

8th Sunday of Ordinary Time A “Jesus and Maslow”

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For several weeks, we have been journeying with Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount as found in St. Matthew’s Gospel. The whole sermon, everything we have been considering from the beatitudes, to dealing with the anger we harbor at times, to even the challenging message last week of loving our enemies, is summarized in our Gospel reading today. Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything will be given you besides.

As we contemplate this message, however, I can’t help but notice how contrary Jesus’ words are to conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom follows Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Are any of you familiar with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? Maslow’s hierarchy of needs essentially states basic human needs must be met before other needs can be satisfied. So, to begin with, before we can focus on anything else we must first satisfy our needs of air, food, shelter, clothing and the like. These are basic physiological needs, without which we don’t survive. Once these needs are met, then the human being can begin focusing on the next level of needs, our safety needs. These include: personal security, financial security, health and wellbeing, and the need to provide safety nets against the effects of accidents and illnesses, this sort of thing. Once these needs are met, we are finally free to focus on the ultimate level of needs, focusing on love and belonging. If religion has any role to play in Maslow’s world, since he was an atheist after all, it would be in this third level of need, of being loved and to have purpose. And to give Maslow his due, there is something to be said about his hierarchy of needs. If we are out of work, our home is being foreclosed, or we are faced with a terrible diagnosis, our attention in life necessarily becomes focused on securing our basic needs before pursuing anything else.

Now enter Jesus. Jesus in our Gospel today throws Maslow on his head. Jesus says do not worry about your life, what you are to eat or what you will wear. Is not life more than food and body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky: they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life span? Of course, Maslow could respond by saying: yes, let’s look at the birds in the sky. They spend all day scurrying about for their survival, much like we do, and if they are not successful, they die! But of course, this observation would be missing the point of what Jesus is trying to say. Jesus isn’t telling us that we shouldn’t be concerned with matters of survival like food, shelter, clothing, a good job, financial security, and the rest. What Jesus is saying is, seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything will be given you besides. We can’t add a day to our lives by worrying about things; however, if we place God first in our lives every other priority will find its proper place.

Jesus gives us the wonderfully troubling message to illustrate this point, “no one can serve two masters. He will hate one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” Now, to begin with, what is mammon? Sure, mammon can be defined as money, but it is a lot more than just money. Mammon can be defined as possessions in general; however, I think there is more to Jesus’ definition of Mammon than this. You see, Jesus didn’t have a problem with people owning possessions. Jesus was a carpenter by trade for most of his life. Archbishop Murphy once gave a good description that captures the meaning of Mammon with a simple question, take an inventory in your mind of everything you have and everything you own or even the habits that you have. Now ask the question, what do I own and what owns me?

I think this can be a very useful spiritual question to ask ourselves as we approach the season of Lent. What do I own and what owns me? Take a shiny new car for example. News flash, there is nothing wrong with having a shiny new car. Purchasing a car helps out all those who built the car, helps the economy, and could even keep us safer on the road. On the other hand, if the shiny new car is a priority that supersedes family relationships, our children’s education perhaps, negates our obligations to charity, or even our family’s financial security that shiny new car ceases to be a car and instead has become mammon. Do you see the difference?

Jesus also says to not worry about what we are to wear. Again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to have nice clothes. I like nice vestments too. However, sometimes the need to have nice clothes and the need to look good can get in the way of our relationships. We call this vanity. People can then get into the habit of judging others by focusing on appearances. When this happens, even clothes can turn into mammon. Could it be that if God loves the flowers in the field, that God loves you just the way you are? It is a powerful question in the spirit life, what do I own? What owns me?

This is why St. Paul says in our second reading from first Corinthians that we are to call ourselves servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. I like the description he uses that we are stewards because it is a helpful reminder that, ultimately speaking, we really don’t own anything in life. The gifts we have of time, talent and treasure are just that, gifts. This becomes instantly recognizable when we find ourselves in the emergency room or being wheeled into surgery. In those moments, nothing that you think you own really matters. All that matters in those moments is a competent surgeon, a loving family and a good and gracious God. Amen? This is why Jesus is inviting us to keep God our ultimate concern in life, in everything we do and everything we worry about. If we keep God our ultimate concern, seek first the Kingdom of God, all our other concerns and priorities will find their proper place and perspective.

A good illustration of this point: Has anyone here had a moment on a plane, in a car or on a train when you were afraid for your safety, raise your hands. How many of you said a prayer to God in those moments? You see, that is where Maslow is wrong. When a basic first or second level need like personal safety is not being met, the first thing most of us do is turn to God. The need we have for a relationship with God is a primordial need that at times sincerely supersedes all others. When life takes a turn for the worse, we turn to God. What Jesus is inviting us to do today, is to not stop there. Jesus is challenging us to welcome God into every area in life, not just our concerns, as important or petty as they might be, but our joys too. If we welcome God into every area of our lives, we gain perspective of what is really important in life. We may even find ourselves making sacrifices from time to time for the greater good of our family or community.

We may even come to the realization that no matter where life takes us, for better or worse, our souls will be in good hands if God is our first concern before all else. Our lives will also have deeper meaning. Our lives will gain focus if in everything we do: we seek first the kingdom of God and seek first his righteousness. When we contemplate all the basic worries we have right now that might keep us from entering the season of Lent with an open heart, the Lord's invitation becomes all the more timely. When we put God first, our hierarchy of needs will fall into place.