

As many of you know, I have just returned from a vacation in France. When I mention that I've been there, people always ask me about the food. Yes, it is very good. The group tour included some wonderfully memorable dining experiences, and with a little help from my smartphone, I was able to find some amazing, inexpensive local restaurants when I was on my own. But when I was on my own, searching for a place to eat, I noticed that the restaurant closest to my hotel was... McDonald's. Or as the French call it, "Le McDo." And I wondered, in a country where you can get excellent food for about the same price, how in the world do they stay in business? It can't be just tourists keeping them afloat, certainly not if the French have embraced the chain enough to give it a nickname.

Is it because the food they sell does not perish? Some of you might have heard of the experiment where someone put a Big Mac under a glass jar and observed it for a month. Shockingly, it did not get moldy. I don't think that's what Jesus was talking about when he offered food that does not perish. And not just because of the obvious anachronism.

Jesus was seizing a teachable moment. John tells us that after the feeding of the 5,000, the crowd did not disperse, but followed Jesus. It's always nice to hear about people following Jesus, isn't it? But many good preachers have criticized the crowd for following Jesus not because of their faith, but because they wanted another free meal. Jesus himself points this out: "you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." But that is an observation, not a criticism.

I want to give the crowd some credit. First, following Jesus is good, even when people do it for less than noble reasons. If the crowd stayed because they had been converted and wanted to pattern their lives according to Jesus's teachings, that would have been better, but the story shows they were still listening, still engaging with Jesus.

Secondly, consider the theology. Both Eden and Heaven are described as places where human beings can eat well without having to work. Remember that we have it on good authority that heaven is like a wedding banquet, which is somehow even better than Eden. Jesus's feeding miracles are indicative of God's forgiveness of sins and foretastes of the heavenly wedding banquet. Should people not desire those things? Jesus did his first miracle at a wedding, making sure that besides all the food, there was also wine, in abundance, flowing from God to guest.

Thirdly, remember that in the ancient world, famine was never far away. So a miraculous feeding and all that talk about food that perishes and food that endures lands differently for us than it did for the crowd. One year of drought or a horde of locusts could destroy all the available food for a community, and the Bible speaks to this scary reality. And on the level of individuals and families, if the food they planned to eat spoiled or was eaten by pests, they wouldn't shrug and make a quick trip to Le McDo, *they wouldn't eat that day.*

Chances are, most of the people in the crowd were agricultural workers. How do I know that? Because in the ancient world, almost everyone was a peasant, and almost every peasant was an agricultural worker. The crowd had taken off from that work of basic sustenance in order to be with Jesus. Most of us wouldn't take off from work to see an itinerant preacher because we might get in trouble when we got back. The crowd wasn't risking an unflattering performance review, they were risking *death by starvation*. So their faith is actually impressive, perhaps even touching. And while Jesus does correct their misapprehensions, he doesn't rebuke them as he rebuked the well-fed elites, he offers them something even more nourishing than they could have imagined: eternal sustenance in all things, eternity with God who will leave no need unmet, *and* a relationship with God right now, in this life.

But Jesus did not go on feeding them. While Jesus fed and healed everyone he encountered who had a need, we might fairly ask, why didn't Jesus do more for the world? The best argument *against* Jesus being the messiah is that he did not usher in an era of global peace and prosperity. People wonder why God allows so much suffering in the world. Why wouldn't Jesus have fed the people again?

For one thing, the purpose of the miracle was to reveal Jesus's divinity. For another, Jesus helped people realize their God-given potential, but Jesus never made people physically dependent on him. But also, earthly life itself, let alone the suffering it can contain, is so small compared to the eternal, perfect life that God intends for all people to enjoy. I remember how, when my brother was very young, he would become infuriated when he lost at a video game. This was in the days when they deliberately made games very hard to win, so you can imagine that this became something of a problem. Of course he grew out of it, realizing that once the screen said, "Game Over," he could put down the controller, walk away from the TV, and do a great many other things, all of which were more interesting, satisfying, and rewarding than twitching and squinting.

People who are spiritually hungry are still asking, Why does God let terrible things happen? Has the church missed the point of today's Gospel story? It is certainly good that we literally feed the hungry, and sometimes even work toward resolving the root causes of hunger, but how good are we at sharing Jesus, the Bread of Life, which no one else can do? I'm not saying we should cease responding to physical hunger, not at all, but I am saying that we need to be better about proclaiming the grace- and life-giving truth about Jesus to a world that is increasingly spiritually hungry.

The church can tell the world, Everyone we ever meet, everything that ever happens, is bringing us to the threshold of God. Therefore even the worst things we can experience have sacred meaning. That is not to say that suffering and injustice are somehow for the best, that we should accept the unacceptable — no, Jesus relieved suffering and stood firmly in the Jewish prophetic tradition of crying out for justice. But that *is* to say that we should rediscover our baptismal birthright, the faith of the

Christians who faced martyrdom without fear or regret, sometimes even cracking jokes about the manner of their deaths. Those Christians lived and breathed what we acknowledge and forget: that being in joyful, graceful, everlasting relationship with God who is love is the only goal worthy of a human soul, above everything else we might crave.

Will God punish us if we don't have that level of faith? No, absolutely not. God only ever loves us, and God understands our weaknesses and limitations. There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting, or attaining, things that make us happy. But trouble starts when those desires take us away from God. God knows us too well to expect perfection, but the good news is that *any* increase in our faith will make our lives better, will help us pattern our lives more closely after the life that gave order to chaos, that causes the universe to operate according to laws. Increasing our faith, growing closer to God, will fill us with the same joy, grace, and love right now that the saints enjoy in heaven, crowding out anger, fear, and regret.

Persisting in following Jesus will leave us so full of God's food that we'll feel like we've just polished off an indulgent French dinner, so that when the world offers us a sack of cold, soggy McDonald's, we'll chuckle and say, "no thanks." We might say, "I'm good," but it would be more accurate to say, we are filled with God's good things. And that has consequences for how we live, how we treat other people. We will delight in sharing joy, grace, and love with others, and invite them to the banquet of God.