When people describe what they think about God they tend to describe themselves. Energetic people tend to imagine that God is always energetically active and expects us to be on the move. Morally conscientious people tend to imagine that God operates through moral transactions: we do good for Him so that He will do good for us. Gentle people tend to imagine that God is meek and mild and just wants us all to get along and be nice to one another. It is not bad to be energetic, conscientious, or gentle, but we limit and distort our understanding of God if we imagine Him as simply being like us, albeit supremely more so. God is infinitely greater than we can imagine; since we are made in His image and likeness, so are we.

There are two false images that dominate the way our culture thinks about God and the way we think of ourselves. The first is that God exists but He is disengaged; in His absence, He requires us to become tireless and zealous moral crusaders, constantly and totally devoted to right all wrongs in our society and our world. It is not bad to work for social justice, political reform, and environmental stewardship; those are good things. But without trusting that God has always been concerned with and engaged in them, we eventually become exhausted and frustrated: without God, we never seem to make a difference and nobody seems to care as much as we do. The other false image is that God is relentlessly demanding; like a screaming, threatening, and hectoring life coach, He constantly challenges us to exert our maximum effort to improve ourselves. It is not bad to address our moral weakness and even our personal neuroses, but without trusting that God has always been at work in us to lead us to health we again become exhausted and frustrated: without God, no matter how hard we try, we just cannot seem to become the best version of ourselves that we think we need to be. To think of God as disengaged or demanding is both wrong and damaging; these false idols require that we do the work of God without God. In fact, the work of God is simply to believe.

Today’s Gospel reading comes from John. You know that there are four Gospels in the Bible, and that John is different from the other three. John is Jesus’ best friend. He describes Himself as “the one whom Jesus loved,” and at the Last Supper, John reclines at the table with his head on Jesus’ chest, over His heart. Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of Jesus from the same day-to-day, newspaper-like perspective, John organizes his material thematically and even poetically and mystically. Composing His Gospel at least fifty years after the others, He has had time to ponder and process what Jesus’ works and His words were really all about. For example, when Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe Jesus’ earthly ministry, they scatter a haphazard host of miracles and a random list of things that Jesus says about Himself; John chooses only seven of each. Why seven? What is the other great “seven” in Scripture? It’s in the Book of Genesis: Creation. Since God created the cosmos and everything in it in seven days, John uses collections of “sevens” in his gospel to emphasize that Jesus is the Son of God Who is making a New Creation. From his perspective of friendship and affection, through poetic and mystical language, with his head always close to Jesus’ heart, John sees Jesus differently than the others.

In today’s reading, Jesus has just fed the crowd of 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. Unsurprisingly, the crowd follows Him. He knows what they really want: in the same way that He has fed them with bread and fish, they want to make Him a king who will feed them and all of Israel with the political liberty and economic prosperity that they hunger for. Instead, Jesus teases them; they should not seek to acquire things that fade away, like bread, or economic prosperity, or international prominence. Instead, they should seek to acquire the Bread from Heaven, the Kingdom of God, the eternal life that the Son of God has come to give them. From his perspective sixty years later, John has seen economic feast and famine, political fortunes wax and wane, and nations’ prominence rise and fall. John sees what Jesus meant all along: the only thing in life worth having is the life acquired through the Bread of Heaven: life in love with God.

When the crowd asks Jesus what work they must do to acquire this kind of life, Jesus says, “This is the work of God: to believe in the One Whom He has sent.” No work needed: Just believe. The love of God is not conditional. He does not love us only after we have built hospitals or food banks; visited the sick, widows, or orphans; righted social wrongs or empowered the oppressed. God’s love is not withheld even if we fail to build a prayer life, start a Bible study, or lose another fifteen pounds. (Or, in my case, forty.) Jesus says that the only work of God is to believe in the One Whom He sent.

You and I know that this is more easily said than done. “Belief,” or “faith,” is just another word for “trust.” A young couple may know intellectually that the babysitter they hired for date night has a long and proven track record of caring for other children from other families. But it is entirely different to actually entrust your most precious person or people to that 13 year-old and walk out the door. For some of us, and perhaps all of us from time to time, it is very difficult if not impossible to truly trust that God is in charge and at work when times are hard: a sick child, threatened or declining health, credit card debt, addiction. Sometimes it can even be hard to trust what Jesus the Son of God said about us: He loves us totally as we are; even while we behave selfishly, Jesus died for us on the Cross, He has totally forgiven and absolved us from our selfishness; after we die He will raise us and everyone we have ever loved from the dead; finally, that God the Father has adopted us as His children—we will be with Him and delight with Him, the saints, and the angels forevermore. As promising as these promises are, they can be hard to believe. Major moral failures, emotional traumas, or disappointments can strip us of our ability to trust. When trust feels impossible, what does Jesus mean for us when He says that the only thing in life to acquire is trust the One Whom the Father has sent? How do fearful people learn to trust God?

I know nothing about horses, but last week I found myself asking a friend about them. On TV, I had seen competitions in which a horse and rider jump over fences and other obstacles—known as dressage. Sometimes I had also seen how a horse, in fear, would shy away from that obstacle or even from an empty place in the arena. I asked my friend how trainers work with that horse to get over its fear so that it can move and jump again the way it is born to do. He told me that there are two techniques. The first is punitive. Essentially, the trainer scolds, yells at, and/or beats the horse until it is compelled to jump. While effective, the results of that method are not long-lasting and, as you can imagine, are traumatic and damaging. The other technique requires time and patience. The trainer walks with the horse, close to its side, and slowly approaches the place the horse fears. Repeatedly and over time, with constant affection and calm, loving, soft-spoken encouragement, the horse learns to get close to its fear, examine it with the comforting trainer nearby, and see that the thing he fears will not hurt him. At first, the horse has no trust—even with the trainer beside him its fear is too strong. But even if the horse does not trust in his safety, the trainer’s trust is enough: his trust is imparted to the horse so that it becomes his own. Connected to and empowered by the trainer, the horse finds the courage to face his fear and learn to do what he was created to do: to jump.

In this present life, now, today, we may have no trust in God or anything at all. God knows this. That is why He sent His only and beloved Son to live among us, to walk beside us, to go the places we fear, to face the pain that produces that fear, and to lead us through them to the kind of living we were created to enjoy—a life so free, so fearless, so filled with love that it can only be described as eternal.

Jesus supplies what we lack; His trust in the Father is sufficient for us. Today we may fail to trust, but He trains us to see that our fear and pain will not defeat us. He constantly imparts His trust to us: one day it will be our own. On that day, He will lead us to jump as we were made to do—we will finally love and truly live as we have always wanted. The work of God is to believe in the One He sent. That work is at work in us. When that work is complete, we will have acquired the only thing that lasts: to love as God loves and finally to come alive.