

Sermon for December 13, 2015 – Advent 3

Psalm 34:8 (NIV84)

Theme: Celebrate a Better Christmas Dinner with . . .

- 1) *A Better Host,*
- 2) *Better Food,*
- 3) *Better Guests.*

Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.

Christmas dinner! Just the thought of all the feasts I've been a part of makes my mouth water. Don't you also have found memories of gathering around the Christmas dinner table with family and friends? As a child: I looked forward to our Christmas dinners as much as I looked forward to my gifts.

But as wonderful as these festive dinners were, they are but imperfect shadows of the greater, spiritual dinner God the Father offers us at Christmas. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: Celebrate a Better Christmas Dinner with a better host, better food, and better guests.

Part One: Better Host

Unless you have abusive, unloving parents, I think we would all agree that the best place to eat Christmas dinner is with our folks. Even the world gets this point, as a viral internet Christmas commercial for the German store "Edeka" demonstrates.

This commercial begins with an old man at home, adjusting the pictures of his children, listening to his answering machine. His daughter apologizes for not being able to visit during the holidays. Wishing him a hardy "Froehliche Weihnachten" (Merry Christmas), her family promises to visit the next year. The camera then shows him at the table, eating Christmas dinner alone for three consecutive years.

The scene then changes to his children. They all get a notice that their father has died. Coming from all corners of the globe, they gather at his house in tears. When they come into the house what do they find, but the table all set and their father very much alive – telling his children that this was the only way he could get them together! What follows is a most joyous Christmas dinner of family and fellowship that the children realized they have missed for so long.

As I mentioned, this video went viral with a lot of people commenting how much they cried watching it. And why did they cry? Because it rings so true: we often let our "busy-ness" rob us from spending time with the people who truly matter in our lives. What is even more sad is that our "busy-ness" often prevents us from enjoying time with our almighty Father in heaven.

You see, like the old man in the commercial I described, God the Father is separated from His children. Now, unlike the commercial: God is not lonely. He doesn't "need" our company. However, God the Father

still loves us. We are the crowning jewels of his creation. He doesn't want us lost in hell because of our sin. He wants us to be with him, partaking in the wonderful feast of salvation He has prepared for us - enjoying his presence for eternity. And this is why, through the preaching of Law and Gospel, He invites us to come home – telling us that He is willing to forgive all our wrongs and, through our repentance and faith, renew in us a right heart.

But how do we treat his invitation? We are too busy for Bible class, too busy for worship and too busy for personal devotions. Like the daughter in the commercial, we offer all sort of excuses why we can't come – promising to spend time with God in the future. The problem is that, unless something drastic happens, that time doesn't come. And, if it does come, how often aren't we tempted to see worship (which is intended to be family time with our Father) as merely an obligation we need to fulfill for him instead of a blessing for us?

Oh how sinfully pathetic we are – chasing after the world's tinsel when our loving LORD offers us spiritual gold! There is no better host than God the Father, and there is no better dinner than the food he provides. Every Christian knows this to be true. Let us then heed his invitation to come to the great banquet he has prepared for us – a never ending feast of forgiveness, fellowship, and love.

Part Two: Better food

Now understand this: the food the LORD invites us to eat is not some quick and easy dinner that cost him next to nothing to prepare. No, what he offers is the most nourishing, soul satisfying, and expensive food there is. All the gold and silver in the universe could not afford it.

What is this food? It is he, himself – as Jesus once said: ⁴⁷ *I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.* ⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died.* ⁵⁰ *But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.* ⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*" (John 6:47-51, NIV84)

Just as we need healthy food in order to live physically, so also we need Jesus in order to live spiritually. Without the forgiveness Jesus won for us through the sacrifice of his flesh on the cross, we would all be condemned to eternal death in hell – hopelessly separated from our Creator forever.

The LORD himself is our spiritual food: we need to eat him in order to live. But how do we eat Jesus spiritually? Listen again to what Jesus said before he calls himself the bread of Life: *I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.* Through faith we partake of Jesus. And how do we regularly partake of him? By hearing the Gospel and making use of his Sacraments as St. Paul says: *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* (Romans 10:17, NIV84).

Even though we need food to live, we don't just eat it because we have to. We eat it because we want to. The same is also true regarding that Gospel of Christ: it is not some tasteless nourishment that you have to

force yourself to eat. King David writes: *Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.*

Faith in the LORD is a wonderful thing! God's love, the forgiveness of sins, comfort and strength in every tribulation, help and guidance in life, the sure hope of heaven, . . . all these wonderful flavors are experienced in the Gospel. Yes, taste (that is, study the Gospel of Christ) and you will see that the LORD is good. He is so good you will not want to stop learning about him. You will want to come back again and again to the Gospel - to taste the love that made you a child of the most High God. And if this is who you are, you can be sure that God the Father will watch over you throughout your earthly life (just as He did for Jesus) using all the pain and suffering you experience as a blessing. He will protect you, deliver you and, when Christ comes again, raise and glorify you.

What a wonderful feast the LORD has provided for us: the feast of himself for the forgiveness of sins! Let us never neglect this wonderful meal which isn't only offered to us at Christmas but through out the year! Celebrate a better Christmas dinner, with a better host, better food and, as we will learn next, better guests.

Part Three: Better Guests.

Where would you rather spend Christmas dinner: at home with all your relatives and close friends, or at Buckingham palace with the royal family and all the world's most important and influential leaders in attendance? Now, as I mentioned before: there is no better place to celebrate Christmas dinner than with your folks. Still, I would love to have the chance to spend Christmas at Buckingham palace as the queen's guest! But wouldn't it be fun if both being with family and royalty at Christmas were an option?

When it comes to the better Christmas dinner to which God the Father invites us, "both" is the only option! Look around you. What do you see? A beautiful Church, some people you know well and others not so well gathered to hear about Christ?

I tell you what God sees: his royal family, gathered around his dinner table partaking in the wonderful feast of forgiveness that He prepared for us in love.

That is right: every believer who has come to Church this morning is royalty: an adopted child of the living God, a prince or princess of heaven. St. Peter says so much, when he writes: ⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* (1 Peter 2:9, NIV84)

Forget eating dinner with President Obama, Queen Elizabeth, or Vladimir Putin; when you came to worship, you came with the most powerful people in the world – people of greater influence than any of those three. You are worshipping with God's personal advisors.

Do you think I'm exaggerating? Consider Jesus own words: ¹² *I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. . . .* ¹⁴ *You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.* (John 14:12a,14 NIV84) Consider, also, what St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: *Do you not know that*

*the saints will judge the world? . . .*³ *Do you not know that we will judge angels?* (1 Corinthians 6:2a,3a, NIV84) As you can clearly see: I am not exaggerating.

But it gets better than that: the guests at Jesus' Gospel feast are not only the most influential people in the world with God, they are also your closest relatives and friends - closer to you than even your blood relation! Jesus said about those who believe in him:⁴⁸ *"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"*⁴⁹ *Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers.*⁵⁰ *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."* (Matthew 12:48-50, NIV84)

How wonderful it is, then, to be here - celebrating God's feast with our brothers and sisters in Christ. True: we don't always get along. Because we still live on this evil earth, the devil will certainly try to cause tension and division among us – just like he tries to do among blood relatives. But in Christ we stand forgiven and empowered to forgive each other.

When the going gets tough, we can go to any Christian for help. Regardless of who they are, if they truly believe in Jesus, they will not turn us away, but will listen to our problem, encourage us with the Gospel and pray on our behalf. They will support with physical necessities, if support is needed. There is no other person on this earth who understands you, cares for you and loves you more than a fellow brother or sister in the faith.

True, because of sin this doesn't happen perfectly. But this is what Christ intended when He called us together as a congregation of believers, and as such, we prayerfully strive to make this a reality - asking God to bless us with a spirit of love, patience and forgiveness toward one another.

Brothers and sisters in Christ - regardless of what plans you have for the holidays, don't neglect celebrating a better Christmas dinner this year. How? By accepting your Father's invitation to come into his house, partake of the spiritual food he has provided for you, and enjoy the fellowship of your closest family - your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.