

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

THE WORK OF GOD

John 6:24-35

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Michael Hoy

24So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 25When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." 28Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 35Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

DIAGNOSIS: Earning Our Bread

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Work in the Old World

Earning our living is already a sign that we are part and parcel of a world that lives by the law, that expects results, that critically measures them, and rarely gets challenged with a better way. When the rich seem to prosper under our labor, we may get resentful, thinking of our work as a chore, our daily bread as a daily grind. But the problem is far worse than being swept up in a society of crass consumerism.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Trusting our Merits

What makes it worse is that we trust it. We trust the legal system, the workings of the law. We may even become quite good at it, and unafraid to boast of our successes. We may even think narcissistically that if it weren't for us, and what we do, nothing could be as great as it is today. The Mosaic law becomes a mosaic for living—the pattern of what we think makes things right. After all, “our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness” (v. 31), which they worked to pick up. We are just following in their footsteps.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Just Desserts for Our Work

Indeed, we are. And therein lies the greater criticism. We have consigned ourselves to a law that we cannot fulfill. We have boasted of our works to the point that we have come to trust in them. And yet they cannot measure up to the critical measure of God. God, who holds us all accountable, finds all our efforts to earn at work, even to earn favor, as that which “perishes” (v. 27) and leads us only to our end in death.

PROGNOSIS: The Bread Who Earns Us

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Work that Christ Performs

But that ending in death is precisely where the “work” that does what is good comes in Jesus the Christ. The question, “When did you come here?” becomes instead—and in spite—of its original ask, an acknowledgment of a new day dawning. This new day will bring earnings of eternal life that Christ will give to us as a gift, a price to pay for so many who have fallen out of favor, that Manna “which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (v. 33). Upon the cross, Christ does the work for us where no one will hunger or thirst for righteousness.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting Christ’s Merits

This is the “sign” to which we look. Not to our earnings, not to the daily grind, but to Christ. We mark the work of our day with a rising in the sign of his cross, and we pray that all we may do this day may be done in the light of his promise. And where we fail, we trust in the mercy of his forgiveness. This is the bread that we could never earn, but for which we yearn: “Sir, give us this bread always” (v. 34).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (Final Solution): New Works for the World

But more, through his promise, we become signs of this new hope for the world. We don’t point at ourselves for the goods of life, but to the Source. Life in this world, even our daily earnings, are a gift from our heavenly Father through the blessings of his life-giving Son, emboldening us each and every day through the holy-ing Spirit. It is a day to raise people up from their being ground into the ground, and the truly better way that finally silences all criticism. The new day dawns!