

## Pigging Out

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. – Luke 15.16

He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any. – The Message

The prodigal son should have come to America. Even our pigs eat well – or badly, depending on how you look at it.

According to the Associated Press, the current craze for ethanol has jacked up prices on conventional corn-based pig feed and left farmers scrambling for alternatives. A new breed of middlemen, or "jobbers" as they are known in the industry, broker deals for leftovers from the junk food industry, scraps which end up as oink-d'oeuvre's for famished livestock. Pigs, it appears, are up to their trotters in troughs full of Ramen noodles, Kit Kat bars, trail mix and tater tots.

Given what doctors tell us about the nutritional value of such snacks, perhaps they are more proper for porkers than people. Given what statistics tell us about our nation's eating habits, the prodigal's envy may be easier to understand. And if bacon was bad for you before, imagine sausage links nurtured on the nutrients in a peanut butter cup.

The point of Jesus' story, of course, was not that the pig chow was sickening, but that it was unobtainable. The horror of the story – especially for the original Jewish audience – was that the young man's mouth watered as he contemplated snatching slops from the chops of the iconic unclean animal. A worse feature however – and again to Jewish hearers – was that his boss did not regard such swiped swill as one of the perks of the profession.

"No man gave unto him" – the Greek verb implies repeated action. It was company policy among these Gentiles not to let minimum-wage help filch the farrago. Jewish law stipulated that even an ox could snack on the stuff he threshed (Dt 25.4) and the down-and-out retained the right to loot leftovers (Lev 23.22).

The contrast between the pig pen and the father's house was not just the menu! The young man ultimately chose, not between fatted calf vs. carob pods, but between the reckless generosity of grace and the pay-as-you-go

policy of the outside world. The very law he had rejected became the skeleton on which love could hang the soft flesh of forgiveness.

The first part of the story is all about economics: the going rate of legacies for second sons, the bull market gone bearish in the stock market of a foreign land, and the relative relations of labor and management between two employers. As Chapter One draws to a close, the kid stands midriff-deep in muck with a pocket calculator in his hand running a balance sheet on his profit/loss prospects.

Our Lord smashes that whole paradigm in the second part, where everything turns on the law of love. The old man's outburst is literally incalculable: no spread sheet ever made can spread far enough to accommodate such behavior.

It doesn't matter how well the pigs eat if poverty cannot afford a place at the table, and it doesn't matter how poor one is if the provender is on the house. The prodigal son didn't just learn how to handle his money better; he learned to live in a world where money was not what mattered most. The call of Christ is not to a better deal, but to a community of love where deals do not matter.

Oink!  
Doug