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## Naming the Famine

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

A sermon preached at Duke Chapel on March 21, 2004 by the Rev. Dr. Jennifer E. Copeland

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In the neighborhood where I grew up, my two closest friends lived in the two houses catty-cornered behind mine. Our three houses together formed a triangle and within that triangle the walls were permeable. Back doors were always open, refrigerators and cupboards always well stocked, and discipline readily available regardless of one's familial relation to that angle of the triangle. One friend's mother had this great line whenever we tried to lay claim to something that wasn't ours to claim. "Look what I found," we might say to fresh baked cookies on the countertop. Or "I found it," when arguing over game pieces on the floor or baseballs in the backyard. And she would say, ever so serenely "It wasn't lost."

It wasn't lost. "He wasn't lost," the older brother might have replied to his father in the midst of the raucous celebration commemorating his younger brother's return home. He wasn't lost. He knew where he was all along. He knew how to get home. And he knew what the servants would be having for dinner at home that night. That's why he came home. He came home because he was hungry. There doesn't appear to be any other motivation for the younger brother's return home. The place where he settled after he left home—a distant country—had a famine. It's true he "squandered his property in dissolute living." "He spent everything he had." But it's the famine that does it. "I am here dying of hunger," he moans. "I will get up and go to my father and say to him, 'just treat me like one of your hired hands.'" In other words, please give me something to eat.

Famine has been pushing people around seemingly forever. Joseph's brothers packed up their old father Jacob and brought him to Egypt because "the famine was severe in the land." Lucky for them Joseph was already there, although they didn't know it since the last time they saw Joseph was in a caravan of Ishmaelites to whom they had sold him. But it all worked out in the end, thanks be to God. Famine drove Naomi, her husband, and their two sons from Bethlehem in Judah. When Naomi finally came home, she had only Ruth, her daughter-in-law, with her. Ruth met Boaz, they had a child, and it all worked out in the end, thanks be to God. Famine is everywhere in the Bible. Mighty King David had to deal with famines; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos all portend famine. And you remember the famine at Zarephath in Sidon, don't you? Jesus remembered it and mentioned it in his first sermon ever. It nearly got him killed when he reminded people that the great prophet Elijah not only fed a foreign woman before feeding his own people, but also breathed life into her dead child. Famine is serious business.

But it's hard to imagine famine in this country where most major intersections in town have three grocery stores. Three! That's incredible. They are so close together, you can stand in the parking lot and hit golf balls from one store to the other: from Harris Teeter to Food Lion, to Kroger and now, just opened, Super Target. What we need in the Southsquare area is one more grocery store. But, of course, having a grocery store on every corner does little to address hunger. I know this because the students I work with have a relationship with the Community Kitchen downtown at Urban Ministries. When I moved back here five years ago we used to serve about a hundred people for an evening meal; most nights it was a little bit less. By last summer the number had doubled and we were routinely planning for two hundred at an evening meal, usually a little bit more. I heard from the director last week that there has been a nine and a half percent increase in the number of meals served since this same time last year.

Meanwhile, the Society of St. Andrew, that fabulous hunger awareness and hunger fighting agency, tells us that 96 billion pounds of food go to waste in this country every year, while 12% of all Americans are food insecure and 18% of all children are food insecure. And you thought hunger was only a problem in places like North Korea or Ethiopia. Too bad about that 96 billion pounds of food. But, in spite of the quaint little suburban neighborhood with friendly triangles where I lived as a child, I also grew up with a farmer. Like most farmers he had to have a real job to support his farming habit, so we lived in a neighborhood and not on a farm. Thank goodness. But because of his habits, I know about farming. I know that what the Society of St. Andrew tells us is an oversimplification of the

facts. They say it's possible to produce enough food to feed everybody in the world. And I know enough to know that the problems are not production, but distribution. They know that, too, and they know that both problems are further complicated by things like NAFTA, the IMF, the WTO, the G-A-double T, the F-T-double A—it goes on and on. All forms of food and hunger management which are based on bottom lines. The bottom line is, we don't get the food to the hungry people. So, of course there's famine in the world today, even in our own city; but you and I, the Sunday circular shoppers searching for the pennies of difference between ground chuck at Krogers and Bryer's Icecream at Harris Teeter, cannot really relate to famine.

Our famines are different. They are famines of insatiable desire, consumerism addiction, and power hunger. Oh boy, that's the worst one. That's the one that propels us to falsify lab results and plagiarize term papers so we can be just that much better than the classmates with whom we are competing in the bell curve. Or it seduces us into misrepresenting our colleagues and co-workers in order to make ourselves look just that much better for the upcoming promotion. But even in the day-to-day routine of our lives when we're not competing with those beside us, we still let famine define us. We worry about what we don't have in the way of latest fashions, newest gadgets, and trendiest accessories. While most of us already have far more than we need, what we want creates intense hunger pangs in our lives. We're famished. And the famine drives us on a never-ending quest to have more.

What a stark contrast we find to famine in the Old Testament lesson from Joshua this morning. Here the people have been fed by manna in the wilderness for 40 years, never any extra, but always enough. Now, at last, the manna has ceased because the people don't need it. They can eat the produce of the land, and they do. There's no mention of rations or quotas. There's no clamoring of "mine" or "more." It is enough. It is enough. Not for long, soon the people will forget the source of their gifts and they will start to hoard food and exclude foreigners. But for now, at least, Joshua gives us a picture without competition. It is enough.

"There was a man who had two sons," Jesus begins his story and immediately we are thrown back into a competitive environment. We are predisposed to think of more and less, haves and have-nots. How easy to reduce this story to a tale of two boys, one good, one bad. The bad boy takes his inheritance, leaves home, and ends up penniless. The bad boy comes home and in a typical parabolic reversal of fortune becomes the good boy, while the good boy who stayed home obediently to do what all good boys do becomes a bad boy by refusing to join the party. It's feast or famine all over again. They can't both be right, can they? It's wrong to take your inheritance and waste it on—how did Luke put it?—"dissolute living." It was the older brother who brought up the notion of prostitutes, by the way, and could it be he's prone to hyperbole? So, prostitutes, maybe, maybe not; but dissolute living for sure and that's just wrong. Or is it? It was his money, after all. Granted most of us wait until our parents die to claim our inheritance, but when the oldest child is getting a double portion anyway and you're only getting the leftovers, the father could probably manage just fine by giving his younger son the money now. Maybe this boy's not so bad after all and maybe his brother's not so good. Maybe they've just chosen different paths.

When their paths merge again it's easy to evaluate which son is better based on which one was more responsible. But that's not what the story is about. It's not about being responsible or better. It's about famine; real famines and symbolic famines. It's about a real place where there's no food to eat—only pods fit for pigs. And it's about a place where hard work and blind obedience try vainly to feed joy and fulfillment. Then there's this parent, a father in our story, but maybe a mother in yours, maybe not even a parent, maybe a different relative, maybe a teacher, a coach, who knows, maybe even a preacher, a person who manages to nourish your hungers. Put a coat on him and make him warm; put sandals on his feet and make him comfortable; kill the fatted calf and make him full. He is hungry; feed him.

Who else is hungry? Who's the only person absent from the party? Who's the one still trying futilely to feed his happiness through obligations? The complaint of the older brother is no idle complaint: Why throw a party for somebody who came home when he didn't have any other choice but to come home? I've been here all along and I couldn't even have a goat? There's no comparison in size or taste between a goat and a cow. We don't eat goats at my house and it isn't because we don't have them. My parents, who incidentally do now live on that farm that I

mentioned earlier, actually have more goats than cows, I think, but we don't eat them. They're too little and they taste funny, at least to me they do. What a diminutive opinion for the older son to have about himself. Couldn't you even give me a goat?

Why no, says his father. Why would I give you a goat, only a goat? NO. I would give you everything I have. "All that is mine is yours." Come, taste and see that it is good. It is all good—goats and cows, sandals, rings, and robes, all symbols of the fulfillment that has always been yours. You see, the older son was just as lost as the younger one. And both of them have been found through little effort of their own. Like the sheep lost in the wilderness and the coin lost in the house from the first two-thirds of this salvation trilogy in Luke, these sons are found by a patient father who watched daily for the return of one and went out into the night to ensure the return of the other. They are found and they are fed. It is not feast or famine in this story. It is feast and feast.

It is a feast that calls us to move beyond simple dichotomies: older son/younger son, good boy/bad boy, either/or, mine/yours, us/them, to a life of celebration. All the people celebrated: the shepherd when he found the sheep called his friends and neighbors and said, "Rejoice with me, I have found my sheep that was lost"; the woman when she found the coin called her friends and neighbors and said, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." And the party in our story for today says a whole lot more about the father than either one of his sons. He, too, calls his friends and neighbors to join him in a celebration, a rejoicing over that which was lost, but now has been found.

We are called to a celebration here today, a feast of which we partake on a regular basis in the life of the Church. Not so much a filling feast—you'll probably have lunch when you leave here, maybe even a fatted calf—but a fulfilling feast all the more. This is a feast of thanksgiving in the midst of a world of famine. This celebration doesn't make the famine go away, just like the party didn't restore the younger son's squandered fortune or reduce the older son's list of responsibilities. The money was still gone and the corn still had to be hoed. But the relationship between them is forever redefined as one of acceptance and fulfillment.

With the tools of acceptance and fulfillment, this feast of thanksgiving offers us a new relationship with which to face the world's famines, both real and figurative. The parent does not choose between the children, but instead says yes to both of them. God does not choose between the loving and the lost, but waits patiently for all of us. The party is about to begin; come to the feast, for whoever eats of this bread shall never die and whoever drinks from this cup will never be thirsty again. Thanks be to God. Amen.