

OF FEEDING AND BEING FED

For a number of years now, I have been amazed that we do not see what we are looking at. More accurately, we see only a small portion of what we are looking at. Not talking about you; talking about me. I suppose the spectrum of what I see is influenced mostly by what I am interested in. Normally I can read the 29th chapter of the Book of Numbers in less than a minute. I don't usually care how many animals or of which kind we are going to sacrifice during the eight days of the Feast of Booths. So my eyes skim over the chapter in a few seconds. My mind is pre-programmed to seek information about a fairly narrow spectrum of interests. There is little in the 29th chapter of Numbers to match any of those interests. I am grateful, since that means I can get through my morning devotions faster than usual and get on with my day.

But what happens if something expands my spectrum of interests? Recently it took me two hours to "read" the 29th chapter of Numbers, and I only quit then because I had an appointment. Afterward I realized more clearly that I am always seeing only a small part of what I am looking at because, without realizing it, I am always programming my mind ahead of time to notice only a very narrow portion of what I am looking at. It gives us a whole new concept of what's happening when we are in conversation with another person. And a whole new concept of what's happening during a sermon or a class. But we won't mention that.

Like many of you, I am continually reading the Bible. For me, one chapter from the Old Testament and one chapter from the New Testament every morning. That means I get through the New Testament approximately twice for every time I read through the Old Testament. Still, in sixty-five years (I didn't start until I was eleven) that means I have gone through Leviticus and Numbers quite a few times. And I got a lot from them. But this last time, it was different. It is very likely that all of you have noticed such things long ago, but it just opened up for me.

I started to realize more than I ever had before how an entire society was focused on worshipping God by means of bringing appropriate sacrifices to the Tent of Meeting, which of course evolved into the temple at Jerusalem. They do not think that worshipping God is about helping orphans in Africa or Mexico. They think that worshipping God

is about bringing appropriate sacrifices to the altar. (Never mind our opinions about such things at the moment.) The Ten Commandments have a lot to say about how we should deal with each other; Leviticus 19:18 does tell us that, in the name of God, we must love our neighbors as ourselves. The stranger and the sojourner are to be treated in the same way as a brother Jew, if they do not break the Covenant. But clearly the big concern and the center of religion is the altar and bringing sacrifices to God.

As always, what people really believe in and care about is revealed in behavior. One-twelfth of the Jewish population is set apart – provided for and sustained – so that they may take care of the Tent of Meeting (later the temple) and the sacrifices. That is their job – that is what they spend their whole lives doing. The entire Tribe of Levi is given cities to live in and a portion of the sacrifices that the rest of the nation brings. Not all of them are priests, but all of them are assigned to various tasks necessary to sustaining and protecting the tabernacle. Some of them will carry water to the temple all their lives. Water is a lot of work; you cannot just turn on the faucet. But you cannot do the necessary washing and cleaning if you do not have a constant supply of water. Wood is also a daily requirement. Some Levites will spend their whole lives finding, cutting, and carrying wood to the temple. The sacrifices go on every day. How do we imagine that the wood gets there? And the animals for the sacrifice: What if they run out of animals? Disaster. The valley between Bethlehem and Jerusalem is a “holding pen” for sheep being brought to the temple for sacrifice.

And of course everything must be done in proper form and ritual. The priests have to know what they are doing and how to do it. They must be washed, purified, and dressed in a certain way. The temple must be cleansed and purified according to Torah requirements. All the Levites must keep aware of rules and sacrifices for purification of themselves and whatever they touch. The animals must all be slaughtered according to kosher requirements. I don't mean to bore you, but the temple complex is a huge undertaking, and the altar fires and sacrifices are going on all the time. The nation must spend enormous time, energy, and resources to support this religious enterprise at the heart of its understanding of how to worship God. And of course, most of us would now say that God didn't really care about any of it, that God didn't require any of it, that God wasn't really pleased by any of it. Obviously if we thought it was important, we would still be doing it. Except we might

suspect that God was pleased by the devotion that was being shown. Intention may count for something.

Does God care about any of the ways *we* worship? The ways we bring offerings and make sacrifices to God are surely just as questionable. But speaking for myself, I am not terribly concerned about being silly, dumb, or wrong, though I am not content to be so from carelessness or sloth. Showing devotion in some fashion – that I *do* care about. To bring some kind of offering – to make some kind of sacrifices to my God – that I still care about. Without that, life is not worth living.

We do see Judaism evolving all along the way. Concern for justice, a growing awareness of a national destiny, concern for the way we live and how we behave, realizing more and more that God cares for all the children everywhere – such things were clearly emerging in the growing consciousness of Judaism. Some of the prophets did not seem to care about temple worship at all, but religions do not change very easily or quickly. Some of what Jesus tried to teach us later is still stuck in old frameworks and religious prejudices that existed before He came. Whatever the prophets tried to proclaim, the temple was still the center of worship – and the altar fires still burned – through all the days of Jesus and of Paul. And both of them worshipped at the temple.

Then what is the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant? They are more connected than we realize, but they are also very different. Under the surface, they have a common purpose. But trying to live by either one of them is an increasingly difficult and almost opposite experience: Law versus Gospel. Rules versus Relationships. Righteousness versus mercy and forgiveness. These are very meaningful categories to most of us, and often we use them and misuse them without fairness or discernment. Certainly the approaches and principles of the two Covenants feel very different to us in significant and often troublesome ways.

But there is a Covenant older than the Old Covenant, one that we seldom think about when we talk about the Old Testament. The world had never effectively switched from that Older Covenant to the dynamism and wondrous promise and revelation of the Torah. The major concern of Torah (first five books of the Bible) still carries within it the concerns and purposes of that Older Covenant. We hang on to the past – to what we grew up with, to the familiar – far more than we usually realize. When new wine comes, new wineskins are always in short supply.

What does that Older Covenant really care about? Not how to love your neighbor. It cares about how to feed God. All the rites and rituals surrounding the Tent of Meeting – and then transferred to the temple as nomadic tribes settle into a more stable and predictable society – are concerned about how to prepare food for God. More and more, some of the meals are shared with God – the feasts and holy days are a big barbeque, and the whole community is celebrating with each other and with God. And behind it all are endless ritual observances: a huge array of details about how to stay ritually clean; how to prepare the food; who takes care of which necessary function of the temple without offending God – that is, without bringing unworthy food, and without making God angry with bad smells, dirty fingers, or wrong attitudes. After all, God is holy, so it takes constant care and watchfulness not to offend him with the many less-than-holy attributes and foibles of mere humans.

There are pages and pages and pages of instructions in Torah about how to wash, how to dress, how to arrange things, and who can do which part of the process. All of it leads up to the major and truly important purpose: Feeding God. The temple is where food is prepared for God, and the temple is the center of religion. Sacrifices are about feeding God. Sacrifices of animals, grain, wine, and vegetables go on in the temple every morning and every evening. Lots of other meals, celebrations, festivals, and high holy days can be added beyond this standard fare, but at the very least we have to make sure that God gets a good breakfast and a good dinner, or there will be hell to pay. We just read about it in Numbers 28. Feeding God is the real center and purpose of all ancient religion.

The world and its religions were changing even in Paul's time. These changes were huge and profound – and I suspect beyond our usual understanding, and doubtless beyond Paul's comprehension as well. But the temple was still the center of religion in Paul's day. Prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit had become the true center for Paul, as they had been for Jesus. But only a tiny handful of people had made this enormous shift in the first century A.D. The altar fires still burned every single day at the temple in Jerusalem. Similar sacrificial fires burned in all the temples of all the pagan religions throughout the Roman Empire. We only catch glimpses of it, and even then only if we stay alert. A hot issue raged at the Christian church in Corinth, for instance, and this issue would spread to all the churches by the end of the first century: Is it permissible to eat meat offered to idols? If you

don't grow your own meat, the only place you can usually get it is at the temple markets. It reminds us that altar sacrifices are still going on everywhere.

In any case, if I asked you or any Christian today: "What is the most important purpose and function of being a good Christian?" none of you would reply: "Bringing food to the temple to feed our God." That is not how you see "being religious." That is not what you think religion is about. But that is what the entire ancient world thought religion was about.

When do you feel at peace, acceptable, on good terms with God? It seems to me that some of you seldom do. But if a brother or sister from the deep past said to you, "I have made a good and proper sacrifice to God," you would probably not recognize that this is what they were saying – "I feel good; I am right with my God." And possibly you wouldn't understand why a whole society would spend so much time and expend so many resources to keep the temple complex running. But to them, the truth was obvious. Without a temple and priests and approximately one-twelfth of the population working full time to keep everything supplied and running right, no individual could make a proper sacrifice. When Jesus came along and said, "*Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,*" such a principle was unimaginable, unheard of – all the old pillars started crumbling.

Do we miss it? On some interior, not really conscious level, is there a racial memory of what religion used to mean to us? How nice to think that we could do something for God. Not only that, but we could do it right – if we really tried. We could band together and build a proper temple, if we pooled all our resources and devoted enough time to it. If we set aside the best craftsmen and artisans and tailors and smiths, we could build a temple for our God. (David's top dream. Solomon's legacy.) The blueprints are waiting for us, spelled out in our most sacred scriptures.

And all the priests could be consecrated, each one knowing what to do, and how to do it: how to butcher, how to wash, how to prepare food for the altar – with wine, vegetables, oil, salt – a full meal. Everything prepared just right. After all, this meal is for God. And all the "servants" of the temple – of whatever task or station – would be consecrated, purified, anointed. Lots of ways to offend the holy God, ways large and small. But it isn't about any of the things we think might offend God:

our morals, our lack of prayer, our failure to be compassionate, our pride, our lack of humility or gratitude. We might find some connections if we look for them hard enough, but they are focused on offenses of a different nature – offenses against appropriate ritual: the right robes, the way to wash, how much wine, what kind of incense – all the proper procedures for a purification that we would consider irrelevant; a purification that would make the priest and the Levite seem like bad guys in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Do we miss it? Do we miss this ancient covenant wherein our purpose, our task – the only reason we were created in the first place – is so that we might feed the gods? How nice to think, “We can do something for God. We can do it right – if we really try. We can get together and pool our resources and our efforts, and follow instructions (from Moses – from Torah). And God will be pleased with us. And so God will bless us.” Do we miss it – such clear and simple certainty? Or are we jealous of the many and growing numbers around us who assume they have no obligations to their Creator, if there even is one? As the external life gets more and more complicated, they simplify the spiritual life by claiming they have nobody to please but themselves, no obligations or responsibilities to anyone but themselves.

How vague and problematical and unfocused and confused are so many of the ways we attempt to please God. Does God really want us to give away all we have to others? Are we ever really unselfish enough in anything we do? Do we ever care enough about *any* neighbor, or even about a child or a spouse or a dear friend?

How do we serve God? Not with mutton, the right incense, or a fine wine. Then what? Being nice? High moral standards? Being responsible – at work; in our homes; in our relationships (and how many relationships, and what should they be)? Being well-educated? Using clean language (one of Paul’s recommendations). Never speaking ill of others? Being full of encouragement, affection, and support for others? Going to church? *Being* the church? Reading the Bible a lot? Talking with people about faith? Have I said anything yet that is not held by some people to be what really pleases God? What about finding and using our best gifts, and using them for the Kingdom – whatever that means. How much clearer and simpler it was to just bring appropriate offerings to the temple.

And by the way, is it a mark against you if you drive a nice car? Or have a home that’s really nice? Is it a mark against us if we have

nice clothes, or too many of them? What if we spend quite a bit of time and money on a favorite interest, like golf, birding, tennis, or boating? Is that a mark against us? Couldn't we find some way to use such resources for the Kingdom? Or what if we watch a lot of movies or sports, or spend hours each day on current events – not shaping them; just following them? Wouldn't good stewards find a way to spend their time on doing things for God?

It is obvious, at least to me, that no human could or should be controlling such choices for anybody else. But is it not equally true that each of us should be thinking about, praying about, and considering such choices in the presence of the Holy Spirit?

What makes us happy – deeply and truly happy? I think that is a very important question. I think it is one of the hints we can trust. Since God is our Creator, we are built according to God's design. To be sure, that is a treacherous thing to trust on some automatic level. The temptations all around us are serious threats to faithfulness. The values and interests of the culture around us are often corrupted by those trying to “sell us” something or get something from us. The impact of idolatry is all around us. But if we are careful, thoughtful, prayerful, and patient – if we are looking for that which truly and genuinely makes us happy – then, while not being foolproof, does that not give us information about how we are designed, and what we are designed for?

What makes us happier than doing what we really want to do? I think most of us really do want to do things – good and important things – for those we love. And I think most of us would like to make a contribution: an invention, a product, or labor; helping to smooth out misunderstandings; or helping people work together for the benefit of the whole. Awkward to try to put into words, but I think we want to be here for each other. And it makes us happy if we think we have made a contribution that has made things better for those around us.

What makes us happier than doing things we really want to do? Only one thing: doing what we think *God* wants us to do. Of course, that depends on how much we trust God, and whether or not we genuinely believe that God loves us. But it is a higher happiness to feel like we are pleasing God than it is to feel like we are pleasing ourselves. Wondrous indeed, if the two happen to coincide.

So the ancients were not as far from our way of thinking and being as we might imagine. We might not agree with them that God needs feeding, or with the notions they had about how this could be accomplished. But they wanted to do something to please God. In that, I suspect, we are not very different. Yet it seems to me that the whole idea of pleasing God is far more complex and convoluted for us than it was for them.

I further suspect that many people in our time have turned away from any efforts to please God, precisely because it seems too difficult, too uncertain, too far-fetched. But if I could tell anyone in clear and certain terms what God wants of them – and if I could do so in such a way that when I had finished they would know for certain that it was true – then I believe most of them would do whatever it took to turn their lives toward the patterns of living that would allow them to please God.

In short, I really believe that we are created and designed with this deep hunger and purpose within us. We want to please and serve God. If only we could take the uncertainty out of it. If only we could stop all the charlatans and pretenders from confusing the issue, and throwing all the dust and false motives into the air. If only we could trust ourselves – and our own motives – to be clear and sincere.

In the meantime, there is an altogether different approach to all these problems. We do not need to be clear enough, smart enough, or great enough to know how to serve God. We do not have to be pure enough or wise enough to know how to bring appropriate gifts to God. Somewhere in the changeover from Old Covenant to the Covenant – somewhere in the process and the unfolding of the New Covenant – everything got reversed. It stopped being about us feeding or pleasing God. It stopped being about us seeking approval, hoping for favors, or finding some way to make up for our sins or our guilt or our shame. We discovered that it wasn't just about us wanting to please or serve God. It was even more about God wanting to love us, help us, and be close to us.

This has been revealed in many ways since the time the New Covenant came into the world and began to work its wonders among us. But nowhere has this been clearer, more dramatic, or more astounding than in what we are remembering and celebrating right now.

“On the same night in which He was betrayed and abandoned, our Lord took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘This is my body ...’”

Yes, after all these many thousands of years, it is still a meal. Only, we are not feeding God. We are not building the temple. We are not laying the fire under the altar. We are not providing the lamb, or hoping it is without blemish. We are not the hosts, or the priests who are inviting or preparing this meal. We have done nothing to make ourselves acceptable, and we do not come to this meal because we think we have deserved it, or worked for it, or made ourselves worthy. It is all provided by Another. We are invited and welcomed by Another.

This is my body – broken for you.

This is my blood – poured out for you.

And so our words falter, and die. It is all beyond our understanding. It is beyond all our logic. It is beyond all our hope or expectation. Only, our hearts and our souls leap within us.

God comes to us. God wants to do things for us. God cares about – no; mere caring is not adequate, not enough, not the truth. God *loves* us. That is the truth. And so, in silence, in awe, in wonder beyond our speaking, we turn to receive this meal – and all that it means, and all that it opens up for us and brings us into.

And now, though in some ways we are apart, we partake together.