

Works of God

John 6:22-35

When you think of the works of God, what do you think of? Do you think of creation, of how God made everything out of nothing? After this last year and a half, do you think of the plagues that came on people in judgment? Do you think of the miracles described throughout the Bible, done by prophets and disciples and Jesus?

In our society, there's a whole class of things described as acts of God. In insurance policies, those are natural events, not caused by human intervention, which could not have been predicted or prevented. That usually includes natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, or storms. Of course, that doesn't mean that the insurance company won't try as hard as possible to not pay out. They may even try to sue God to cover their losses, but they usually don't get very far.

In today's Gospel lesson, the people have seen a miraculous work of God. They've seen Jesus feed a huge crowd of over 5000 people using only five loaves and two fish, with baskets full of leftovers. The disciples saw Jesus do another miraculous work of God, walking on the water, calming the storm and getting their boat safely to shore. But now the crowd followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee. They want to see him do the work of God again.

The crowd is looking for Jesus, but only because of their hunger. They want Jesus to do the same work of God he did before, feeding them. They want Jesus to give them what they want, on their schedule. They want Jesus to be like the rulers they're used to having.

Rome was famous for its bread and circuses. In order to maintain power, the leaders made sure the people were fed and entertained, and then they were happy. Other rulers throughout the ancient world did the same thing, placating

their subjects with free food. The practice continues today in many and various ways, with people demanding things for free, and the powers that be trying to keep the peace with entertainment and economic benefits.

The crowd looking for Jesus isn't looking for him to save them. They're looking for Jesus to do the work of God, providing them bread from heaven just as God did to the Israelites in the wilderness. But they miss the work of God that happened in the Exodus. The work of God wasn't providing food for them in the wilderness. God's work had been saving them from slavery in Egypt. God's work was leading them to the Promised Land. God's work was providing all that they had, not just the manna.

The crowd sees the bread God provided in the wilderness, and the bread Jesus gave them earlier, not as a sign of God's provision or care or love. They want God to provide what they want on their schedule. The people are focused on material things, not spiritual things. They see the miraculous signs Jesus does, the works of God he performs, but not the true meaning. They don't see how the miracles point to who Jesus is, and what Jesus is there to do.

We often do the same thing. We want God to provide a miracle, but on our timetable. We pray for rain to come on our schedule. We pray for the pandemic to miraculously come to an end immediately. We pray for a cure for chronic and terminal diseases. We want God to do a miracle for us, but we focus on asking only for our immediate physical needs.

But when we do that, we treat God like a vending machine. We treat God as our servant. We think that if we put enough prayers or promises in, Earning God's favor, earning material blessings from some sort of vending

machine god, is impossible, and not the way the true God works.

And just as with snacks from a vending machine, we're often left unsatisfied. The snacks don't fill us as much as we think they will. They don't give us the energy we need, the nutrition we need, the satisfaction we want. We're left going back again, hoping the next snack will satisfy. All the while, God wants to give us something more, something that will satisfy, something that will last.

The people don't just see works of God as the things that God does for them. They are also the works God requires. They want to know what they have to do for God to do His works for them. They want to treat God like a vending machine; put the right work in, get the right work out.

The work of God, the work that God requires, though, isn't anything like that. As Jesus tells them,

All we do is believe. All we have to do is believe. And that's not even our work. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is who points our faith to Christ, who makes sure that Christ is the object of our faith.

Jesus came to do the work of God. The work God required of Jesus was to perfectly keep the law, to remain sinless. The work of God was to go to the cross, and die for those who had failed to do the works God required, which is everyone. And from that miraculous work of God, we all get more than a meal. We get more than a temporary reprieve from hunger. We get eternal life.

That work of God comes out of love. It doesn't come because of any merit or worthiness on our part. It doesn't come because of the works we do. It comes freely.

Jesus tells the crowd not to work for food that perishes, but for food that lasts. We've had the

chance to reexamine how we work over the last year and a half. Working from home, or at least remotely, has increased dramatically. Many have found the flexibility in such arrangements to be good and helpful. Others have discovered that being treated badly by customers in restaurants or retail stores isn't worth the low pay. Others have discovered new passions, new opportunities, new meaning in their lives. Those changes, though, haven't always brought people to finding the true meaning, the true happiness found in Jesus.

The works of God that Jesus did, the miracles, the signs, weren't done for their own purposes. They were not the goal in and of themselves. They were signs. They pointed to a greater reality. They pointed to who Jesus is; who God is.

We are surrounded by the works of God. Martin Luther once wrote,

[Most people] are so accustomed to [the works of God in nature]; they are as permeated with them as an old house is with smoke; they use them and wallow around in them like a sow in an oats sack. Oh, they say, is it so marvelous that the sun shines? That fire heats? That water contains fish? That hens lay eggs? That the earth yields grain? That a cow bears calves? That a woman gives birth to children? Why, this happens every day! ... [M]ust it be insignificant because it happens daily?

The works of God are not insignificant because they happen daily. The works of God provide for our physical needs, our daily bread. The works of God provide for our spiritual needs, calling us to repentance, giving us forgiveness. The works of God are miraculous and glorious. Look at Jesus and see them.

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