

Life lies before us, not behind us. Computer screens, television screens, the screens of our phones, the work we do with our hands, driving our vehicles, quilting, reading books, playing games, and everything else in life is all in front of us. This is not by accident. It is God's design. He put your eyes in the front of your head. Also your nose and your mouth. Your feet face forward. Your arms are designed to move forward so that you can see what your hands are doing. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to eat if your mouth was located on the back of your head? And how could we maintain eye contact when engaging in conversation with other people?

God's design is without flaw. It is perfect. Yet there are problems with it. Problems that came when man sinned. The Serpent took advantage of God's design and tempted Eve with the fruit that was hanging from the tree which was in front of her. She saw the fruit with her eyes, perhaps an apple. She heard with her ears how desirable it was. And with her hands, she reached forward to take it and put it in her mouth, and so did Adam. And ever since that day, everyone who is born into this world is tempted with what lies in front of us.

But Jesus says this: "*Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.*" Yet here is the problem: the food that perishes is in front of us; the food that endures to eternal life is not. We can say that this food lies behind us. We cannot see it with our eyes. It's behind us, not in front of us. We cannot grasp it with our hands. Our hands reach forward, not backward.

The Apostles Creed is a confession of the food that endures to eternal life. Our Lord Jesus Christ and what He did for our salvation. The Holy Spirit and the gifts He gives to the Church. Forgiveness, the Sacraments, the life we have in Christ.

We do not see these gifts with our eyes, for they are not in front of us. These gifts are behind us. And thus, they can only be grasped by faith, not with our eyes, and not with our hands which can only reach forward.

It is in our nature, therefore, our sinful nature that we inherited from our first parents, to labor for the food that perishes that is in front of us, but not for the food that endures to eternal life.

Now the food that perishes is not necessarily evil. Not everything in this world is wrong and hurtful for us. Much of it is a blessing, and God designed our bodies to reach for it and enjoy it.

The problem is not with what the food that perishes can do. The problem is with what it cannot do. It cannot preserve us to eternal life. The food that lies in front of us preserves our bodies from day to day. But it cannot prevent us from dying. And it cannot prevent us from dying eternally.

In the verses prior to our text, Jesus fed more than five thousand people with bread, with the food that perishes. It filled their bellies and it satisfied them. But such food, along with everything else that lies in front of us will perish one day. And Jesus, therefore, out of love for them, and us, says not to make our focus in life working for this food.

And yet we are tempted to ignore what Jesus says here, and labor for the food that perishes and not for the food that endures. For example, the television screen lies in front of us. And so, we reach for the remote, but ignore the Bible which lies behind us. A beautiful Sunday morning greets us, and we are tempted to enjoy the day and what lies in front of us, ignoring God's gifts for us – the food that endures to eternal life which lies behind us. Young Christians are especially tempted in this way. To reach for the job in front of them, which demands their Sunday mornings. But as they labor for the food that perishes, they ignore the food freely offered to them here in the house of God, the food that endures.

We would all perish, everyone of us, for we are so fixated on the world that lies in front of us. We do not reach backward for the food that endures, nor can we. But friend, Jesus reaches in the way that we cannot. Jesus reached out for the cross, for suffering and death, and it was for you and for your salvation. He gave His hands to those who held in theirs the hammer and nails. This was God's gracious work becoming, for you, the food that endures to eternal life. And also this, working within you the faith to apprehend this and make it, make Christ, your own.

*"What must we do..."* the people ask Jesus in our text. *"Believe,"* He tells them. *"Believe in the One God sent."* But we cannot. We cannot reach backward that way. And so, God reaches out for you. *"This is the work of God,"* says Jesus. To believe in Jesus is not your work, nor my work; it is God's work in us.

In your baptism, God's loving hand reached out through the water and Word and worked faith in you. He reaches where we cannot reach. He reaches out to embrace sinners like us. People who so often are working for the wrong kind of food. People who are fixated on everything in front of us. God reaches out to us not with punishment in His hands, but with the marks of the nails. He reaches out with mercy, with forgiveness for our sins. It is true that God forgives the very people who do not reach for Him; who reach for everything but Him. God forgives you, is what I'm saying. Each one of you He forgives.

And since you believe this, my friend – and why do you believe this? Because *it is the work of God that you believe,* says Jesus. Because you believe that you are forgiven in Jesus Christ, you see what your eyes cannot see, you grasp what your hands cannot grasp. By faith you see in Jesus the One sent by God to die the death that you and I deserve. By faith you grasp in Jesus the food that endures to eternal life.

You and I don't reach out so well. We reach for the wrong things in life, for the food that perishes. Do not be afraid. Jesus reaches out for you with love. There is no place He cannot reach. There is no sinner so evil that he or she is beyond Jesus' reach. Those nail marks are in His hands for everyone. There is hope for all sinners. There is hope for you.

And because Jesus reaches out to you, He helps you to reach backward. When you are in the habit of reaching for your Bible, reaching for the hymnal in the pew, reaching for the gifts Jesus offers and gives here in His house and at His table, this is the work of God within you.

The more Jesus helps you to reach backward for the food that endures, the more you will desire that food. And the more you will want, and help others to enjoy that food. Be constant, therefore, in living each day this week reaching backward by faith for the food that endures. This is the work of God in you. Amen.