

**Guess Who's Coming to Dinner**  
**Luke 14:12-24**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**October 4, 2009**  
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In last Sunday's comic strip *Cathy*, Cathy debates her options for spending a pleasant Sunday afternoon. The first option is to go for a walk, which will make her feel energized, motivated, invigorated, empowered, proud, accomplished and alive. The second option is to eat a bag of chips, which will make her feel cranky, fat, sluggish, disgusted, and cause her to lash out at loved ones for a week. After a moment's reflection, she announces her decision, "I'll take the chips."

As happens so often, Cathy captures our nation's weird, schizophrenic relationship with food. You have to be in a cave somewhere not to know that nearly 2/3 of Americans are now considered overweight, with nearly 25% of us in the category of obese. Even more alarming, the rate of childhood obesity has tripled in the last two decades. 16% of American children are now overweight, and another 15% are at risk of becoming overweight.

And the sad truth is, the poorer you are, the more likely you are to be overweight. About 11% of American households are what is called "food insecure." This means that these families have difficulty at times providing food for everyone in the household. In 3-1/2 % of the households, one or more members of the family go hungry at some point.

Sadly, an even higher percentage of families with children are food insecure—almost 17% of families with children struggle to feed everyone in the house. Blessedly, children are usually protected from outright hunger. Only 1/2 of 1% of the households

with children experienced such dire straits that the children went hungry. But the children ate because their parents or other caretaker denied themselves in order to feed the kids.

Ironically, if you live in one of these “food insecure” households you are far more likely to be obese. In fact, the person most likely to be fat in our country is a single mother with children who has less than a high school education. She is even more likely to be overweight if she is a woman of color.

It may strike us as strange that the poorest among us are also the fattest because we tend to associate obesity with being well nourished. But for the poor, the constant problem is how to feed a family with limited resources. A pound of potatoes costs a whole lot less and can fill you up a whole lot faster than a pound of lean protein or a pound of fresh fruits and vegetables. Folks in food insecure households may not be actually hungry, but it’s often because they are filling up on foods that are highly processed, full of chemicals and high in fat and sugar—all foods that fill you up cheaply, but which also make you fat.

So say you are a mom with three kids on food stamps. Say you want to feed your kids something besides fried potatoes and fatty hamburger. But the problem is, if you are like most of the poor in our country, you live in a neighborhood that doesn’t have a supermarket. The supermarkets, with their abundant choices and cheaper prices, are all out in the suburbs where the middle class families live. Your neighborhood grocery is a small mom and pop store, or a convenience shop in a gas station. Not only does the food cost much more in these place, they also don’t have much in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables, even if you could afford them. You can get a bag of pork rinds way easier

than you can get a bag of apples. You can get a six-pack of Colt 45, but you can't get a cantaloupe. And since you don't have a car, or if you do have a car, you can't afford the gas to go someplace else, you shop at stores that have food that is much more expensive and much less healthy than what is available to an average middle class family.

So you're poor and in part because you are poor, you're overweight. And if you are overweight, you are also more likely to be sick—we all know the whole constellation of health problems that are associated with obesity. But if you are poor and overweight, you are even unhealthy than someone who is middle class and overweight. If you are one of the working poor, you probably don't have health insurance, so if you do get sick you can't afford to go to the doctor, which means you get even sicker. Someone who is poor and overweight is 3 ½ times more likely to die early than the national average.

When we talk about hunger, we usually imagine the starving poor in places like Sudan and Bangladesh. We don't have that kind of hunger in this country. In terms of percentages, there really aren't a huge number of chronically hungry in this country, though even one person going hungry is too many. But what we do have is a system in which the poorest among us have the unhealthiest life styles. They can't afford and don't have access to healthy food, so they fill up on cheap food and empty calories. They get fat, so they get sick. When they get sick, they can't work, so they get even poorer, and then even sicker. And they die long before they should. This is not only sad, it is an outrage.

Food insecurity, of course, is nothing new. The Bible talks about it a lot, only the Bible calls it hunger. Jesus talks about it a lot as well. Even before he was born, his mother Mary sang about the ministry this special child would grow to have, "He has

brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

Our scripture today picks up this theme of God’s preference for the poor. As we see so often in Jesus’ ministry, the encounter happens around a meal. Jesus is having dinner at the home of a prominent religious leader. As the meal progresses, Jesus looks around at all the rich men there at the dinner party and remarks that what is really pleasing to God is not inviting friends or relatives or rich neighbors over to dinner, but asking the poor and the crippled and the lame and the blind.

One of the guests embarrassed that Jesus has been rude to their host by criticizing the guest list exclaims piously, “Blessed is anyone who eats bread in the Kingdom of God.” In response, Jesus tells a parable. Like many of Jesus’ parables, it has to do with food, with a great banquet or party. A rich man gives a party and invites all his rich friends, only to discover that they are too busy to attend. They offer an array of feeble excuses. The host is understandably angry at his friends’ rejection, but what he does next is unexpected and even scandalous. The host doesn’t send his slave out to find some other acceptable guests from his own social circle. Instead he does the unthinkable. He sends his slave out to bring in the poor and the crippled and the lame and the blind. In fact, he invites precisely those that Jesus had said should be invited. Then he goes even further; when the slave reports that there is still room at the table, he instructs him to go into the back streets and garbage strewn alleys to bring in the outcast from all over the city.

So what does this parable say to us in the context of our series on Urban Poverty, and specifically in the context of this special day, World Communion Sunday. On the simplest and most obvious level it is about feeding the hungry, about inviting them to the

party, about treating them as honored guests. The parable reminds me of the ministry of the Inspiration Café, which works to end homelessness in several major cities. They offer employment counseling, housing and other support services. But the most intriguing and moving of their ministries is the Inspiration Café. Unlike most programs to feed the homeless which take place in an institutional cafeteria-setting, the Inspiration Café feeds the homeless in a sit down restaurant, offering them the same dignity as any well-to-do diner in any restaurant in town.

On another level, the parable repeats the theme we see so powerfully in all the gospels and particularly in the gospel of Luke. The same theme we find running through the entire Bible: the theme of God's decided preference for the poor. "He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty." Who does God invite to the heavenly banquet in the Kingdom of God? The poor, the lame, and the outcast. The least, the last, and the lost.

But as New Testament scholar Fred Craddock points out in his commentary on this passage, the parable also contains a subtle indictment of the church. The guest who exclaimed, "Blessed is anyone who eats bread in the Kingdom of God!" was no doubt confident of his own place at the feast in God's kingdom. After all, he knew all the right words to say. But the passage offers a prophetic word of warning to all of us in the church who think uttering pious words is a substitute for doing what Jesus demands of us—inviting the poor and the hungry and the homeless and the outcast to God's table.

*(Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Luke* by Fred Craddock, pp179-180) As preacher James Forbes says, no one gets into heaven without

a letter of reference from the poor. This parable invites us to ponder who among the poor will write that letter of reference for us, as individuals and as a church.

I know that there are some in the church who have been a little unhappy about this series on urban poverty—with the way it has disrupted our Sunday schedule, and interfered with our normal Sunday School classes. I know some are distressed with the fact that next Sunday we will have only one brief worship service at 9:00. I understand that. This series has been disruptive for me, too. But what it has disrupted is not my schedule but my comfort. It has made me think hard and pray even harder about whether or not I am living out the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I can't say I can always give myself a passing grade. It's a lot less threatening to talk about the poor far away in Africa or India than about the poor right here in our own community. It's a lot easier to utter pious platitudes about the poor than to ask ourselves if we are going to do something about poverty in our midst. So I thank God for the disruption of these past few weeks, because this is exactly the kind of disruption to which Christ calls his followers.

I recently heard an interview with an anthropologist. He was talking about what makes us human, what separates us from all other animals. Anthropologists have long postulated that the distinguishing characteristics of humans is that they can make tools, but this man said that he believed what made us human was cooking. If you are a hunter/gatherer, and you find some berries or fruit or roots that are good to eat, you eat it on your own. You don't share it with anyone else. But cooking means sitting around the campfire, waiting for the food to be ready; it means sharing food and telling stories. It means community.

Sharing food together is what makes us human. It is what makes us community. Perhaps that is why Jesus left this table as a sign of his love for us, and his demand that in his name we love one another. On this World Communion Sunday, we live out, in brief, fragmented, but nevertheless important ways the great banquet of which Jesus spoke—the banquet to which all are invited.

Guess who's coming to dinner. Everyone.