

Text – John 6:1-21 Of whom Does This Remind You?

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Creator has come into the world to reclaim and renew creation. Oh, certainly God has never been absent from the world or uninvolved with what goes on in it. If that were the case, then the world would have ceased to be.

Continually, God upholds creation and supplies the needs of creatures. “The eyes of all look to you,” the psalmist says, “and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.” Another psalm tells us that God gives “bread to strengthen the human heart” (Psalm 145:15-16; Psalm 104:15).

But many people don’t acknowledge the Creator or give him thanks. Even Christians who say a prayer before meals may do it more as a pious tradition than anything else, and don’t give any thought to God really being the giver of their food.

Through the ages, some have looked to fertility gods and goddesses to supply their needs. Today, perhaps people explain how they get their food and other necessities of life in terms of natural processes — the solar energy that plants use, their chemical reactions, weather and so forth. Or they just don’t think about such matters at all, like other animals.

It’s not surprising that deer and bears and sparrows don’t reflect on where their food comes from or give thanks for it. God, however, created human beings to be different. We were to know God and to be God’s representatives in caring for creation. But we refused — that’s what the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent is about.

And because of that refusal, humanity gradually wandered away from God. We didn’t trust in God above everything else, we didn’t love our neighbors as ourselves, and we didn’t do a very good job of caring for creation. Bloodshed, wars, infidelity and environmental devastation were the result.

But when our unfaithfulness had taken us far from God, God did not abandon us to destruction and death. That is why, in our gospel, a Jewish teacher stands on a hill near the Sea of Galilee, surrounded by several thousand hungry people.

Most of them have no food, and there’s no place nearby where they can get any. But the teacher’s disciples have found a boy who has brought something for dinner. There are five barley loaves — generally a food of poor people — and a couple of dried fish.

Jesus takes them, gives thanks to the God of Israel and hands these paltry provisions to his disciples to distribute to the crowd. As they do that, there is more and more of the food so that everyone has enough. And we say, “It’s a miracle!”

Well, all right, we can call it that if we wish. The word “miracle,” after all, just means an unusual event at which people marvel. But that’s not the word the Gospel of John uses.

“When the people saw the sign that [Jesus] had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’” “Sign” is John’s word for turning water into wine at Cana, for opening the eyes of a blind man and for other great works that Jesus does.

So think of this action of feeding the multitude like a big yellow arrow pointing to Jesus and words saying, “Of whom does this remind you?” Who is it who gives “bread to strengthen the human heart”?

For those who know the scriptures, the answer is obvious: It’s the God of Israel, the one who made heaven and earth. This event is not some kind of magic trick, but a sign that the Creator of the universe is present and active.

Actually, the Creator of the universe is present and active all the time. The feeding of the multitude is the kind of thing that God is doing in the world every day. God is always providing food for his creatures. In the Lord’s Prayer we ask, “Give us this day our daily bread,” and if we have any experience of the world at all, we don’t expect food to drop out of nowhere onto our plates.

Our bread comes to us because of the planting of seeds; the growth of plants fueled by water, sunlight, air and soil chemicals; and the harvesting and processing of grain by humans.

And as people of faith, we should understand God somehow to be working with and through all those processes. That is the picture we’re given in the Bible’s first creation story, where God does not simply make plants appear in a vacuum.

Instead, the Creator commands, “Let the earth put forth vegetation” (Genesis 1:11). And every year this same Creator turns the little bit of grain planted in the fields into a lot of grain that becomes our bread. Something similar is true of all our other food.

We don’t literally see God at work in these processes, but only the elements — the grain, the soil and so forth — that God uses. Martin Luther called these things with which God works “the masks of God” because they conceal God from our direct observation.

And in an important sense, this hiddenness of God in creation is a gift because it means that we have to find out for ourselves how things in the world function. We have to grow up and not just have all our needs supplied to us like babies in a nursery.

But in the event that we’re told of in our text, God takes the mask off.

Grains of barley or wheat planted in the earth become a great deal more barley or wheat that is made into bread for our meal. Jesus takes a few loaves of bread in his hands and gives thanks, and it becomes many loaves of bread to feed thousands.

It is the same way of operating, the same way of working — a little becomes a great deal. The same God who created the world and is at work in it all the time to sustain life is doing the same thing here in a magnified and more dramatic way.

People sometimes talk about miracles in terms of God “intervening” in the world. But what we see in the stories of Jesus’ marvelous works aren’t invasions of the world by some foreign power, but acts of the God who made the world in the beginning.

What Jesus does is, of course, surprising, but it is not completely different from things we see every day. The miracles are not violations of the order of nature but extensions of it.

There are indeed stories in the gospels that go beyond anything in common experience. Today’s Gospel concludes with Jesus walking on the sea, and the whole story of Jesus reaches its climax in his resurrection on Easter. These are stories of the new creation, of the renewal of the world pointed to in verses that speak of hope for “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1).

But this new creation does not mean annihilation of the old world and replacement by something entirely different, but the world’s transformation.

The story of the feeding of the multitude is then a sign that God was present and active in Jesus. But there is something else in the text that we might not think about. “Then Jesus took the loaves,” it says, “and when he had given thanks, he distributed them” (John 6:11).

Jesus is God’s presence with us, but he is also fully human. And as a human being — in fact, as what God always meant humanity to be — he shows us our proper relationship with God. And that proper relationship is to acknowledge God as the Creator and to give thanks and praise to God for the gifts we receive in creation.

Faith in Jesus Christ means faith in our Creator, the source of our life. Through his death and resurrection, he begins the renewal of creation and the renewal of our lives. And for this, we give God thanks and praise. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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