

John 6: 24-35

THERE WAS A NAME IN 19TH CENTURY CHINA FOR PERSONS WHO CAME TO CHURCH BECAUSE THEY WERE HUNGRY FOR MATERIAL FOOD. THEY CONVERTED, WERE BAPTIZED, JOINED THE CHURCH, AND REMAINED ACTIVE MEMBERS AS LONG AS THEIR PHYSICAL NEEDS WERE MET THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF THE CONGREGATION. BUT ONCE THEIR PROSPECTS IMPROVED AND THEY AND THEIR FAMILIES NO LONGER NEEDED RICE, THEY DRIFTED AWAY FROM THE CHURCH. MISSIONARIES CALLED THEM "RICE CHRISTIANS." THAT NAME CALLS TO MIND THOSE WHO FLOCKED TO THE CHURCHES IN EAST GERMANY AND ROMANIA JUST BEFORE THE LIBERATION OF EASTERN EUROPE---WHEN THE CHURCH WAS MANIFESTING COURAGE, AND PASTORS WERE SPEAKING OUT AGAINST COMMUNIST REGIMES. THE PEOPLE CAME TO CHEER THE CHURCH ON, AND TO JOIN THE CONGREGATION IN OPPOSITION TO COMMUNISM. BUT AFTER LIBERATION FROM SOVIET DICTATORS, THE CROWDS DISPERSED AND THE CHURCHES BEGAN STRUGGLING AND WERE AS ABANDONED AS THEY HAD BEEN PRIOR THE STIRRINGS OF POLITICAL LIBERTY.

THE CROWDS OF PEOPLE WHO FOLLOWED JESUS TO CAPERNAUM WERE THE VERY ONES WHO SAW THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000. BUT THEY SAW THE MIRACLE AS AN END IN ITSELF, RATHER THAN AS THE SIGN IT WAS MEANT TO BE, SOMETHING THAT POINTED THEM TO FAITH IN THE LIVING GOD AND IN THE SON WHOM GOD HAD SENT. JESUS TOLD THEM THEY WERE NOT TO WORK FOR THE FOOD THAT PERISHES, BUT WERE TO PERFORM THE WORKS OF GOD THAT LEAD TO ETERNAL LIFE.

CHRISTIAN AUTHOR MAX LUCADO FRAMES IT THIS WAY: "DISBELIEF HAS PECULIAR CHILDREN. THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO WAS AFRAID TO FLY. AFTER HER FLIGHT SHE WAS ASKED IF SHE HAD BEEN NERVOUS. "NO," RESPONDED. "I NEVER SAT DOWN ON THE SEAT."

THERE WAS KING WHO LEFT HIS SERVANT IN CHARGE OF THE CASTLE WHILE HE WAS ON A JOURNEY. THE KING HAD A FALCON. THE SERVANT HAD NEVER SEEN A FALCON AND SO WHEN HE SAW THE KING'S FALCON, HE THOUGHT IT WAS A DEFORMED PIGEON. OUT OF COMPASSION FOR THE BIRD, HE CLIPPED ITS CLAWS AND FILED ITS BEAK SO IT WOULD LOOK MORE LIKE A PIGEON.

THERE WAS A HANDSOME PRINCE WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH A SIMPLE MAIDEN. SHE WASN'T ATTRACTIVE. SHE DIDN'T TRUST HIS LOVE. "HOW COULD YOU LOVE ME?" SHE WOULD ASK. "I'M NOT BEAUTIFUL. I'M NOT RICH. I'M NOT ROYALTY." "I JUST LOVE YOU," HE WOULD ANSWER. HE ASKED HER TO MARRY HIM. SHE STILL DIDN'T TRUST HIS LOVE, BUT SHE AGREED. "I WILL MARRY YOU. I WILL CLEAN YOUR HOUSE AND PREPARE YOUR MEALS AND BEAR YOUR CHILDREN."

"BUT I DON'T WANT TO MARRY YOU FOR WHAT YOU DO FOR ME. I WANT TO MARRY YOU BECAUSE I LOVE YOU," THE PRINCE SAID. AND SO THEY MARRIED. SHE CLEANED HIS HOUSE AND FIXED HIS MEALS AND BORE HIS CHILDREN. AND HE LOVED HER. BUT SHE LEFT HIM. SHE TOLD A FRIEND SHE DIDN'T THINK HE LOVED HER ANYMORE.

THREE PEOPLE. THREE PEOPLE WHO COULDN'T BELIEVE. A WOMAN WHO NEVER ENJOYED THE FLIGHT BECAUSE SHE COULDN'T TRUST THE PLANE. A MAN WHO MAIMED A FALCON

BECAUSE HE'D NEVER SEEN ONE. AND A WOMAN WHO LOST THE LOVE OF HER LIFE BECAUSE SHE TRIED TO EARN WHAT HE WANTED TO GIVE HER.

DISBELIEF HAS PECULIAR CHILDREN. CHILDREN WHO ARE MISERABLE ON THE JOURNEY, BLIND TO THE BEAUTY, AND OBLIVIOUS TO ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME ROMANCE WITH GOD. CHILDREN WHO NEVER FULLY RELAX IN THE PALM OF HIS GRACE. CHILDREN WHO FOREVER TRIM AND FILE THE SPLENDOR OF HIS LOVE. AND CHILDREN WHO HEAR HIS PROPOSAL BUT ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR THE FINE PRINT AND THE HIDDEN AGENDA.

THE FEELINGS OF THESE CHILDREN ARE CAPTURED IN OUR READING FROM JOHN. JESUS SAYS "DON'T WORK FOR THE FOOD THAT SPOILS. WORK FOR THE FOOD THAT STAYS GOOD ALWAYS AND GIVES ETERNAL LIFE. THE SON OF MAN WILL GIVE YOU THIS FOOD, BECAUSE ON HIM GOD THE FATHER HAS PUT HIS POWER.

JESUS REDUCES THE NUMBER OF LIFE'S STRUGGLES TO TWO. WE EITHER STRIVE FOR FOOD THAT ROTTS OR FOOD THAT LASTS. FOOD THAT ROTTS IS ANYTHING TEMPORARY....ACHIEVEMENTS, AWARDS, MONEY, RECOGNITION.

FOOD THAT LASTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS ANYTHING THAT IS ETERNAL. SO HOW DO WE GET THIS FOOD? THE SON OF MAN WILL GIVE US THIS FOOD. WE DON'T BUY IT, BARTER FOR IT, OR EARN IT. IT IS A GIFT. JUST BOARD THE PLANE AND SIT DOWN. JUST UNLEASH THE FALCON AND WATCH IT FLY. JUST ACCEPT HIS LOVE AND ENJOY IT....

JUST BELIEVE. BUT HIS LISTENERS DIDN'T GET IT. LOOK AT THEIR QUESTION: "WHAT ARE THE THINGS GOD WANTS US TO DO?" ANOTHER QUESTION OF DISBELIEF. "I KNOW HE SAID HE WOULD GIVE IT, BUT HONESTLY, HOW DO WE PAY FOR THIS BREAD? HOW DO WE EARN THIS MEAL? HOW LONG DO WE HAVE TO STAND IN LINE TO GET THE ETERNAL FOOD?"

THEY MISSED THE POINT. DIDN'T JESUS SAY, "THE SON OF MAN WILL GIVE YOU THIS FOOD?"

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE: SUPPOSE YOU GIVE ME A GIFT...A BEAUTIFUL SCARF. I TAKE IT OUT OF THE BOX AND EXAMINE IT. I SAY THANK YOU AND REACH FOR MY PURSE. "NOW HOW MUCH DO I OWE YOU?" I ASK.

YOU THINK I'M JOKING. "IT'S A GIFT," YOU SAY. "YOU DON'T NEED TO PAY ME."

"OH, I UNDERSTAND," I RESPOND, BUT THEN SHOW I DON'T BY ASKING, "COULD I WRITE YOU A CHECK?"

YOU'RE STUNNED. "I DON'T WANT YOU TO PAY ME. I WANT YOU TO ACCEPT THE GIFT."

"OH, I SEE," I RESPOND. "PERHAPS I COULD DO SOME WORK AROUND YOUR HOUSE IN EXCHANGE FOR THE SCARF?"

"YOU REALLY DON'T GET IT, DO YOU?" YOU STATE FIRMLY. "I WANT TO GIVE THIS TO YOU. IT IS A PRESENT. YOU CAN'T BUY A PRESENT."

"OH, FORGIVE ME," I STAMMER. "MAYBE IF I PROMISED TO BUY YOU A SCARF IN RETURN."

BY THIS TIME YOU'RE INSULTED. IN TRYING TO BUY YOUR GIFT I HAVE DEGRADED YOUR GRACE. I HAVE ROBBED YOU OF THE JOY OF GIVING.

HOW OFTEN WE ROB GOD. HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED WHAT AN INSULT IT IS TO GOD WHEN WE TRY TO PAY HIM FOR HIS GOODNESS?

WHAT ARE THE THINGS GOD WANTS US TO DO? THEY ASK. JESUS REPLIES, "THE WORK GOD WANTS YOU TO DO IS THIS....WAIT FOR IT..

CAN'T YOU SEE THE PEOPLE LEANING IN CLOSER, THEIR MINDS RACING? DOES HE WANT US TO PRAY MORE? GIVE MORE? STUDY? MEMORIZE HIS WORDS?

WHAT IS IT, THEN, THAT GOD WANTS US TO DO? WHAT IS THE WORK HE SEEKS? JUST BELIEVE. BELIEVE THE ONE HE SENT. CHRIST PROMISES THAT IF WE ARE WISE ENOUGH TO PUT ALL OUR EFFORTS TOWARD RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, WE WILL BE GUARANTEED AN ABIDING PEACE THE WORLD CANNOT GIVE.

IN YOUR DAILY LIFE, WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE TO SEEKING CHRIST? WHAT DO YOU HUNGER FOR MOST? HOW DO YOU TRY TO FILL THAT HUNGER? HOW LONG DOES IT LAST BEFORE FEELING HUNGRY AGAIN? DO YOU SEEK CHRIST FOR THE JOY OF RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, OR DO YOU SEEK CHRIST SO HE WILL ANSWER YOUR PRAYERS?

WHAT MIGHT BE MISSING IN YOUR LIFE THAT IS KEEPING YOU FROM LIVING THE LIFE TO THE FULLNESS JESUS PROMISES? IF YOUR HONEST ANSWER IS NOTHING, THAT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS IS STRONG AND YOU'RE FINDING EVERYTHING YOU NEED IN HIM, THEN PRAISE GOD THAT YOU HAVE SOMETHING STRONG TO OFFER THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU WHO HAVE HUNGRY HEARTS. IF, HOWEVER, YOU HAVE A HUNGER THAT YOU CAN'T SEEM TO FILL, THEN I ENCOURAGE YOU TO PRAY ABOUT THAT AS YOU KNEEL AT THE COMMUNION RAILING; PRAY THAT JESUS WOULD FILL THAT HUNGER BECAUSE HE PROMISES THAT WHEN WE TRUST IN HIM FOR WHAT OUR HEARTS AND SOULS ARE HUNGRY FOR, WE'LL NEVER BE HUNGRY AGAIN. MAY IT BE SO THIS DAY AND ALWAYS. AMEN.

