

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – March 31, 2019
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

Perhaps your family meals are always the same, but in my parents home dinner-time had three distinct levels of formality. Almost every evening my parents, my brother and I gathered in our small kitchen, around our formica-topped table and ate off of plates that were then called “melmac,” but would today be called just plastic. When we had guests, we moved to the dining room and ate with the better stainless and used the simple china that the bank my father worked for had given away with new accounts back in the early 1970s. Then there were the special occasions – those times when the dining room table was laden with linen and the fine crystal, and the sterling silver, and the good china that my parents received as wedding gifts. During my entire childhood – indeed in my entire life – I remember only two such special occasions – and I wasn’t invited to either. I believe that we’ve papered and painted that dining room more often than those dishes have found their way out of the china cabinet. At least in my family’s experience, truly special occasions are rare.

In today’s very familiar gospel passage, Jesus tells us of one such special occasion. The generous father, overwhelmed at the return of his son, asks his servants to prepare a feast, to kill the fattened calf, to invite the neighbors – presumably to use the good china. The tremendous celebration he calls for is not only an expression of his gratitude and joy at seeing his son again, but it undoubtedly is meant to accomplish something. The father wants to heal his relationship with his son – to show him that there are no hard feelings, to lavish him with gifts so as to demonstrate that whatever has gone before – however irresponsibly the son has acted – all is forgiven and the father’s love continues to be overflowing.

That’s what our celebration is to be each week, each day. Our loving Father sets before us not the fattened calf, but the banquet of heaven. We are called to share the body and blood of Jesus Christ – the bread of angels and the cup of salvation. Physically, our portion is small – one small host, one sip of the cup – yet how can one begin to measure the grace that flows from our spiritual nourishment? Like the father in Jesus’ parable, the banquet of the Eucharist to which our heavenly Father calls us is an expression of his joy, his completely self-giving love for us. God wants us to be changed by our celebration. By gathering in God’s presence, by gathering in the presence of our brothers and sisters in Christ – and with the saints and angels of the heavenly host, by gathering to feast on the

food of heaven, God wants our relationship with him to be completely healed. As the psalmist says, we should taste and see the goodness of the Lord – and the most perfect place for this encounter with God is here at his altar, where heaven and earth unite.

Unfortunately, though we almost always approach the table of the Lord and eat of the food he offers, we do not always taste and see in it the goodness of the Lord. Our encounter in the Eucharist has become routine – too often we take God’s presence for granted – and do not appreciate the immensity of his love for us. In effect, we are frequently like the sons in the parable today. The younger son could not appreciate his father’s love – his father’s daily care for him – until he had exhausted all of his inheritance – until he was physically hungry and emotionally drained. And there have undoubtedly been times in our lives when we ran from God – when we were so intent upon setting our own agenda, upon having our own way that we took our inheritance – the precious gift of life that God gave us – and set about “doing our own thing.” Only when we were beaten down by our bad choices, only when we discovered that the world that seemed so bountiful really had very little to offer – only when we found ourselves broken and hungry did we return to God and receive his loving embrace, his tender forgiveness.

Yes, we have been the younger son, but we have been the elder as well. We have remained faithful to God – avoiding sin, keeping the commandments, coming to Mass and receiving the Eucharist. We have lived so close to the abundant, ever-present love of God that we take his presence for granted. Too often we have grown complacent in our faith, going through the motions without giving them much thought. And then we see those who are welcomed and forgiven, those whose faith has been reawakened and we find ourselves wondering – What about me? What have you done for me lately, God? Don’t I deserve the fattened calf? Don’t I deserve the Father’s love? And like the eldest son, we too are invited to hear the Father’s response – You are with me always. Everything I have is yours. My love for you knows no bounds. Oh, we hear the Father’s words, but do we take them to heart? Are we waiting for the grand celebration, for the good china, for the fattened calf? Or do we recognize the presence of God in our midst – so loving, so close that we can hear and breathe and touch his love? So close that we can taste and see the goodness of the Lord.