

Faith and Fair Food

L e c t i o n a r y C o m m e n t a r y

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2007

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Lectionary Readings

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalms 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Whenever we interpret scripture, we bring our own lives into the interpretation. Our own contexts and our own concerns allow us to see new facets of the text. We compare our lives with the texts and we learn to live more faithfully.

During this Lenten season, our context for interpreting scripture includes the Campaign for Fair Food. This year we are emphasizing the Campaign for Fair Food, which seeks fair wages for the workers who pick the tomatoes that go onto the hamburgers and into the salads we buy at fast food restaurants. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has already come to an agreement with Yum Brands, the company that owns Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Long John Silvers, A&W Restaurants and Pizza Hut. The agreement provided an extra penny per pound of harvested tomatoes for the workers who picked for Taco Bell. This amount seems small to consumers who buy the fast food, but for the workers it is the difference between poverty and a living wage. Now we are asking McDonalds and other fast-food corporations to make a similar agreement with the workers.

What does today's Gospel reading have to do with the Campaign for Fair Food? Does the parable of the prodigal son reveal anything to us about this aspect of our lives? If we look at the role of food in this familiar parable, we see three important contrasts between the parable and our fast food lifestyle.

In order to get to understand those contrasts, however, we should note first that the parable of the prodigal son is not a freestanding story. It is the third of three parables, the surprising conclusion in a series of stories recorded in Luke 15. The first two parables are shorter but end with the same idea: God gladly welcomes the sinner who repents.

The series of parables starts with a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one sheep who has wandered away from the flock. He finds the sheep, tells his friends and family the good news, and they all celebrate. Then Jesus delivers the punchline of the first parable: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

The second parable is similar. A woman who has 10 silver coins loses one of them. She searches everywhere, turning the house upside down until she finds it. Then she tells her friends and they all celebrate. The point of the story is similar: “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

Then comes the parable of the prodigal son, in which a son rejects his family, leaves home, and spends all his resources on wild living in a foreign country. When he has spent everything, he has nothing left and is desperately hungry. He returns home to see if he can be just an employee of his father, but his father welcomes him with open arms. The father immediately prepares a great feast to celebrate the repentance of the son who had wandered away and was lost.

This would be a great ending to the parable of the prodigal son. In fact, the author has set us up to expect this celebration as the ending. After all, the parable of the lost sheep ended with rejoicing and so did the parable of the lost coin. But the third parable takes a dark, ominous turn. The prodigal’s older brother learns of the feasting and refuses to join in. Why does the older son object: because he has worked faithfully the whole time for the family instead of wasting the family’s estate. He has never had a feast in his honor and he will not celebrate the return of his brother. The parable ends without a resolution of the tension: the father pleads with his older son to rejoice in reconciliation, but we do not know if the father is successful.

In this story of the father and his two sons, food plays three important roles. First, hunger is revelatory: it reveals something is seriously wrong. When the younger son has squandered everything in a foreign land, he is reduced to feeding pigs. He is so desperate that he envies the pigs and wishes he could have their husks to fill his own belly. It is his hunger that brings him back to the truth. His hunger reveals that his actions have nearly destroyed him. His wasteful lifestyle destroyed his connections to family and to community. His wanton consumption brought him to the brink of starvation. And so his hunger reveals the truth: he has pursued his own pleasure and it has nearly consumed him. But his hunger also reveals hope: hunger brings him to his senses and puts him on the path toward home.

Second, feasting is a symbol for the joy of reconciliation in our story. Hunger revealed the truth about repentance and hope, and the result is joyous celebration of food and drink. The destructive life of greedy reckless consumption is behind him. The reconciliation with his father allows food to play its proper role: it brings people together in the celebration of community.

Third, the older son’s refusal to participate in the feast shows his inability to understand the joy of repentance or the hope for reconciliation. His refusal to feast reveals his own troubled relationships with the father—he has obeyed and he has worked hard, but he finds no joy in the obedience or the labor. Because of his obedience, however, the older son has

never known real hunger. Perhaps for that reason he cannot celebrate repentance or know the joy of reconciliation. Feasting cannot be a celebration for him. It reveals instead that the older son is bitter about his brother's return and resentful of his father's joy.

How does this parable of Jesus help us understand our lives today? And how does it help us reflect on the efforts to support the working poor through the Campaign for Fair Food? The answer is not a simple one. For believers who are committed to social justice in God's name, this story of compassion, repentance, and reconciliation is deeply moving. But it is not easy to identify with any of the characters in the story. The modern fast food system underpays workers in order to provide moderately priced food that will increase corporate profits. What does such a parable say to us today in this context?

The role of food in the parable provides the connection through three contrasts between the parable of the prodigal son and the fast food lifestyle in North America. First, we need to recognize that the modern hunger of the workers is also a revelation. The hunger of the workers reveals that there are unjust economic systems at work in our world. Their hunger is not like the hunger of the younger son, whose wanton lifestyle brought him to the brink of starvation. The underpaid workers who support the fast food industry are working 6 days a week, 12 hours a day trying to support their families. They have no wealthy family estate where they can return. In fact, many farmworkers are small farmers who have lost their small farms during the last decade as a result of unfair trading practices related to the NAFTA agreement. As these modern agricultural workers attempt to bring themselves and their families out of poverty, their hunger reveals the injustices that are built into our systems of food production.

This leads us to a second contrast between the parable and our lives: the feasting of consumer culture perpetuates many forms of inequality. Our abundance of food is not like the feast of the father, who invited the community to celebrate the return of his younger son. Our feasting is built upon the labor of the working poor, who can barely afford the fast food they are producing. Thus our abundance is not celebration of community that has been restored. Our feasting contributes to the inequalities that hinder reconciliation.

And finally, a third contrast. The older son refused to feast out of resentment and anger. But it could now be time for us to refuse to eat, not out of bitterness but rather out of compassion and out of solidarity with the workers. Perhaps it is time for us to stop supporting the corporations who refuse to pay a fair wage to the farmworkers who produce the food. As the Coalition of Immokalee Workers embark on their McDonald's Truth Tour, let us join them through our presence, our prayers, and our actions in demanding McDonald's change course and work as a partner with the CIW to end the human rights abuses of farmworkers in its own supply chain.

Lent is a traditional time for fasting—for refusing to eat—and biblical fasting has always been closely connected to the pursuit of justice. During this Lent, let us take the parable of the prodigal son to heart and thus fulfill the words of Isaiah 58 (v. 5-8).

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Learn More and Take Action!

Join the CIW and their allies from the faith, student and human rights communities April 13th at McDonald's Headquarters in Oak Brook, IL and April 14th for a Fair Food Parade in downtown Chicago. Learn more about these two days of action as well as the entire "McDonald's Truth Tour 2007: Behind the Golden Arches" at <http://www.ciw-online.org/2007truthtour/index.html>

View the "With These Hands" video as an act of prayer for fair food. This moving, 5 minute piece is particularly suitable for worship settings and is downloadable (as well as viewable) from the CIW's homepage www.ciw-online.org.