

Providence Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 14:13-21 – Stewardship, thankfulness, possibility.

I got interested in ministry as a teenager because of John 10:10 – a sense that Jesus brings life, not just eternal, but whole life, life to the fullest. I was motivated by connecting people to Christ and an inner spiritual life. The spiritual is a relationship with God. I went to Houghton College to study the Bible and youth ministry. Unexpectedly, one of the first things I encountered was Maslow's hierarchy of needs. One thing that Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests is that it is hard for people to contemplate or entertain the spiritual if their basic needs of food and shelter, a sense of safety and stability, and basic needs for love and acceptance are not met first. Because any adherence or interest in the spiritual will only be aimed primarily at the hopes of achieving those other more basic needs.

The discussion of Maslow back then made me realize the importance of compassion ministry and taking poverty, instability, and practical challenges seriously. It also intertwined with Young Life's philosophy of modeling Christ, incarnating the gospel, and showing love and acceptance as a foundation for learning about Christ. So not only does this focus demonstrate the love of God through care and compassion, but it gets people to a place further up the pyramid where they can consider the spiritual.

As I was remembering and thinking about this as it relates to stewardship, to trends of generosity and giving of oneself, it made me think about the role of faith, and it also made me think about when it is appropriate to go fly fishing. For example, how in-order does life have to be to justify getting away for a day and not accomplishing anything? Now, I get that if you can't pay your car insurance or you can't afford groceries, then going out to eat or off to fish may not be the wisest or most prudent use of your time. But I think of my friend Eric, who, rather than going fishing, drives Uber when he has time, working to pay off vehicles and mortgages, using that spare time to pursue his financial goals. Perhaps my odds of retiring would be improved if I had followed Eric's example the last couple of years instead of spending all my free time building a boat. When is it appropriate and responsible to go fishing? And what if fishing, rather than being at the top of the pyramid, has a way of refreshing and renewing and bringing sanity that helps us even when we are at the bottom of the pyramid?

So, thinking about Maslow's hierarchy and having come from a family that taught that one does not go play until one's work is done it raises the question of when is

it appropriate to go fly fishing? And when do you give generously to ministry and mission, only when your needs are fully met and savings doing well? Only when life is secure, and there is no risk in it? And when do you give your time and talents and volunteerism? Only when life calms down? Only when everyone else has been asked first, and no one else is willing to do it?

There may be some ideal to Maslow's hierarchy or our variations to it, the sense that we give and recreate and self-actualize on a foundation of security and stability and comfort. There are some fundamental truths and dynamics in Maslow's hierarchy that should inform our compassion towards others, and there are reasons that it is generally accepted as bearing some truth. However, critics would say it doesn't reflect life on the ground for large swaths of people. There is nothing that says life really follows this progression cleanly, nor does it need to in every situation. But it does give insight, perhaps, as to why walking and seeing by faith are so hard.

Faith calls us to step out and act before all our needs are met and rules satisfied. Faith suggests that the spiritual life calls us to act in ways that bring things about. Faith messes with the progression. Seek first the kingdom of God and then all these things, these basic needs, shall be added to you as well. Opposite order.

I'd like you to think about your own pyramid. What does your pyramid look like? What are the layers, and what has to be satisfied before you get to other things? What is the rubric, the set of priorities, the needs that must be met before you would consider things like giving of your time, resources, and talents and before you would step out in faith?

Israel is in the wilderness, and they are struggling with this – which comes first, provisions or faith? They do not feel their needs are met; they think that they have been abandoned and that they are alone and they are going to die. We might say their basic needs have not been met, and they are stuck worrying about them. However, that is not totally true. God was with them. God was providing for them manna each day. It seems that God was both providing and also providing in a way that is intended to cultivate faith and dependence on God. But what it produced seemed to be only grumbling and negativity.

So, if this problem came across your desk, if you were consulted on what to do with these Israelites, what would you suggest as the next steps? Give more or better food to satisfy their basic needs so they are more able to trust, or to tell them to be thankful and to cultivate trust and obedience first? And if you lean towards one option over the other, I would guess that your spouse is likely to lean opposite.

That's what makes parenting so fun! Well, interestingly, as the passage progresses, it seems God does a little of both. He hears their complaints and adds meat to the diet, but he also reiterates his faithfulness to them and why they should trust him, that he is their God, and that he hears and responds to them.

In our gospel reading, a day of healing ends as the sun gets low in the sky and no one has anything to eat. The story is framed as being in a deserted place without ready resources. This detail itself is a reversal of Maslow's pyramid, for the spiritual and healing work being done displaces the need for food and security. But nonetheless, they are now far from home and without sustenance, parallel in some ways to the Israelites following the Lord in the wilderness, in a remote place where they must rely on him.

“When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ 16 Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ 17 They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’”

So, on Maslow's pyramid, we are back to the base, worrying about basic needs – food, shelter, and security. And there is nothing here to meet those needs. Given the situation, the disciples are being quite practical and realistic and have proposed a very reasonable plan. Let's break this party up before it gets any darker so that the people can get to nearby villages to get the food and sustenance they need. They are not thinking about faith and the spiritual, they are not thinking about possibility and what God can do. They are firmly in the practical realm of meeting basic needs, paying attention to facts and data. And on their little pyramids, their hierarchy of needs, they are at the bottom so much so that the idea of acting on faith hasn't even entered their brains. All they can see is what is not there.

They see absence, they see lack, they see the problems, and they act out of that. Send them away. Someone else will have to meet the need; our conditions for faith and generosity have not been met, and no sane person could argue with us.

But Jesus hasn't learned about Maslow yet, nor is he bound to our pyramids. He sees resources and possibility. He sees opportunity. He sees abundance. He sees what faith can do. And he says to the ones that want to pass buck, “you give them something to eat.”

What is the difference? Now we might say one difference is that Jesus is Jesus – that his divine nature might have an impact on what he sees, and that comparing him to us is not a fair one. And yes, I suppose that might be true. But what else?

We talked about thankfulness a few weeks ago, and how a spirit or posture of thankfulness changes what we see, and we might focus on things otherwise overlooked. And I've been listening off and on to a book recommended to me by Tom Roth about gratitude and thankfulness. The author would say that thankfulness is the difference, the practiced ability to see the blessings and the good and the possibility, rather than just to grumble and complain and stress about the unresolved realities of life. Thankfulness changes what you see, she would say, changes the way we react to circumstances, as does faith. For example, if you were a disciple looking at the situation, do you see chaos about to ensue or a miracle about to happen? Do you see a kid wasting his lunch of fish and loaves on a pipe-dream, or do you see someone leaving a legacy?

Having listened to Ann Voscamp, the author, and her focus on how thankfulness changes what we focus on and what we see, it caught my attention that when Jesus takes the lead in the situation, he takes the limited resources and he looks up to heaven, and he blesses the loaves and fish, and he then breaks it and distributes it. He blesses the limited resources. In John's gospel, it reads that Jesus looks up to heaven and gives thanks and then breaks it and distributes. "And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children."

In this story, thankfulness for limited resources and faith to use them is what brings about stability and met needs. Rather than conserving and hoarding, Jesus sees possibility, which leads him to bless and give thanks and to break it and distribute. In the Exodus reading, God is not providing stability in the way we might conceive, but he is sustaining them and growing in them the faith to see how God is present even in a stark landscape, even in a deserted place.

This means that if you are going to fly fish, you can't wait for life to all be in order, and perhaps the discipline and patience and serenity of this or a similar endeavor will aid in addressing the other matters of life. This means that you can't wait for life to settle down before you decide to give your time and energy to ministry and caring for others. You probably shouldn't wait for all needs to be met and details secure before you are willing to give thanks, to see the possible, to walk in faith. It suggests that if we are always waiting to be on the top of our pyramids of needs and priorities, we will never see the opportunities and the seeds of the miraculous.

For both the Israelites in the wilderness and the disciples in this deserted place, faith in God and thankfulness for the provisions and faith in what God can do are what are expected and requested of them. The Israelites struggled to get past their grumbling and discontent. The disciples couldn't see it on their own, either. But they get a stark lesson in faith as they see Jesus give thanks for what they complained about, that it wasn't enough. They see Jesus give thanks and use it to do far more than they could ask or imagine.

In this season of stewardship, we've talked about changing our language, perhaps changing our mentality a bit. Last week, Joseph Moore spoke of legacy. The idea of giving not just to meet our own needs, or the things that serve us, but to give in a way that lives on long after us. To leave a legacy of love, faithfulness, and generosity that carries on farther than we have the eyes or imagination to see.

Today, I'd like to add thankfulness and possibility to our stewardship vocabulary. What are your loaves and fishes? What time do you have that you don't think is enough? What abilities do you have that you do not think are good enough? What resources do you have that are not enough? Perhaps we start there. Name them. Lift them up and bless them. Give thanks. Ask for the eyes to see what is possible. Ask for the faith to see and the willingness to hear Jesus' words: "you give them something to eat." Don't pass the buck. Something is possible here.

And all God's people said...Amen.



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Matthew 14:13-21

Feeding the Five Thousand

(Mk 6:30–44; Lk 9:10–17; Jn 6:1–14)

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Exodus 16: 1-12

Bread from Heaven

16 The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” ⁸And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”