

The Reading of Psalm 25:3-14

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

¹¹For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.

¹²Who are they that fear the LORD?
He will teach them the way that they should choose.

¹³They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.

¹⁴The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.

The Reading of Mark 6:30-34

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

July 22, 2108

Mark 6: 30-34

“And He Began to Teach”

Kerra Becker English

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published his ground-breaking paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation” in Psychological Review. The “hierarchy of needs” which was originally presented in that paper STILL gets taught in courses of developmental psychology today – though it tends to be a bit more nuanced than the original, not so well-scientifically substantiated paper. This general information though is valuable for educators, therapists, religious leaders, health care professionals, and really anyone who wants to know what stages human beings grow through as they mature. It’s a helpful chart – one that I’ll summarize for you.

It’s designed as a pyramid – with the most pressing needs on the bottom, and the rest rising to the top levels of human development. In this chart, the first four needs he characterized as deficiency needs. If you don’t have these things, Maslow argued – you are probably going to be anxious and tense, and less able to grow as a person. The bottom level, core need is **PHYSIOLOGICAL**. Do you have the absolute basics for what it takes to survive? Adequate food, clean air and water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. The second level of this chart is **SAFETY**. People have a need to feel safe in their surroundings. Personal, emotional and financial security fall into this category. Not feeling safe has incredibly negative impacts. If there are deficiencies such as poverty, violence in the home, or a health concern that isn’t being addressed, a person can spend their whole life just trying to find security. The next level of need is **SOCIAL BELONGING** – friends, family, and the intimacy of human groups. Do you have a place where you feel welcome and supported and loved? Next is personal self - **ESTEEM**. Do you feel

important? Respected? Valued as part of society? These are where the questions begin to arise of meaning and purpose? Do I have a place in this world? Human beings are seeking all the above in order to feel complete. And beyond that, his upper levels were those things Maslow called into question even in his own understanding. He continued to ask the questions about how a human being could fulfill his or her whole potential, and surmised that spirituality and the quest for connection to a higher power were what one could do if all those basic needs were being met. He at times called this either SELF-ACTUALIZATION or SELF-TRANSCENDENCE. It's the goal that is always just ahead of us – to discover our true self in relation to the One-ness of God. He speculated about this category by examining what he presumed to be spiritually successful people, mostly men, and drew his case from what he saw them doing.

Those who teach the basics of spirituality continue to use similar developmental ideas in seeking to understand the process of faith formation. It's hard to think about your ultimate goal of connecting with the divine in the universe when you are hungry, or in danger, or lonely, or depressed. Even before Maslow got his chart published, Jesus was well aware of this in his ministry to the world. He fed people. He healed people. He told sinners they were loved by God. And challenged those who would put down others to recognize the value of all human beings. A lot of these later developmental charts look to Jesus as an example of someone who may have experienced Self-Actualization or Self-Transcendence, the kind of wholeness and being satisfied with one's place in the world that can elude even the most mature spiritual people that you and I know. That's OK. Jesus had a great deal of humility about his spiritual maturity and genius as well. In humbling himself, we see how he reached some of the pinnacles of these developmental processes.

In the simplicity of a chart like this, sometimes it's hard to see how these stages of development overlap, and don't have an exact staircase or pyramid kind of value to them. One commentator I read in a Psychology magazine makes the point that even food and shelter are dependent upon having early social relationships like parents or a caregiver – so it's not that one of these steps happens neatly after the other. Even if I am at a point in my life where I can seek spiritual fulfillment, I still have to eat and breathe. I still want to feel safe in my own home. And I may or may not feel secure at any given moment about my relationships with others or confident in myself. So, someone who is struggling to survive in a war torn impoverished situation is not of any less value than me in my middle-class suburbia surrounded by books on spiritual growth. And yet, we may see the world differently, and perhaps even understand God differently. In extreme crisis, God is the hope for the moment. But in my comfort, God may be shaking me to change my ways or to get to work now in imagining and building a better tomorrow for more than just me.

So, I found myself thinking about this concept of development as I read one particular verse from this passage in Mark's gospel. It says a lot about who Jesus was as a teacher, and as someone who cared deeply about human beings and the development of their faith. It reads, "As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." Yes, Jesus fed and healed people – you can read about that in verses right before and after these. But he found time to teach, and to teach the teachers. His disciples had already returned exhausted from being sent out to teach. They were likely feeling unsafe because news of John the Baptist's death at the request of an angry queen had gotten to them, and they were preaching and teaching the very same circuit, maybe even saying some of the same criticisms of those in power. Jesus felt their anguish

and fatigue and let them rest, AND THEN he saw the agitation of the crowd who needed to feel connected, who needed to feel respected, and who needed his words of wisdom and encouragement to face the world and respond in a way that would bring them spiritual comfort. Jesus became the Shepherd for the sheep, the leader of the leaderless. It was his calling as a teacher – to his closest friends and to the crowds who gathered to hear him.

Sometimes I feel like the needs are so great in terms of survival and safety in our world today that it is silly for me to do what seems like wasting my time teaching spirituality and asking people to reflect deeply on their walk with God. I do that in my role as both a pastor and a spiritual director, and sometimes it seems as though I might do more good by running a non-profit like 'Feed More' or supporting refugees fleeing one set of unsafe circumstances only to be caught by another.

Nevertheless, Jesus had compassion for the people, and as he did, he taught them. It makes me wonder what that was like. What did he say? How did he say it? Surely, he was inspirational – but no one recorded his talk with their cell phone. No one asked him to be the keynote speaker at the next megachurch conference. Mark doesn't even say "what" he taught, only that he had compassion and his compassion led him to teach.

As I've said, quite a few times, Ashland Presbyterian Church is a teaching congregation. The compassion you have for student interns is not common. It takes a level of maturity to witness their mistakes as the trials of learning rather than see them as straight up blunders or failures. You have compassion – and though I've also seen you feed people and work to alleviate difficult circumstances in our community – some of your best work is to engage the work of the Spirit and deepen each other through teaching and learning.

Perhaps, since Mark leaves it out, we can say that Jesus wasn't teaching in such a way that the content was going to be important for the end of semester, fill in the bubbles, kind of test. That he taught and inspired, that he had compassion and cared for the crowd in what he said and did as examples, maybe that's the most important piece we can get. It's not like we would be too surprised by what he taught. We have records of many of his stories and at least one of his sermons in completion. We can presume he wasn't going over Algebra problems or conjugating French verbs. He was leading people toward self-actualization, transcendence - guiding them into a relationship with God, as he had a relationship with God. He was a life teacher, an instructor in what leads human beings to realize their best potential. And as Maslow surmised back in the Mid-20th century, the desire to live a good human life stretches us beyond survival and security. Only having read about Maslow, and not reading his book first hand – I don't know if he got there – but I think it takes spiritual leaders and teachers to help us understand the principles and values that seem to consistently show up in those who are living the whole-hearted, self-actualized kind of life.

Since the first publication of the hierarchy of needs – more studies – and scientific models have attempted to get at these nuggets of human truth, but even those studies seem to point to a spiritual element in what unites human beings who seem to be living their best lives. It's thinking beyond one's own self toward the good of others that characterizes the self-transcendent potential. Whether you describe the driving force as God or goodness, or human exceptionalism – it ties back into the kind of things Jesus taught and lived out in his life.

It's too easy to forget just how important Jesus' teaching role was. It was central to his life and ministry and is the pattern we are called to follow. And yet, we are consistently told that it was him "dying for our sins" that saves us. I'm not sure we know "how" that saves us without

understanding his teaching, his commitment to the love of God that takes away even the sting from our abilities to be hurtful human beings. It allows us to move on, to experience the love of God for ourselves, and to be sorry for our past but not beholden to it.

Yes, I wish I could have been there in that crowd, listening to his voice, watching his mannerisms, being swept up in his enthusiasm and desire to turn hearts and minds to the light of God's love. I can only imagine, I can only wonder at what he said. And then I can turn my own life to teaching, to recounting and interpreting to the best of my ability what he taught, and said, and did – for the benefit of those who would follow. Let us all work at doing the same. Amen.