

On his deathbed, a man is sad because he worked hard all his life to amass a great fortune. Even though he knows that “You can’t take it with you,” he prays for an exception. Suddenly, an angel appears and says that God has answered his prayer: he can take one suitcase of whatever he wants into the afterlife. Overjoyed, the man hops out of bed, finds his largest suitcase, runs to his safe, fills his case with as many bricks of solid gold as can fit, drags the heavy baggage to his bedside and then, at peace, lays down to die. Suddenly, he appears before the Pearly Gates. Panting and sweating, he heaves and pushes his massive golden burden to St. Peter who stands to welcome him. But first Peter asks to see what’s in the suitcase. Peter opens it, blinks a couple of times, looked dumbfounded, and then—pointing to the suitcase with one hand and with the other to the Heavenly streets on which they stand—he asks, “Pavement? You brought pavement?”

When people tell us what they think about God they are telling us about themselves and what they think our purpose ought to be. Energetic people tend to imagine that God is always on the move and that we therefore must be men and women of zealous action. Conscientious people tend to imagine that God is primarily interested in moral standards and that we therefore must maintain and promote good behavior. Gentle people tend to imagine that God is fundamentally kind and that we therefore must always build and strengthen interpersonal relationships. God is all these things, and all these things are good for us to do. But in Heaven, these things are as common as pavement. God is infinitely greater than we can imagine; since we are made in His image and likeness, so are we. The strange Gospel that Christ lived, died, and rose again to offer us—the Good News so weird that we could never have imagined it—depends not on our zealous action, moral righteousness, or interpersonal kindness but entirely on God. Regardless of what we think God is, He simply is; He sent His only begotten Son to show us Who He is so that we might simply love Him for Who He is.

Today’s reading takes place just after Jesus has fed a crowd of 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. Unsurprisingly, the crowd follows Him. He knows what they want. Or maybe it is better to say that He knows what they think they want, just as He knows what we all think we want from God. He knows that sometimes we want things from God more than we want God Himself. In the same way that Jesus fed the crowd with bread and fish, they (and we!) want to make Him a king Who will feed our needs. In fact, the miraculous feeding of the crowd in the wilderness is a repetition of the time He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness when Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in his 1880 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated Christ’s temptations into three “M’s”: Materialism, Miracle, and Majesty. Materialism: we want

God to be a King who will give us limitless personal economic prosperity—to turn stones into bread, to put a chicken in every pot, to give high wages and low inflation and everything else advertised to us in the news and on Madison Avenue. Instead of seeking the things that fade away like every kind of earthly bread, Jesus says that should seek to acquire the Bread from Heaven, the Kingdom of God, the eternal life which is found only in Him, the Son of God made Man Who was crucified, is resurrected, and has ascended into Heaven. Second, Miracle: we want God to be a king who will dazzle us into submission to Him with heroic proofs of His divine identity and power to change our lives—physical healings, spiritual deliverances, cosmic signs. Instead, Jesus refuses to subjugate our wills through such irresistible miracles but rather works to liberate our souls through by encouraging us to have faith in Him even when such signs are not seen. Finally, Majesty: we want God to be a king who will dominate the world with a New Messianic Order, using political and even military power and might to fix our social, culture, and international problems. But while Christ is a King, His Kingdom is not of this world. Instead of enforcing imperfect peace through strength, Christ triumphed over the world through weakness; He died on the Cross like the lowest criminal or slave. He will have us reveal His enduring and even eternal peace by dying to ourselves the way He died, loving and forgiving our enemies the way He loved, forgave, and still forgives His. And so, opposing the crowd’s demands that He feed them with materialism, miracles, or majestic might, Jesus tells them (and us!), “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you (John 6:27).”

And still, like us, the crowd fails to understand that the Kingdom is not what we work to accomplish but rather is what He has come to accomplish for us. They ask Him, “What must we do to perform the works of God (John 6:28)?” In response, Jesus says, “This is the work of God: to believe in the One Whom He has sent (John 6:29).” No work needed: Just believe. God’s love does not wait for us to build hospitals or food banks; to visit the sick, widows, or orphans; to right social wrongs or empowered the oppressed. These things are good, but in God’s Kingdom they are as common as pavement. God does not withhold His love even if we fail to build a prayer life, start a Bible study, lose another fifteen pounds, or accomplish any other plan for self-improvement. Jesus says that the only work of God is for us to believe in the One Whom He sent.

You and I know that this is more easily said than done. “Belief,” or “faith,” is just another word for “trust.” And it is a very difficult thing to trust anyone or anything. You and I are addicted to control; we will always seek to control things even if our attempts to control them leads to even

greater catastrophes than what we sought to avoid by controlling them. A young couple may know intellectually about babysitters who might care for their child so they can take a date night; they may even know such a babysitter who has a long-proven track record of caring for other children from other families. But it is entirely different for them to entrust their most precious person or people to that 13-year-old and to walk out the door. For some of us, and perhaps all of us from time to time, it is very difficult if not impossible to truly trust that God is in charge and at work even when times are hard: a child in distress, our declining health, credit card debt, addiction. Sometimes it can even be hard to trust what Jesus the Son of God has done for us. It almost seems too good to be true that He loves us totally as we are, that even while we behave stupidly or selfishly, Jesus died for us on the Cross, that He has totally absolved us from our selfishness, and that after we die He will raise us and everyone we have ever loved from the dead. It can be hard to accept the truth that God the Father has adopted us as His children and that therefore we will be with Him and delight with Him, the saints, and the angels forever. As promising as these promises are, they can be hard to believe. Major moral failures, emotional traumas, or crushing disappointments can strip us of our ability to trust. When trust feels impossible, what can we do when Jesus says that the most important thing we can ever do is to trust the One Whom the Father has sent? How do we, as fearful people, learn to trust God?

We are now amid the Summer Olympics, which for me is a time to be exposed to form of exercise and activity about which I know nothing. For example, I know nothing about horses, but today and for the next few days we can see people compete for medals with them—we can watch riders lead their horses to jump over fences and other obstacles they would otherwise avoid—I am told these competitions are known as *dressage*. A friend of mine is familiar with such activities. I asked him how trainers work with their horses to get over their fears so that they can move and jump over obstacles as they were born to be able do. He told me that these trainers have two kinds of techniques. The first are punitive. Essentially, the trainer scolds, yells at, and/or beats the horse until it is compelled to jump. While effective in the short-term, the results of that method are not long-lasting and are even traumatic. The other technique requires time and patience. The trainer walks with the horse, close to its side, and slowly approaches the place the horse fears. Repeatedly and over time, with constant affection and calm, loving, soft-spoken encouragement, the horse learns to get close to its fear, to examine it with the comforting trainer nearby, and to see that the thing he fears will not hurt him. At first, the horse has no trust in anything—even with the trainer beside him its fear is too strong. But over time, the trainer's trust in the horse is enough; the

trainer's trust is imparted to the horse so that it becomes his own. Connected to and empowered by the trainer, the horse eventually finds the courage to face his fear and learn to do what he was created to do: to jump.

In this present life, now, today, we may have no trust in God or anything at all. God knows this. That is why He sent His only and beloved Son to live among us, to walk beside us, to go the places we fear, to face the pain that produces that fear, and to lead us through them to the kind of life we were created to enjoy. Jesus came among us to supply what we lack. His trust in the Father is sufficient for us; His trust in His Father changes us. Today we may fail to trust, but by standing beside us, He constantly imparts His trust to us, and one day it will be our own. On that day, we will finally jump as we were made to do. This leap into life as we are meant to live it far exceeds the quality of life that any kind of material comfort, miraculous assurance, or magisterial power could ever provide. On that day, we will finally love and truly live in a way that is greater than we could ever have imagined.

In San Francisco in the mid-1920s, there was a street evangelist who used to stand on the street corner with a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. She proclaimed that she wanted to burn down Heaven and extinguish the fires of Hell so that we would neither seek the promise of reward nor the fear of punishment but simply love God for Who He is. The work of God is to believe in the One He sent. If we even want to try to believe in Him, we will grow to trust Him. As we grow to trust Him, we grow to simply love Him as He is. And that is the only thing that ever truly matters.