, his father came out to personally invite him in as well.

Perhaps because of the competitive rather than cooperative spirit of our society, the common thought is that there must be losers if there are winners. For example, even in religion, it is very difficult not to think in terms of Jews or Gentiles, Protestants or Roman Catholics, rich or poor, saint or sinner, publican or Pharisee, older son or younger son. But God's love is

both/and, not either/or. The embrace of the younger son does not mean the rejection of the older; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not negate the love of Pharisees and scribes.

Nothing has been taken from the older brother to give to the younger brother. So why is it that when God is forgiving and loving to someone we don't think deserves it, we don't like it? Life with God is not a pulley system so that when someone else goes up, we go down. God does not have a limited amount of love and forgiveness, so that when God forgives and loves someone we think is undeserving, there is less love and forgiveness for us.

Such is God's love, but we find it difficult not to be offended by God's grace toward another, especially if we have serious questions about that person's conduct and character.

It seems to me that too much of the current religious conversation focuses on who is "in" and who is "out." In a previous sermon, I noted that a journalist once asked Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After a few minutes, Sandburg replied, "Exclusive." The ugliness of "exclusive" depends on whether we see ourselves as being among the included or the excluded.

The first major conflict in the early church centered on the question of who is in and who is out. Are Gentiles to be included? Peter and Paul debated that one until Peter had a dream and concluded that God shows no partiality. The story of the compassionate father ends with a question mark. In spite of his father's invitation to come in and join the party, and his assurance that everything that is his now belongs to the older son, the story ends with the older son standing in the yard. Whether or not he goes in, we do not know.

It's a shocking story. Jesus hangs out with the wrong people. It's a story about throwing parties for losers. It tells us that we cannot love God if we despise each other. The only way to work out our relationship with God is to work out our relationship with each other.

You are also invited to the party. Will you come in and sit at the table and eat with people you may have despised or found it hard to forgive? Amen.