

Gospel - John 6: 24-35

Pentecost 10

Sermon 8.1.21

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The people ask Jesus, **“What must we do?”**

It is a reasonable question. It is a commonly asked question.

Today they ask Jesus, “What must we do,” and specifically they ask, “What must we do to perform works of God like you?”

The question is posed like a kind of bargaining. What must we do in order to receive something back? It is reminiscent of some of the Old Testament promises where God indicates that if you will do this or obey that, then I, God, will grant you a blessing. The entire idea is contractual.

Here’s an example from the book of Malachi. The prophet speaks to the people to “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

I do understand that when people see power demonstrations of Jesus, they then would like to be able to do the same things.

Hence the question, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Their question is only natural.

Just think for yourselves, what if you had the power to multiply bread and fish? You would never have to grow hungry. Your family and friends would never grow hungry. Your community would stop suffering. You could close down the food banks.

What else could you do if you could perform the works of God?

You could turn water into wine. You could instruct about God’s secrets like when Jesus taught Nicodemus in the nighttime. You could tell people the secrets of their hearts like Jesus did with the woman at the well. You could heal the sick and the lame.

You could do “greater works than these,” like Jesus promises.

The mistake is our believing we must do anything at all.

I would like to observe at the outset that one of the things we most frequently “do” is come to church.

That’s got me thinking about different reasons why we come to church; but let me pose the question to discover some of your own reasons for coming to church.

Why do you come? What attracts you to begin with? What keeps you coming back?

Why do I come to church? I am contracted to come to church of course. But for many of the reasons you have already stated, I come to church in order to experience a private and public connection with God and God's people.

I come in order to sense certain feelings, especially those that go along with corporate worship, acceptance, forgiveness and renewal. I also come for a sense of individual purpose and meaning. I come to speak words of absolution and forgiveness. I come to proclaim the message of the gospel. I come to share with you our Lord's body—and in non-pandemic times to share our Lord's blood.

They are all great reasons for doing church. They point to Jesus' fundamental message in today's reading. Jesus doesn't only want our doing, our acting. Jesus wants our believing. In other words he wants our minds, our hearts, our being. Jesus wants us. "This is the work of God," Jesus answers, "that you believe in him whom he has sent."

Moreover, asking Jesus what we can do simply does not take into account Jesus offering himself fully to us as bread, that is, all who he is. He wants to give himself as freely as bread, irrespective of our doing.

"What must I do," they ask, "to perform the works of God?"

Filling in the blanks, they ask, what must I do to be knowledge-able enough, to be worthy enough, to be holy enough, to be pure enough, to be skilled enough, to be qualified enough, to be credentialed enough?

I have got good news—there is nothing you can do or need to do. He just wants us to allow him to love us, to do for us. That's all. The gospel is not anything about what we must do. The gospel is about what God through Christ has done for us.

When the rich young ruler asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do? What must I do to inherit eternal life," Jesus answers him directly, according to his question.

He says, "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

"He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

I do not want you to miss the statement where it says that, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Jesus loved him.

He didn't have to earn Jesus' love. He didn't have to keep certain commandments. He didn't even have to sell everything and give it to the poor, because it says that Jesus looked on him and loved him anyway. Jesus loved him. But he could not comprehend it.

One of my personal heroes is Rev. Nadia Boltz-Weber. In her 2013 autobiography, *Pastrix*, Rev. Nadia makes these two important theological points (actually they are two of five important points). She says:

"God's grace is a gift that is freely given to us. We don't earn a thing when it comes to God's love, and we only try to live in response to the gift."

“The movement in our relationship to God is always from God to us. Always. We can’t, through our piety or goodness, move closer to God. God is always coming near to us. Most especially in the Eucharist and in the stranger.”

Jesus is our living bread. It means he is our means of life in every way. Jesus thus teaches our life, health, happiness, wholeness, wellbeing, and relationships are all sustained by provision of his living person and his living grace. We need not do, but gratefully receive.

Lynn and I hosted a celebration for our granddaughter, Kyla, yesterday, which lasted all afternoon and into the evening with about 22 attendees including children.

This was her high school graduation party. Ostensibly, she did need to do something in order to qualify for a party. She needed to graduate from high school. There was definitely a unified family sigh of relief when indeed she did graduate, especially in spite of this crazy Covid year.

But the occasion of a high school graduation was only an excuse for there to be an outpouring of love and gifts and congratulations for her now beginning to make her way toward greater autonomy and adulthood.

Think about the prodigal son. From his point of view he needed to do stuff. He needed to come to his senses, begin his return, make his approach, say certain words: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

From the father’s point of view he loved his son without condition. He loved him while he was part of the household. He loved him when he demanded his inheritance. He loved him when he traveled to a far country and squandered his property. He loved him when he ate the same pods the pigs were eating. And he loved when he returned and when he saw him from afar: “He ran and put his arms around him.” He clothed him in his finest robe, “put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” He killed the fatted calf and began to celebrate.

My daughter Lael appreciates the object lesson and image of Mary and Martha serving Jesus.

You remember how Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to what he was saying, while her sister, Martha, “was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work myself? Tell her to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”

I am afraid I am very much like Martha and need to be busy with some task or other.

Especially when I am under pressure, I am anxious and fidgety and must be driven toward doing something—anything. I am like the people in the crowd who are all the time saying, “What must we do?”

Gladly, there is something we can do. We can do church. We can come to church. In the natural rhythm of our liturgical doing we gather, we feast, we listen, and we are sent. The entire experience is called Eucharist, for we share with God our thanks and praise for all his gifts that he bestows; and in particular for his love, forgiveness, absolution and blessing.

In this morning’s rhythm we will soon approach the Lord’s Table where Christ’s real presence manifests himself as our own personal bread of life. “This is my body. This is my blood of forgiveness. Do this in remembrance of me.”

The prophet Ezekiel envisions a restored temple where the people must enter through this one particular door in order to worship. When they leave the Presence, they are made to exit through an entirely different door. Simply put, they can't go out the same way they came in. In other words, they are changed, transformed. We, too, can never go out the way we came in. We thank God for that. Amen.