

Love  
The Invisible Framing Gift of ~~Rational Order~~ God Gives

Matthew 4:1-4  
Ted V. Foote, Jr.

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First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

Today we are gathered around a table set with bread; and today we read and hear of Jesus experiencing extreme hunger, being tempted to pray for power from God to turn rocks to bread, so he can eat and have his hunger satisfied. All of this is “on a dare” from his adversary, The Satan. On this table is bread; and Jesus, due to his hunger, is tempted to turn rocks into bread.

Jesus, though, declines and resists that temptation.

The Rationalist “in” a person – in you, or me, or anyone else – (the Rationalist in any of us) argues that, really, no person can turn rocks into bread. It is not possible. So maybe Jesus was delusional from his hunger. Maybe he “came around,” and realized it was a dream or an hallucination. Maybe this conversation-encounter with “the Satan” was his subconscious’s version of “fake news” that he (Jesus) would even dream or think rocks might be turned to bread. One reality is evident through the “unrealness” of thinking that rocks could ever be turned to bread: how hungry Jesus was.

Then again, maybe there is something more here, something more than the irrationally miraculous (such as rocks becoming bread), and something more than the “stone-cold” realism (which argues there is never any “truth” in life except “stone-cold” realism). Maybe there is something more both within Jesus’ first temptation and within all of us, as far as we are from Jesus’ time period during the Roman Empire in the land of Palestine. Maybe there is something more in Brazos County, the State of Texas, the United States of America, and the world during the 21<sup>st</sup> century since Jesus – something more, which is every bit as true and powerful today as it was true and powerful back then, but often overlooked, especially in times like this morning, when we who hear this story are generally not literally starving. Wondering what more there might be and before any of us are tempted to psychologize our interpretation of this temptation story, it’s essential to sense how such a thought-process in Jesus’s mind could naturally be triggered from extreme hunger. Holding in mind his extreme hunger, we can move to think more broadly and to probe more deeply into who we are as people in God’s world. Convinced thinking broadly might be positive, we can then recognize how the Rationalist can say, “We live in an orderly universe with ordinary, natural cycles;” and we therefore recognize that a starving person medically, physically, psychologically can hallucinate, and, further, in such situations, any human potentially becomes irrational, Jesus included.

The Rationalist also argues logically that any religious person who thinks, for example, that rocks can be turned to bread, is thinking outside of logic and reason. The Rationalist also argues, (whether you and I agree or not), that considering miracles – however mysterious – to be outside of the orderly nature of the universe, is akin less to faith and more to fantasy. I’m not saying that I do not believe miracles ever happen, or that God is incapable of miracles; but this story indicates God is not 100% dependable in Jesus’s life for a miracle to occur simply because there is desperate need. Jesus’s reply, when we hear it, is a quote from Scripture which indicates his help in this desperate situation is related far more to what’s invisible rather than to what is visible. From Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus remembers how it is written: “People do not live by bread alone, but by what comes from God.” This reply as a Scripture quote seems to indicate that a primary miracle to be expected is the miracle of God’s love sent. Such love is as invisible as the wind. The invisible wind, we know, is evidenced in the bending of the trees. The invisible love of God is evidenced in human lives being touched in some way, being healed in some way, being transformed in some way.

Think with me about this: an orderly cycle which the Rationalist understands, is a progression from desiring, to seeking, to accomplishing and being satisfied, until desiring begins again. Jesus tells “the Satan,” or he tells his own starving and hallucinating self, that God’s miracle – on which he (Jesus) depends – is a miracle of what cannot be seen just as God, and wind, and love cannot be seen.

Jeremiah 13:23 observes that “a leopard cannot change its spots.” Much as a leopard is a creature with spots which will always have some version of those spots, we humans are all – in a given day or chapter of our lives, or in a given lifetime – we are all primarily “who we are.” Can we change some aspects of our lives, realize errors and addictions, and learn emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, physically how to overcome challenges and adapt for improvement or increased health? Yes. We can change as individuals, and we can change as groups, families, communities, even nations, in positive directions; but we probably only change and adapt through a sort of miracle which is not necessarily embraced by stone-cold Rationalists. We change and adapt, I think, by way of an invisible miracle which is deeply personal, and which may be – as its basic characteristic –invisible. As I said, a primary miracle to be expected is the miracle of God’s love sent; and it’s mostly as invisible as the wind.

Born in 1932, Renolds Price died in 2011 at the age of 77 – almost 78. In 1986, when Mr. Price was 53, he experienced occasions of falling. His doctors diagnosed a shoestring-like tumor in his spine. Subsequent surgeries and aggressive treatment caused the physical limitation of paralysis to his legs. In the memoir entitled, “A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing,” he wrote:

In the black trough of one night at the home of my friends, Marcia and Paul, I remember looking up to the ceiling and addressing . . . God, “How much more do I take?” A long silent pause, then I heard one word: “More.” Nothing beyond that word, except some human help. The next morning, I asked Marcia to call her minister at the Methodist church and ask if he would bring communion. I’d been raised a Methodist. While I had not attended church with any frequency for years, I kept a strong respect for communion. A few days later, a young pastor came to my bedroom. I sat in my chair. He read the words from Mark’s gospel account, “This is my body; this is my blood; do this in memory of me” (11:22,24). He offered, and I partook. I felt no need to sense the elements as literal human flesh and blood – as the Roman Catholic church has argued miraculously happens to the bread and juice. But perhaps as intensely as any mystic, in the slow eating that one morning, I experienced again the almost overwhelming force which has always felt to me like God’s presence. Whether that “force” would confirm my healing or go on devastating me, for that moment I barely cared. No prior taste in my old life had meant as much as this new chance at a washed and clarified view of my fate. A minister I did not know in a room that did not belong to me brought an answer not even the minister would sense as I did, how the single word in response to my middle of the night prayer, “More,” now gave way to three words within me: “Bring it on.” [pgs.80-82]

Like a leopard’s spots, the stones of our life-situations, which are what they are, can be touched, influenced, and altered by the invisible miracle of God’s love, even when tragedy, error, sin, pain, grief, accident, injury and illness impose their effects. The miracle of God’s love – don’t we realize? – is different from a rational ordering of life which is framed exclusively by an empirical, analytical framework of exclusive, stone-cold realism. The miracle of God’s love speaks the word “more” to life’s real and vexing limitations which beset us, as in Reynolds Price’s life; and the same word “more” reminds us how the invisible God gives the invisible miracle of love to create, within God’s people, the resolution and the transformation, which Reynolds Price sensed, daring hardship, adversity, challenges, and illness to “bring it on.” Even when we are hallucinating as a physical reaction, when we are physically or emotionally paralyzed, when we are frantically desperate, when we are dying, always greater than rocks being changed to bread is invisible love from God – originating from beyond and continually drawing near. Such love, experienced as when Reynolds Price tasted communion bread in 1986 and still was paralyzed for the next 25 years of his life, (such invisible love from God) is the life-changing miracle we continually need, which – thank God – is continually given to us. – All honor and praise be to God.