



University Christian Church – Austin

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Giving Life

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There is a bit of Jewish humor that goes like this: An old man goes to a diner every day for lunch. He always orders the soup du jour. One day the manager asks him how he liked his meal. The old man replies, "It was good, but you could give a little more bread. Two slices of bread is not enough." So the next day the manager tells the waitress to give him four slices of bread. "How was your meal, sir?" the manager asks. "It was good, but you could give a little more bread," comes the reply. So the next day the manager tells the waitress to give him eight slices of bread. "How was your meal today, sir?" the manager asks. "Good, but you could give a little more bread," comes the reply. So . . . the next day the manager tells the waitress to give him a whole loaf of bread, 16 slices with his soup. "How was your meal, sir?" the manager asks, when he comes to pay. "It was good, but you could give just a little more bread," comes the reply once again.

The manager is now obsessed with seeing this customer satisfied with his meal, so he goes to the bakery, and orders a six-foot-long loaf of bread. When the man comes in as usual the next day, the waitress and the manager cut the loaf in half, butter the entire length of each half, and lay it out along the counter, right next to his bowl of soup. The old man sits down, and devours both his bowl of soup, and both halves of the six-foot-long loaf of bread. The manager now thinks he will

get the answer he is looking for, and when the old man comes up to pay for his meal, the manager asks in the usual way: "How was your meal TODAY, sir?" The old man replies: "It was good as usual, but I see you are back to serving only two slices of bread!"ⁱ

You and I probably usually don't see bread the way most of humanity has throughout the centuries or, in fact, the way that most of humanity sees it today. While they see bread as the staff of life, the very symbol of basic foodstuff enough..., for us bread is more likely a guilty pleasure we sometimes give into, but avoid it to large degree because the bread makes larger than we want to be.

66 years ago the young psychologist Abraham Maslow first presented his later famous hierarchy of needs in a paper entitled, *A Theory of Human Motivation*. It is often illustrated by a pyramid with the wide base demonstrating the most basic of human needs: water, air, shelter... food – or bread in today's parlance, that level of our human absolutely basic necessities. In our religious tradition it was the lack of grain to bake bread that originally drove the ancient Hebrews from Palestine down to Egypt past other ancient pyramids where the Nile River valley rich and wet could provide a regular, reliable source of grain for bread. And in our reading this morning follows the story in all 4 gospels of Jesus had miraculously providing the crowd of well over 5,000 food enough when all He began with was 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, and they had finished eating, there were 12 baskets full of fragments, of leftovers. They had been filled with bread enough, but were also made aware of a godly power in Jesus that strongly attracted them. Jesus recognizes their attraction was in part simple self-interest: "I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

But understand, having enough bread is a good thing. Jesus certainly is not disparaging that. But Jesus is clear that just having bread enough, just physiologically surviving isn't enough. It isn't nearly the real Life that God wants to give us all.

Certainly part of the interest the crowd showed in Jesus was that here finally was one who might answer the next higher level on Maslow's pyramid: Safety and Security might well be something that people seek to find in Jesus. Our old hymn says it clearly, "Safe and secure from alarms, leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms," and maybe even the next level as well, Love and Belonging, as all are so essential to a life that rich and full and complete.

Yes, I'd say it is a good bet that many in that crowd were finding in this Jesus God's emphatic "yes" answer to prayers they had lifted up for years. Safety, security, and even more, love and belonging, a new fellowship in faith to guide them, and perhaps the hint of more.

What more does one need? Maslow said famously throughout the mid-20th century what was then picked by others in the humanistic psychologists and later transpersonal psychologists that another range of human needs comes to awareness when these earlier concerns are satisfied. Some have to do with self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others. And at a higher level still: creativity, spontaneity, a higher morality. Having spent years studying what we might call well evolved people such as Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Frederick Douglass rather than mentally ill or neurotic people that many psychologists had been studying, Maslow understood what we all have, I expect, experienced. Far

beyond the basic human needs that we may satisfy fairly well early in our adult lives, is a whole range of potentialities that have a spiritual dimension to them and to which Christian faith speaks so powerfully.

As we come to the end of this morning's reading we arrive at this area of human life to which Jesus is pointing when He says (*John 6:33-35*):

“For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Do you think that Jesus is just talking about bread and water here? Physical food and drink? No, He clearly is not. Jesus says metaphorically that in Him, in following His ways, in inculcating a relationship with God and with our neighbor as He did, we can find the satisfaction of even these higher levels of human need. Jesus is Giving Life... in all of its richness and fullness to those who will follow Him!

If we wish to see proof of that promise, we need only read of the lives of those early disciples, the apostles, who indeed followed Christ, and who evidenced in their lives every one of these higher level needs being thoroughly fulfilled in their following of Christ.

However, if we come to believe that that path is only available to those of us who claim Christ as our savior and guide, we might do well to read the writings of Victor Frankl who demonstrated that even the Jews doomed to physical destruction in Nazi prison camps could maintain a victorious spiritual life as long as they knew that their lives held meaning and purpose.

Two weeks ago an article in the Wall Street Journal told of how at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York researchers using Frankl's principles embedded in a new therapeutic approach are bringing to patients there of several different religious backgrounds a new found courage and a new level of energy to the lives of those with a terminal cancer diagnosis by refocusing them on the deeper purposes and the meaning of their lives.ⁱⁱ

So here we have reached to top of Maslow's pyramid, the hierarchy of needs, and found the promises of Jesus in John 6 fulfilled..... But there is more!

First, there is the more that Abraham Maslow himself discovered in the new research he was doing at the time of his death in 1970, in what he called an even higher level of human development: Self-transcendence.ⁱⁱⁱ He spoke of a relatively small proportion of folks who get to this level; who have what might be called mystic or sacral or peak experiences; who imbibe states of awareness that – he believed- 98% of the world would not come to know in this lifetime.

In a public broadcast made in London the famed poet T. S. Eliot talked of this level of “spiritual awareness” that so many aspire to, but most never reach. In our day it seems that that such an ongoing aspiration– that is, constantly being a religious seeker- can become a lifestyle in itself.^{iv} But Eliot said that while this aspiring upwards is a good thing, but the actual living in it, experiencing it and knowing it to be true in one's bones, is something totally else. For so many good Christians and good religious

aspirants of every stripe it is as Charles Duthie once remarked, “a matter of living forever in the preface and never becoming involved in the story.”

And if that challenge makes many of us shudder at the thought that we might never reach our spiritual potential, then let us make one further Christian observation beyond Maslow’s concern. Without finding ourselves released from the solemn obligation to each strive to reach our full spiritual potential, let us at the outset acknowledge that every single one of us **will fall short here**. The biblical witness is that all except Jesus have. All except Jesus will. As Paul puts it in Romans Chapter 3:

23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;

That is, all have sometimes taken the selfish turn instead of the noble one.

But the good word, and the final word to each of us no matter whether we never clear the first level of Maslow’s pyramid, or whether we reach spiritual levels beyond it altogether, is in the following verse:

24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Or as Jesus Himself put it:

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

So, where ever we get on our journey is far enough. Those everlasting arms we sing of will then reach out & pick us up & bring us the rest of the way home.

ⁱ From “*I Am The Bread Of Life*” by Brett Blair

ii <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203547904574276434196118914.html>

“When Midge Wilker was diagnosed with advanced colon cancer last summer, she couldn’t make it through a doctor’s appointment without sobbing. A former IBM executive who founded her own management-training company, she was weak from chemotherapy and terrified; the cancer had spread into her ovaries and lymph nodes and possibly her liver. She didn’t raise her window blinds for weeks. “Everybody said how important it is to have a positive attitude,” says Ms. Wilker, 64 years old. “But I’m not Lance Armstrong. I wanted to jump in the grave.”

While getting chemo one day at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, Ms. Wilker agreed to join a study comparing two different forms of group therapy. Asked what she hoped to gain from it, she said: “I need to find the courage to face this.”

The unusual [program](#) she was randomly assigned to aims to help cancer patients find a sense of meaning, peace and purpose in their lives, even as the end approaches. “For many cancer patients, the biggest challenge is, ‘How do I live in the space between my diagnosis and my eventual death?’” says William Breitbart, a Memorial Sloan-Kettering psychiatrist who developed the program, known as meaning-centered psychotherapy, and has tested it with more than 300 patients since 2000.”

ⁱⁱⁱSee the fascinating Maslow summary on my blog for Aug. 1, 2009 at:

<http://ckutzmarks.blogspot.com/2009/08/maslows-seeking-higher-potentialities.html>

Or the overly brief summary below...

“Near the end of his life Maslow revealed that there was a level on the hierarchy that was above self-actualization: self-transcendence^[7]. “[Transcenders] may be said to be much more often aware of the realm of Being (B-realm and B-cognition), to be living at the level of Being... to have unitive consciousness and “plateau experience” (serene and contemplative B-cognitions rather than climactic ones) ... and to have or to have had peak experience (mystic, sacral, ecstatic) with illuminations or insights. Analysis of reality or cognitions which changed their view of the world and of themselves, perhaps occasionally, perhaps as a usual thing.”^[8] Maslow later did a study on 12 people he believed possessed the qualities of Self-transcendence. Many of the qualities were guilt for the misfortune of someone close, creativity, humility, intelligence, and divergent thinking. They were mainly loners, had deep relationships, and were very normal on the outside. Maslow estimated that only 2% of the population will ever achieve this level of the hierarchy in their lifetime, and that it was absolutely impossible for a child to possess these traits.”

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs

^{iv} Donald MacLeod, *Know The Way, Keep The Truth, Win The Life*, CSS Publishing Co