

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 27, 2011, dedicated to the memory of Chalmers Coe on the fifth anniversary of his death, to Dick Schwabe at this time of his death, to all who loved him, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”**

**Matthew 6:11**  
**(Part IV of VIII in the sermon series  
“The Lord’s Prayer”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

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Abraham Maslow was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1908, the oldest of seven children. His parents were uneducated Jews who had immigrated from the Ukraine. He described himself as a slow and tidy child. He remembered his childhood as lonely and rather unhappy, because, as he said, *“I was the little Jewish boy in the non-Jewish neighborhood. It was a little like being the first Negro enrolled in the all-white school. I was isolated and unhappy. I grew up in libraries and among books.”* He would pursue law, but he went to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin to study psychology. He returned to New York with his doctorate and there he spent most of his lifetime developing his new discipline, called “Humanistic Psychology.”

Maslow revolutionized the study of human behavior and

the mind with one simple belief. *He believed every person has a strong desire to reach and realize his or her full human potential.* Each of us has a deep desire to reach a level of "self-actualization." To prove that humans are not simply blindly reacting to situations, but trying to accomplish something greater, Maslow studied mentally healthy individuals instead of people with serious psychological issues. As he once said, *"Dr Freud has supplied us with the 'sick half' of psychology, now we must fill it out with the healthy half."*

Studying healthy people informed his theory that people experience "peak experiences," high points in life when the individual is in harmony with himself and his surroundings. In Maslow's view, self-actualized people can have many peak experiences throughout a day while others have those experiences less frequently. Self-actualized persons are "reality-centered" and have a great ability to differentiate between what is fraudulent and what is genuine. They are also "problem centered," meaning they can treat life's challenges as problems that demand solutions. Jesus of Nazareth, Albert Einstein and Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism, were three such people that Maslow studied.

To demonstrate the ascendancy of his theory, Dr. Maslow created a visual aid that he called the **Hierarchy of Needs**. It is a pyramid depicting the levels of human needs, psychological and physical. When a human being ascends the steps of the pyramid, he reaches self-actualization. At the bottom of the pyramid are the "**Basic needs or Physiological Needs**" of a human being, food and water and sex. The next level is "**Safety Needs: Security, Order, and Stability.**" These two steps are important to the physical survival of the person. Once individuals have basic nutrition, shelter and safety, they attempt to accomplish more.

The third level of need is "**Love and Belonging,**" which are psychological needs; when individuals have taken care of themselves physically, they are ready to share themselves with others. The fourth level is achieved when individuals feel

comfortable with what they have accomplished. This is the **“Esteem Level,”** the level of success and status (from self and others). The top of the pyramid, **“Need for Self-actualization,”** occurs when individuals reach a state of harmony and understanding. (*The Developing Person Through the Life Span*, 1983, pg. 44).

Clearly, without meeting basic needs and safety needs, one cannot ascend to love and belonging, to esteem and ultimately to self-actualizing needs. And this where Maslow theories meet the Lord’s Prayer.

Last week, as our class explored the phrase **“give us this day our daily bread,”** a self-actualized, oldest of seven, first century Jewish Peasant of Nazareth named Jesus encountered a self-actualized oldest of seven 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish immigrant’s child from Brooklyn named Abraham. Without daily bread, without meeting basic human needs, no one can reach the peak experiences to which Jesus calls us in our encounters with God and one another. Jesus knew this as he taught his disciples to pray to “our father” in heaven.

Today, the challenge to recite this petition is ever-growing in a world in which hunger grows and bread is too unevenly distributed.

In America alone, we are seeing an ever-increasing cry for daily bread. With 43.6 million Americans living below the poverty level, our national census statistics indicate that over 23 million households in America are “food insecure.” What this means is that someone in this home will be challenged to find daily bread over the next 24 hours. Considering that we are “the bread basket” for the world, how is it looking for the billions of others occupying the planet with us? It is bleak to say the least.

Indian theologian, Musa W. Dube Shomanah, speaking from one of the world’s most impoverished countries writes to his fellow Christians:

*To pray for daily bread is thus a simple but clear reminder to all. Christians that it is God's will that there be food for all but that food is not readily available to all on a daily basis. Praying for daily bread confronts those with refrigerators, storerooms and supermarkets stuffed with food with this question: Why do I not feel the urgency to pray for daily bread while some homeless, some jobless, and even some hard-working persons have nothing to put on their plates and that of their children? The Lord's Prayer challenges all who eat, store or throw away food to be producers and givers of daily bread. (From Michael Crosby, *The Prayer that Jesus Taught Us*, Maryknoll Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2002, p. 119)*

But, let's bring this home a bit more clearly. We have members and friends of our congregation who can say this day that they don't know from what source today's daily bread will be coming. When asked last Sunday if people had ever experienced a day without bread for the journey, one member said, *"On Friday (two days earlier), I was down to my last half cup of rice. I was paid that day and was able to go grocery shopping."* Daily bread is not a given - even in our congregation.

What was Jesus saying when he offered this prayer? The Aramaic word for "bread" is *lachma*, which has multiple meanings. It means both "food" (not bread alone) and "understanding." In his book *Prayers of the Cosmos*, Neil Douglas-Klotz writes, "The root of this word comes from the divine feminine - HMA - which pictures growing, vigor, warmth, passion, possibility and all the instruments of generative power. In Proverbs we see this word as 'Holy Wisdom.'" (p. 27) So, "bread" is food and understanding. To use Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "bread" in this context fills both a physiological and spiritual or self-actualizing need.

In addition, the word for "daily" is *epiousios*, which also is interesting. *Epi* means "that which belongs to someone." *Ousios* means "that which is essential." So "daily" translates to "that which is essential that belongs to someone."

**“Daily bread”** for Jesus would have been food of essence, plus the food of understanding and the food of belonging. For all of us to provide daily bread is more than putting food on the table, so to speak. It harkens more to Maslow’s understanding of self-actualization. For all of us, daily bread feeds our bodies, minds and souls. It is the sustenance that provides so much more than food. It is about community. It is about solidarity. It is about our connection to one another and the center of God.

“Give us this day our daily bread” is the turning point of the Lord’s Prayer. The first part was directed toward heaven, the divine reality of God, the intimate relationship with the parent, “Our Father,” and the ultimate coming of God’s kingdom and God’s will being done. Now, in the second part of the prayer, our gaze is turned toward earth and humankind and its needs. Bread is necessary for life and understanding one another. It provides us with strength to forgive the disruptions and divisions in the human community and our fellowship and provides strength as well against temptation and deliverance from evil.

In this turning point of the Lord’s Prayer we see no mysticizing or spiritualizing. We see human life in concrete, biological, social and historical contexts faced and dealt with. Jesus was like that! He faced reality and dealt with it. When he was teaching by the Sea of Galilee and the time came for people to eat, he consulted his disciples. Seeing the people were hungry he asked what should be done. The disciples said, “Send them away.” Jesus double checked - send away the 5,000? “No” he said. The correct answer was to feed them. Even today, Jesus’ disciples too often hear the knock of the hungry poor at their door and send them away. A friend said to me this week, our greatest challenge in Ohio today is the creeping poverty and hunger everywhere around us. Jesus would have none of that if he were here!

Jesus works for the miracle – feeding those around him

in need! The miracle of feeding 5,000 hungry students on the hillsides of the north shore of the lake was one of distributive justice. Jesus called upon his followers to share what they had. They did so. When the meal was over, baskets of food were left.

**For Jesus it is never *just* about food. It is always about *just* food.**

How do we share what we have? When do we share what we have? With whom do we share what we have? Why do we share what we have? These are the questions which drive our Jesus to open and close each day and each encounter with prayer. Life lived out of prayer is always life lived in love and justice.

When Jesus took bread, blessed bread, broke bread and gave bread, this four-fold action was more than eucharistic. Ultimately, it was more than a memorial feast for his disciples. It was more than the distribution of food by the seaside. It was distributive justice. It was the eucharist as God's justice coming to earth!

Taking, blessing, breaking, giving was the action for life itself. When we take our lives each day, present them to God as a blessing, sacrifice ourselves for our families, for our brothers and sisters in need, and then give completely of ourselves to others, we have crossed the threshold of earth and heaven. In the words of Celtic spirituality, we have traversed the "thin space" between here and now and eternity.

Jesus knew this. He knows it still. Let us work together with one another, in the name of Jesus, to "give daily bread" and know that God is all about taking, blessing, breaking and giving in making us complete and beautiful human beings. It is God's will after all. Amen.

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