



Setting a Table where All are Fed

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good (I Peter 2:2 – 3)

ECS-NJ Sunday is a dedicated day for congregations within the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey to come together to celebrate our unified mission of service, reconciliation, and peace, embodying the truth that we are stronger *together*.

Participating in ECS-NJ Sunday allows us to raise a collective voice for social justice, secure the resources needed to support ECS-NJ's mission, and strengthen collaborative bonds to meet the pressing needs of our neighbors. To help us advance this crucial work, some of the ways you can participate are

- **Pray:** Include the designated ECS-NJ Collect in your service; remember ECS-NJ's mission, our neighbors facing systemic injustice and hunger, feeding ministries across the Diocese, and our shared vision of a more equitable world during the Prayers of the People and on your weekly parish prayer list.
- **Preach:** Focus sermons on the intersection of service and reconciliation, highlighting how ECS-NJ's work provides a pathway to unity and healing.
- **Give:** Take a special plate offering to help fuel ECS-NJ's mission; join our community of monthly donors.
- **Act:** Appoint a parish liaison to bridge communication with ECS-NJ and the church; sign up for ECS-NJ's new volunteer network to connect with local service projects; start or support a local feeding ministry.
- **Empower:** Engage parish youth in a meaningful, age-appropriate conversation on food injustice and explore together tangible ways to transform dialogue into action; "gamify" the classroom for social impact by using Freerice (United Nations World Food Programme) (ages 9+) or Spent (Urban Ministries of Durham) (ages 15+) to help raise social awareness and support humanitarian causes; encourage Sunday School students to "Make a Joyful Noise for Justice" by taking a change collection during service or coffee hour to help ECS-NJ make lasting change.
- **Learn:** Help tell ECS-NJ's story using printed materials, like ECS-NJ's bulletin insert for ECS-NJ Sunday, flyer, and Impact Report; stay connected through our website, Facebook page, and YouTube channel; invite a representative from ECS-NJ to speak during service

or at coffee hour; join our mailing list; contact us!

Feeding the Body, Feeding the Soul

Focused homilies on this day play a critical role in bridging the gap between liturgical life and just action while further helping to interpret scripture to meet today's social needs. By highlighting local impact in the context of social sin, a culture of care that sees Christ in every act of justice can be more readily cultivated.

Below are some thematic connections between the assigned readings and ECS-NJ Sunday. Please note, they are mission-based insights for your reference, not homiletical drafts

The Collect for Episcopal Community Services of the Diocese of New Jersey (ECS-NJ)

Compassionate God, you called us to establish Episcopal Community Services of the Diocese of New Jersey: endow us with the vision to balance charitable giving with advocating justice, so that both the source and symptoms of oppression will be overcome; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The First Reading

Acts 7:55-60

While his final moments are recorded in Acts 7, Stephen's vocational calling began as a response to inequity in the early church. As one of "the seven" appointed to oversee the daily distribution of food, Stephen's primary mission was to ensure those at highest risk for starvation, specifically Hellenistic widows, received equitable care, thus defining his ministry as one of compassionate action.

Stephen's commitment to incarnational love serves as a powerful call to action for the 21st-century Church, demonstrating that our mission is most effective when it is *both* sacred and practical. This 'lived theology' transforms the Church from a gathering place into a "sending station" where faith is tangibly expressed through radical service - a vocation that continues to embody the heart of diaconal ministry today.

Feeding the Body, Feeding the Soul:
Homily Highlights for ECS-NJ Sunday

1. Together, We are Stronger

Stephen is often viewed as a lone, Spirit-filled figure standing against an angry mob, an image that powerfully highlights individual faith. However, a closer look reveals that Stephen's strength was cultivated within a community, not a vacuum. As a deacon chosen by his peers, he was the first fruits of a church that recognized a profound truth: we are never meant to face the 'stones' of this world alone. At ECS-NJ, we mirror this early church conviction in the belief that *together, we are stronger.*

This collective resilience is vital, as the work we do is rarely met with open arms; just as Stephen faced the "stones" of indifference and systemic resistance, we encounter similar challenges today. Grappling with the reality of over a million hungry neighbors in NJ is a daunting prospect for any one person, but when we adopt a heavenly perspective like Stephen, we too can see a different reality - one where unified action transforms poverty into prosperity.

It's in this spirit that ECS-NJ unites (and invites) congregations to turn shared resources into lasting justice. When we unite to dismantle oppressive systems, our shared gifts become a tangible expression of hope, confirming that walking in faith *together* enables God's vision for a just world to prevail. In this way, we mirror the courage of Stephen, who, even in the face of the world's hardest stones, kept his eyes fixed on the glory of God and the promise of a heaven opened for all.

2. **Beyond the Closed Door**

For a growing number of people, the world has become a more exclusive place where reliable access to basic needs is no longer a given. Closing the door on food security does more than leave a temporary void; it locks people into a cycle of despair, where the pain of hunger hardens into a permanent loss of hope

In today's passage from Acts, Stephen faces the death, the ultimate closed door. But what does he see? "Behold, I see the heavens opened" (7:56). Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he sees past immediate despair to eternal glory, proving that Spirit-led faith finds hope where the world sees only hopelessness, a vision of life in the face of death.

Similarly, ECS-NJ's mission is to look at the brokenness of our communities through the lens of the Spirit. Acts 7:55-60 reminds us that our faith-driven vision is truly meaningful only when it is grounded in service to others. Before Stephen was the church's first martyr, he was one of the first deacons chosen to manage food distribution for widows (Acts 6:1-6). His path to the "open heavens" began at the community table, fostering a place where no one left hungry. When we address food insecurity in New Jersey today, we are continuing the exact ministry that defined Stephen's life; we are ensuring that the daily distribution continues for all.

Just as the early church shared resources to care for the vulnerable, ECS-NJ empowers parishes to adapt their compassion ministries using collaborative funding. By offering microgrants, such as Sacred Space, Safe Access, and Community Harvest, alongside traditional awards, ECS-NJ, *together* with you, our ministerial partners, are equipping

congregations to follow the example of Stephen by serving as bold, active, and present agents of change in their communities.

That means that when you support ECS-NJ, you aren't just donating to a nonprofit; you're helping set a table where *everyone* is fed - an act of radical love that, like Stephen, looks past the world's brokenness to witness God's glory reaching the abandoned through life-changing work. Stephen proved there is a better way to live – and so can we.

This shared potential calls us to move from inspiration to impact. Therefore, as you reflect on Stephen's witness, consider how you and your congregation can partner with ECS-NJ to turn his heavenly vision into a nourishing reality. Because when we work together, when we pray together, when we serve together, we are not just helping others - we are bringing heaven to earth

Beyond the Stones: Finding Glory in the Struggle

The world around Stephen was hostile. The world of poverty and food insecurity is often hostile thanks to the stones of stigma, systemic inequality, and chronic stress. Stephen's final prayer for his persecutors (Acts 7:60) was the ultimate act of radical generosity before giving his life for the sake of the Gospel. While we may not face literal stoning, we face the "mob" of indifference and systemic poverty. May we, like Stephen, keep our eyes fixed on the glory of God as we serve our neighbors, knowing that in Christ and in community, *together* we are stronger.

The Epistle

1 Peter 2:2-10

1 Peter 2:2-10 reimagines the church as a spirit-led, counter-cultural community organized to dismantle systemic oppression through the practice of radical grace. Built upon Christ, the ultimate marginalized cornerstone, this body is called to disrupt "darkness" by modeling an equitable society that prioritizes the vulnerable and embodies restorative justice as a direct challenge to the status quo.

Feeding the Body, Feeding the Soul:
Homily Highlights for ECS-NJ Sunday

1. A Hunger for Justice

The author of I Peter defines the church as a community that recognizes hunger as a primal cry for life. Just as a newborn instinctively craves milk to survive, this "spiritual body" is called to build a society where the basic needs of the vulnerable are met as a reflection of God's own nourishing grace. The text challenges us to "crave pure spiritual milk" so that we may grow up in our salvation. ECS-NJ believes this growth is never

solely for our own benefit; it is instead intended to increase our capacity to love our neighbors and to join God's mission of reconciliation by transforming unjust structures *together*.

Today, our spiritual growth is tested by a staggering reality: over **1.1 million** residents in New Jersey are currently food insecure—a **65% increase** since 2020. The current food insecurity crisis disproportionately impacts at-risk populations, with over **473,000** children and elderly individuals struggling to secure meals. As food scarcity is deeply rooted in structural inequality, communities of color face the most severe barriers to access.

When we grow in salvation and taste the goodness of God our hunger for righteousness becomes a hunger to ensure no person goes without a meal. ECS-NJ acts on this call by empowering congregations to address these needs directly. Since 2021, both congregational and individual support has enabled ECS-NJ to provide vital grants to grassroots feeding ministries across the Diocese while securing safe spaces for everyone. We balance this direct aid with advocacy for food security and systemic change.

By supporting ECS-NJ, you are letting your faith move you to action, changing the narrative from sacristry to hope by building a community aligned with God's purpose.

2. **Individually Crafted, Collectively Built**

"Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." A single stone cannot feed a city, but a house built of many stones can. In 2021, ECS-NJ was established to connect the Diocese of New Jersey in a unified, justice-oriented mission that serves communities alongside congregations. When we are "built together" through ECS-NJ, we become a structure that cannot be ignored. We move from reacting to the symptoms of injustice to becoming the "*architects*" of a new, just society.

We live out our priestly calling through:

- **Advocacy:** Challenging unjust structures and lobbying for legislative change.
- **Education:** Equipping God's people to organize for direct action.
- **Grantmaking:** Funding grassroots ministries that address immediate human needs.
- **Fundraising:** Securing resources to expand our reach across New Jersey.
- **Prayer:** Grounding all our work in the mission of reconciliation.

ECS-NJ is about more than just fitting in; it's a call to be "living stones" who move beyond the church walls and into active mission. Today, we invite you to be part of that construction. Together, through prayer and giving, we can provide the necessary

foundation for our parishes to transform lives through God's work. Let us build a house where every stone is valued and every neighbor finds fullness.

Out of Darkness into Light

"Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (I Peter 2:10). Food insecurity often feels like a dark, isolating valley, a shadow that hides the dignity of our neighbors and obscures the abundance of God's creation. But as the people of God, unified through ECS-NJ, we can shine the Christ's light.

By supporting ECS-NJ Sunday and our commission, we move from being fragmented individuals to a powerful, coordinated force for mercy. We are testifying that the darkness of 1.1 million hungry neighbors is not the end of the story.

Your generosity is what turns our collective faith into bread for the hungry and hope for our neighbors. Let's be the light *together* and ensure there's a seat – and a meal – for everyone at the table.

The Gospel

John 14:1 - 14

In John 14:1-14, Jesus comforts his anxious disciples by promising a prepared place in his Father's house and identifying himself as the way, truth, and life. He emphasizes unity with God, encouraging trust in him to overcome worldly distress.

While traditionally read as a message of personal salvation, a social reading of this passage underscores a mandate for radical inclusion, collective accountability, and the deconstruction of inequitable structures. Rooted in divine abundance, this text challenges believers to actively promote transformative justice and truth in the present world

Feeding the Body, Feeding the Soul:
Homily Highlights for ECS-NJ Sunday

1. A Place at the Table

Do not let your hearts be troubled (John 14:1)

These familiar words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper offered peace during a night clouded by betrayal and fear. The disciples' hearts were troubled because their world was falling apart. On this ECS-NJ Sunday, we recognize that just as the disciples' world felt unstable and broken, over one million hearts across the Garden State are also "troubled" due to the fear and uncertainty that comes from hunger.

Food insecurity is a reality that leaves 1 in 9 New Jersey residents in a daily state of troubling anxiety. It's the anxiety of a parent forced to choose between bills and bread; a

child's struggle to learn while hungry; and the isolation of being judged. That's because hunger isn't just a physical need, it's *food trauma*, a cycle of chronic stress which creates lasting harm to one's mental health, family dynamics, and social well-being.

Yet, at a meal defined by looming crisis and uncertainty, Jesus doesn't serve up a bunch of empty words to mask his followers' fears; he instead gives them a promise and a place alongside a challenge to act. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" (v. 2a). Amidst the scarcity of food deserts and social exclusion, Jesus extends a table of radical hospitality – a home where *everyone* has a seat.

Today, on ECS-NJ Sunday, we look at this text not just as a promise of heaven in the distant future, but as a promise of security *now* for a world plagued by food insecurity. ECS-Sunday reminds us that the church is tasked with making that heavenly reality a physical reality on earth. Just as Jesus prepares a spiritual home, we are also called to "prepare a place" for our neighbors by addressing both the systemic causes and consequences of hunger. When we follow the Way into the brokenness of food insecurity, we're preparing that place of absolute security and belonging here on earth. We're showing that God's love isn't abstract; it's tangible.

Greater Works through Collective Care

In today's Gospel, Jesus shares a profound and challenging promise: "whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these" (John 14:12).

As we celebrate ECS-NJ Sunday, we are reminded that these "greater works" are not acts of individual magic. Instead, they represent the collective power of a community *united* in Gospel Justice. Through ECS-NJ, we cojoin our voices and efforts to dismantle the root causes of food insecurity while easing the immediate suffering it creates. By dedicating ourselves to tangible service and mercy, we live out the Gospel, recognizing that when any member of our community struggles, the entire heart of the church feels the pain. *Together*, we turn compassion into action, making "greater things" possible in our neighborhoods and beyond. Because we are stronger *together*.

The Ultimate Power-Up: An Object Lesson for Kingdom Kids (and children's sermons)

Introducing young children to ECS-NJ's mission teaches them the importance of justice, service,

and caring for others, showing that even small hands can create significant, positive change. By explaining that ECS-NJ is a shared effort within their own diocese, children can feel part of a caring team dedicated to fixing unfairness and building the world God desires.

An object lesson using dried spaghetti can help students visualize the strength that comes with unity. Show how a single strand is easily broken, but when all the strands are bundled together with a rubber band it becomes nearly impossible to break.

That's how it is for us and the church. If we try to help the whole world alone, it can feel impossible. But when churches join together, we become part of something stronger. We become a bundle that's strong enough to do REALLY BIG things for God like making sure everyone in our community doesn't go hungry.

ECS-NJ is the special team that brings all our churches together. By joining the ECS-NJ 'bundle,' we're living out Jesus' mission of love by working *together* to make New Jersey - and the world – a fairer, kinder place for everyone.

Table Talk

Some tidbits about ECS-NJ and food insecurity in New Jersey to get the conversation started at coffee hour.

ECS-NJ

- Founded in 2021 by Bishop William "Chip" Stokes, then the 12th Bishop of New Jersey, the organization was created as a strategic response to the human needs highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- It was designed to address systemic inequities by focusing on "Gospel Justice" through five core components: Advocacy, Education, Grantmaking, Fundraising, and Prayer.
- ECS-NJ uses the motto "we are stronger together" to emphasize its role as a unified initiative of the Diocese of New Jersey, serving as a vehicle to unite the people of the Diocese in promoting Gospel Justice and meaningful systemic change. By pooling resources like the early church, ECS-NJ can provide grants, education, and connections that a single congregation might not be able to sustain alone. The motto draws on the belief that as followers of Christ, the community is bound together in a shared mission of reconciliation and service to "the beloved community."
- Since its founding, ECS-NJ has awarded over **\$500,000 in Gospel driven grants**

designed to empower **55** congregational initiatives addressing critical needs like food insecurity, housing instability, and educational gaps stemming from systemic inequality.

- By late 2024, ECS-NJ reached a major milestone of **surpassing \$1 million** in total funds raised since its inception.

Food Insecurity in the Garden State

- Nearly **1.1 million** New Jerseyans (**1 in 9**) are currently food insecure, representing a **65% increase** since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.
- Roughly **1 in 7 children** in the state live in food-insecure homes. In some areas, such as Atlantic County, the child food insecurity rate has reached as high as **24.3%**.
- New Jersey has the **19th** highest food insecurity rate for seniors in the nation effecting **1 in 8** elders.
- The average cost per meal in New Jersey is **\$4.19**, which is roughly **5% higher** than the national average. Food-insecure residents report a combined annual shortfall of more than **\$772 million** needed to meet their basic food needs.
- Between **45% to 55%** of those facing hunger in New Jersey **don't qualify** for SNAP benefits because their income exceeds the federal eligibility threshold...yet they still cannot afford consistent, healthy meals.
- Food insecurity rates for Black and Latino residents (around 24% and 22%, respectively) are roughly **three times higher** than for white residents (7%).

When we feel exhausted by the slow pace of justice, when our work seems unappreciated, remember that "we are stronger *together*" is a promise of long-term impact. Your efforts to set a place at the table where all are fed aren't in vain. They are the seeds of resurrection being planted in communities across our Diocese and state.

