

“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

Joshua 5:9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Part V of VIII in the Lenten sermon series,
“The Lord’s Prayer”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent IV, March 27, 2022, dedicated to Rabbi Susan Silverman, Esther and Courtney Keys of Second Nurture, to the blessed memory of my friend, mentor and colleague, the Rev. Don Norenberg, and always to the glory of God!

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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 Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Abraham Maslow was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1908, the oldest of seven children. His parents were uneducated Jews who had immigrated from Ukraine. Abraham 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 Black child enrolled in the all-white school in the south. I was isolated and unhappy. I grew up in libraries and among books.”*

He pursued the law, but 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. He called this “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 or herself and her surroundings – a self-actualized person. 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.

He named Jesus of Nazareth, Albert Einstein and Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism, as three such people. To demonstrate the ascendancy of his theory, Abraham 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, that person 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*, Kathleen Stassen Berger, McMillan, NY, NY, 1983, p. 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 is where Maslow’s theories meet the Lord’s Prayer.

With the words, “**give us this day our daily bread,**” a self-actualized, oldest of seven, first century Jewish Peasant from Nazareth named Jesus encounters a self-actualized oldest of seven 20th-century Jewish Ukrainian immigrant 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. In 2022, over 37.2 million Americans live below the poverty level (11.4%

of our population). Poverty Levels are calculated as two adults and two children living with \$27,479 annual income. As many as 13 million children live in families that are “food insecure.” This means that in a family of four someone in the home is hungry every day.

Considering that we are “the bread basket” for the world, how is it looking for the billions of others occupying the planet we all call home? It is bleak to say the least.

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

“To pray for daily bread is a simple, but clear, reminder to all. 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 to a hungry world” (From Michael Crosby, *The Prayer that Jesus Taught Us*, Maryknoll Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2002, p. 119).

But, let’s break this down a bit more clearly. Someone in this house of worship today will be challenged to find daily bread over the next 24 hours. 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. Recently, I spoke with a person in our family of faith who told me that, “a few days ago, I was down to my last half cup of rice. I was paid that day and was able to go grocery shopping.”

“Give us this day our Daily bread” is NOT a given - even at First Church.

So, 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” in Aramaic is *epiousios*. *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.*”

For Jesus, “Daily bread” 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 family and community. It is about solidarity and unity. It is about our connection to one another and the center of God. Today, as Rabbi Silverman blesses us, daily bread is about “Second Nurture.” It is about growing the circle of love in our families.

“Give us this day our daily bread” is the turning point of the Lord’s Prayer. The first part of the prayer was directed toward

heaven, the divine reality of God, the intimate relationship with our spiritual 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 focus is turned toward earth and the needs of humankind. 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, there is no mystery and no 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, doubled down, “Send away 5,000 people? Really?” “No” he said. The correct answer is, “We will feed them.” Even today, as too many of Jesus’ disciples hear the knock of the hungry at their door, they send them away rather than feed them. A friend said to me this week, our greatest challenge in Ohio today is the creeping poverty and hunger everywhere around us. The knocks are everywhere around us.

Jesus would have none of that if he were here!

Jesus works for the miracle – feeding those around him in need! It is not just a matter of “doing miracles,” but “working for miracles.” The real miracle of feeding 5,000 hungry students on the hillsides of the north shore of Lake Tiberius (which we call The Sea of Galilee) was one of **distributive justice**. Jesus called upon his followers to share what they had. So, that’s what they did. Sharing what they had

WAS THE MIRACLE! 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 daily bread and justice.

When Jesus took bread, blessed bread, broke bread and gave bread, this action was more than the four-fold action of the Lord's Supper. It was more than a “last supper,” 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!

Every time we are at the communion table – Taking, blessing, breaking, giving – we are living out the action of life itself.

When we **take** our lives each day, thanking and **blessing** God for what God has given us, **breaking** the bread and ourselves in **giving** to others, we are crossing 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 leading us to “take, bless, break and give” as God's way of making us complete, self-actualized, beautiful human beings. Like Jesus. Like Abraham. Amen.

