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## The Work of God

**Text:** St. John 6:24-35

Often when I introduce the confession of faith, whether it is the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, I do so with these words found in this morning's Gospel lesson: "When the people came before Jesus, they asked him, 'What is the work of God?' And Jesus replied, 'It is to believe in him whom God has sent.'"

But what exactly does it mean to say that the work of God is to believe in him whom God has sent? Well, there is an obvious answer to that. In the Gospel of John, it means without question that faith, saving faith, is faith in Jesus, for Jesus is the one whom God has sent. Thus the work of God is to believe in Jesus. But what exactly does *that* mean? Does it mean that we will be saved if we simply say the words of the Creed? Is that all we have to do? Does it mean that those who don't say them or won't say them are excluded? Do you have to *mean* all of the words, or just some of them, and if only some of them, which ones? Are Christians the only ones who are right? And how is any of this the *work* of God, anyhow?

There is no quick and easy answer to any of these questions. The *only* quick and easy answer at all is that this is pretty complicated. But since we still have about fifteen minutes anyhow, still, it is worth looking at how Jesus explains himself after making the claim that the work of God is to believe in him whom God has sent. He does so in one of those conversations that take place regularly in the Gospel of John, wherein the more he explains himself the less his conversational partners seem to understand. But perhaps we will fare better.

When Jesus claims that the work of God is to believe in him whom God has sent, he does

so in response to a question that his listeners have raised after he has just told them that they are not to work for the food that perishes; instead, they are to work for the food that endures to eternal life. This food “the Son of Man will give you.” They ask simply in response, “So, what is that work?” Jesus then gives our by now oft repeated answer. They don’t, however, ask what the food is.

There is a reason they don’t ask that question. They think they know what the food is. That is why they then ask what sign he can give to prove that *he* is the Son of Man, the one whom God has sent, and therefore the one in whom they are to believe. They have a very specific sign in mind that they think he ought to provide. For, according to tradition, when the Messiah comes he is expected to reproduce the miracle of the giving of the manna that was given to the people twelve hundred years before when they wandered in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt. Thus the sign that they wanted from Jesus to prove he was the one whom God sent was to give them manna.

Unfortunately, in asking for this sign, they appear utterly clueless. Just the day before five thousand of them had been fed in the wilderness with only a few loaves and fishes. In short, the sign has been already given and they missed it. But their waning memory is not the only problem. They have also missed what the sign was pointing at, for all signs point. They were rather like the students that St. Augustine once complained about, who, when he pointed at some wonder in the heavens for them to observe, they kept their attention steadfastly on his finger. He isn’t the only teacher to have had that experience.

There is the problem. They looked for the wrong thing, and failed to see the most important thing. They looked for the sign, namely, the bread, and missed to what the sign was pointing, namely, the one who did it. Thinking that the import of the miracle of the feeding of the

five thousand was the multiplication of the loaves and that the import of the wilderness experience after the escape from Egypt was the manna, in both cases they kept their attention firmly fixed on earthly bread. In doing so, they missed the fact that what had been given from heaven was not physical bread or manna, but God's gift of a sort of bread which gives life, eternal life, to the world. What they missed by looking at the loaves was that the real gift of life was Jesus himself. They thought that what Jesus meant when he said that the work of God was to believe in him whom God sent was that if they believed in him that he would give them the bread they wanted. What they had missed was what Jesus then told them plainly, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

In other words, they thought that if they believed in Jesus, then, as a result of their labor of belief they would get the bread. To their way of thinking, it was the bread that was the important thing. Jesus was just the means, a ticket as it were. Believe in Jesus, get a ticket. Get a ticket, trade it in for bread. But Jesus meant something quite different, something much simpler and at the same time much harder because it was simpler. What he meant was that he *is* the bread of life. To believe in him is to have eternal life, because faith in him is eternal life. Worldly labor gives us a certain kind of bread, bread we have to keep working for, because it does not last. Faith as the work of God gives us a different kind of bread, bread that lasts forever, for faith in its very act receives him who is our bread. Faith is real nourishment for real life.

Now, at first glance this may not appear to give us much help with our questions about what we must believe, how much we must believe, and who gets into heaven, etc. But it actually does say a great deal about what Christian faith is, or at least what Christian faith takes Jesus to be. Faith is not like a good luck charm that wards off evil nor is it something to be traded in for the other stuff we really want out of life. It is not the case that everybody really wants the same

thing the world over, and their religions are just different ways of getting that same, common stuff. Rather, Christian faith is a matter of who we trust and it is a matter of a distinct kind of life. In confessing our faith, therefore, we are simply locating where we find life and whom we trust to be that life. It is not just a matter of saying it, though, although we must always be willing and brace enough to say it out loud. It means above all receiving Christ as the bread of eternal life. The work of God is receiving Christ the bread of eternal life.

But how do we receive him? How do we trust and believe in this way? The English theologian John Henry Newman was once asked by a man who thought he had lost his faith because he had doubts, how he could tell if he still had faith. Newman replied that all he had to do was look to see if he still prayed and if he still took communion. What Newman meant by that is rather simple. If we pray, and pray in Jesus' name, we are looking to him to come to us, and are looking for his presence to take away evil and to give life. If we don't pray, no matter what we say otherwise, we clearly don't trust that he has something worthwhile to give. We have lost faith not when we have intellectual doubts, for questioning is simply part of how we learn better. We have lost faith, though, when we no longer look to Christ in prayer to deal with our doubts. Similarly, if we take communion, no matter how confused we may be, we are taking him at his word when he says that he is the bread of life, and that "whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." In these things, Christ is present and we know he is present by the sort of life he gives in them.

All this is in one way rather simple, but it can also be rather difficult, too. But it can be pictured, and one of the best ways I have ever found of picturing it came in a film made several years ago in Denmark titled *Babette's Feast*.

*Babette's Feast* is the story of a small pietistic Lutheran sect in the hinterlands of

Denmark in the nineteenth century. The sect had been founded by a man of real spirituality, one whose love for God and for all his brothers and sisters was genuine and broad. Although the life style of the community was strictly modest, it, too, was genuine and not forced. Nowhere was this seen quite so well as in the characters of the founder's daughters, who, despite possessing both beauty and musical talent, nevertheless rejected all enticements to try to succeed in the world. One rejected a very favorable marriage and the other rejected an opera career, both preferring instead to persevere in the way of their father and their faith. For they found in the community a peace and joy that could not be found elsewhere.

In time, of course, the founder died, leaving the care of the community to his daughters. Although they were filled with every good grace and good intention, the community in time shrunk to ten aged souls, including the daughters. They followed their traditional practices, but as always happens in such communities, they also had fallen into too much bickering, too many complaints, too much distrust of each other.

Then into their lives came Babette, a young French woman who had just fled a bloody civil war in France in which her husband and her son were killed. Simply looking for refuge, she came to work for the two sisters for a pittance, for they could not pay her much. Yet, she greatly improved their simple lives, for Babette was above all a French cook of the first order. A few simple herbs in the daily fare of the community transformed that fare into a taste of heaven.

For fourteen years, Babette worked for the sisters. Then one day she announced that she had just won ten thousand francs in the French national lottery. The sisters were convinced that she would now leave them since she had the means to do so. But that was hardly the only problem they faced. The one hundredth anniversary of their father's birth was coming up soon, and they had proposed by way of observing it a small meal among the community. Babette upon

learning of their plans offered to cook for them what she called a true French meal. Hardly wishing to offend her, although they had no real desire to desert their own boring meal plans, they hesitantly agreed.

But then the flood waters broke loose. After a brief trip to France by Babette to order all that she would need for the meal, suddenly into the village the imported ingredients for the meal began to arrive – a huge tortoise for turtle soup, a dozen live quails, cases of wine and brandy, more sugar than all of them had eaten in the past several years put together. Still not wishing to offend Babette, but worrying that they were about to be thrown into an experience paralleled only by the pagan Belshazzar's feast, they quietly agreed to go along with the plan. However, they firmly resolved amongst themselves that they would not enjoy it, and that not a single one of them was to mention the quality of the food at all; all were to maintain the usual severe decorum.

The plan was a good one, but not effective. It was like trying to put your fingers into your ears so as not to hear something. The problem here was that on the night of the feast a aged relative who was once part of the community arrived with her son, a famous and worldly general. This brought the number of disciples to twelve. Now, the general had not been briefed on the plan that enjoined silence on the company, and so he made absolutely no attempt to restrain his enthusiasm. He ate and drank with gusto. He wildly exclaimed that only once in his life had he had such turtle soup, such a delicious Burgundy, such a wonderful entrée as the *coq en sarcophage*. At first, the others simply stared at their plates in embarrassed silence. But soon the wine and the exquisite meal had its effects on the other eleven disciples, too. Smiles broke out and their once gray sunken cheeks became ruddy. The bickering and the severity stopped. Old wounds and hurts were quickly being forgiven in a spirit of fellowship that had not existed for many years. It was, as they said, as if the founder himself were there once more. The community

had been rediscovered, a point made obvious as they all went outside at the end of the meal and sang a hymn of surpassing sweetness while holding hands around the town well, that symbol of living water.

But that was not all. For once everybody had gone home, the sisters returned to thank Babette, and to express their despair at the thought that she would now be leaving them. But, Babette informed them, she had no intention of leaving. She couldn't if she wanted to do so. She had spent every last franc of her winnings on this meal for them. No, instead, she told them, she would continue to live with them as their servant for the rest of her days.

Twenty one hundred years ago, the Word became flesh in order that we who are flesh might become divine. He came among us, and served us, giving his body and blood, his very self to the community he had founded. He gave everything he had, so that we in partaking of his substance might be able to live in peace and joy in this community. Sometimes we have approached this table resolving to keep our heads down and our lips silent. But then we have also found that in this feast he has prepared for us that there is the power to heal us and to make us joyful once again. It is as if he were with us once again.

What does it mean to say that the work of God is to believe in him whom God sent? It means to feed on him in this meal with your hearts in faith, and it means to live together as his body, in peace and joy and love. That is above all the proof he gives that he is the Son of Man, namely, the very life that we live because of him.