

#AlternativeFaith: *Feed Me Till I Want No More*

Matthew 5:6, 6:24-34

Over the past few weeks, I've been working with our friend, Ricardo Mayol, to help build his support network as a newly re-commissioned missionary for International Ministries. It's turned into an interesting contrast of cultures—one that is fairly representative of the broad differences between North America and Latin (or Meso-) America. Namely, in the global north we are a bit anal about making sure all our needs are covered and provided for—in responsibly planning for the future down to the finer details. And our friends to the south, for the most part, are not.

This week, Ricardo will be in Valley Forge for preparatory meetings at the American Baptist Mission Center, which is one of the two sending agencies for his ecumenical peacebuilding ministry in Latin America—the other being Global Ministries of the Disciples of Christ/United Church of Christ. One of the requirements of these denominational agencies is that Ricardo must have his entire funding for the year accounted for in place or at least pledged. According to what I've been told, he is still a little short by roughly \$10,000, which could keep him from meeting his desired timeline of moving to Guatemala City in May.

As you know, Ricardo is a man of passionate, enthusiastic, and visionary faith; he is not one to get caught up in those nasty little things called “details.” As far as he is concerned, whether \$8,000 or \$80,000 short, he feels God will provide. He doesn't stress over it. Either he will meet his target number in time or he will simply find a way to get by with less. What he doesn't want to do is delay this opportunity over someone's worry of a shortfall. Prudent people in Valley Forge, however, don't see it quite the same way. He must have 100% of his budget covered before they

will send him forth in ministry. Therein lies the dilemma—not just over finances or logistics, but theology as well.

Namely, where does the act of faith occur—in trusting that funds will magically appear before Ricardo goes out on the field, or in anticipating that he will figure out things once he is there? Practically speaking, that's an interesting spiritual question for any of us. Which perspective is more faithful—to trust that God will provide what you want before you need it, or that God will guide you how to make ends meet when they won't? What would you do if you were making this decision with Ricardo? Wait to send him out until all his funds are accounted for, or send him out without securing those financial commitments, but trusting God that they will come in time?

I will admit, both perspectives make sense to me depending on the topic at hand. For instance, when I'm thinking about the Hayes household budget, I don't often worry if we've got enough to cover our anticipated bills, because I know during lean months, Wendy and I find a way to make it through—usually cutting back expenses by prioritizing needs, or delaying certain expenditures, or finding we have access to credit or even income we hadn't expected. In those months when I see only red, I'm often amazed at how things work out in one way or the other and attribute it all to God's providence taking care of our needs. Such a sense of trust is reassuring and helps to alleviate worry.

However, when I think about it a little more, I realize my sense of reassurance is more likely due to the providence of Paul or Wendy. It has a lot to do with how privileged our life is compared to many others around this planet for whom every day is an emergency. Far too many people don't have the luxury we (and many others like us) enjoy; their options for

resources are far more limited. Left to their own devices, their needs might not be met, no matter how much they pray. It makes sense to me that prudence in waiting for resources works in a privileged society where we expect more resources to become available; in an unprivileged one, prudence may not be warranted. What does that say about us or them—about their faith or ours? Are we more faithful because we can trust that God will meet our needs, even though it's largely due to our own ability to provide for ourselves through access to resources many do not have? Are they less faithful because they live in such a state that few of their needs will be met?

To be honest, privilege and poverty factor into our appreciation of divine providence than we realize or acknowledge. Those in a privileged state have more reason to be confident that everything will work out fine; we rely on having an abundance of resources at our disposal to address every need and desire. But life looks quite different when access to all these resources is unavailable. Providence is not so apparent in nonprivileged conditions.

I was thinking about this over the past week when it appears the next federal budget will severely reduce government assistance to those with lower incomes, among other programs. We often don't realize the levels of insecurity that exist in our country in terms of income, housing, food, healthcare, and even social support. So, I looked up some government data from the USDA and found that in 2015 (the latest numbers available), nearly 13 percent of the population lived in food-insecure households, which translates to 42.2 million people, including 6.4 million children.¹ As

¹ According to the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, www.ers.usda.gov. Food insecurity refers to a shortage in quantity of food and to a lesser degree the quality of nutrition.

a statistical percentage it might not strike us as alarming (one could note it means 87% of people are doing well). However, in real numbers, 42 million people is the equivalent of the combined populations of New York, Pennsylvania, and all of New England—that many people lack access to sufficient daily nutrition! Is this not a major national crisis, warranting a significant response? Add to that insufficient housing and healthcare and it becomes even more alarming!

In the wealthiest nation on earth, we have a crisis of poverty! Tens of millions of people live in want because of hunger, lack of sufficient and affordable housing, and little or no access to basic healthcare. For many people, life is a chronic emergency! According to government data, in many low-income households (even those working 40 or more hours a week in minimum-wage jobs), well over half of the resources go to pay for rent and utilities, leaving the balance for taking care of all the rest, including food, clothing, health insurance (if they have it), transportation, and the like. What kind of life is this? Who can possibly make ends meet without some assistance? It seems as those who want to cut government assistance to the low-income households don't even know what they're talking about. Being dependent on temporary government assistance is a necessity if you can't make ends meet. To eliminate it is a case of privileged people wanting to punish the poor.

Besides, it's not like the rest of us don't depend on government handouts (though we don't view it as that). The fact is, the population receiving the largest amount of government assistance are retirees through Social Security and Medicare, and the ones receiving most of that are mostly middle-class. Then, if you count indirect benefits (e.g., tax breaks, student loans, government contracts, and other forms of assistance), guess

who gets the most? The middle and upper income households. The poor are easy targets, but they are not draining our national resources. So, if those who are privileged want to make it even harder for low-income people to access help, on what basis is this morally justified?

Frankly, if we want to talk morality, a concern for the poor is more fundamental to the Bible than any other single ethic—be it personal or social. From the Torah through the New Testament, concern for the poor is everywhere, not only because it's merciful, but because it's God's prophetic calculation for righteousness. If one treated the most vulnerable in society with justice and mercy, it was an act of righteousness. With Jesus, this was even more pronounced.

Do you recall the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25? Who was considered righteous? Those who gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, who welcomed the stranger or foreigner, who took care of the ill, and who visited those in prison—a representative list of social and economic needs and vulnerability. Righteousness was being responsive to such needs and it helped to bring about right relations with “the least of these”—a righteous relationship where you would meet the spirit of Christ (“...as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me”). As I mentioned last Sunday, righteousness was not about religious ceremony and ritual; it was being fair, just, equitable, considerate, and compassionate to others, especially those who were impoverished in body and spirit.

So, when Jesus declared, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”, it had a definite social and economic implication imbedded in it. Luke made it more explicit in his version: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled” (Lk. 6:21). Even so, Matthew's

audience would have understood it as such, since they knew “righteousness” was being in right relations with God and with one’s neighbors, particularly “the least of these.” Divine providence was made manifest in dire situations—to those who lacked the resources or access to them to be self-reliant like the privileged; God provided in tangible ways to those who were in desperate conditions and contexts. Such providence came through those who shared their resources and took care of them as if they were the hands and heart of Christ. Such generous concern for the most vulnerable is what restores essential righteousness to the world.

This sense of divine providence—that which is shared with those in need, then, serves as the lens through which this remarkably powerful passage in the Sermon on the Mount can be read—the one that tells us not to worry about our life—the one that encourages people to trust in the providence of God.

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

As we know, these are the very things that most people preoccupy themselves with, from a subsistence level with basic human needs over to the iconic ways in which wealth, power, and privilege are expressed through opulence in what people eat, drink, or wear. How does one not worry about these things, unless you have more than enough or have ready access to them? The poor have neither, unless it comes through generous sharing. Who shares? Those who have generous hearts, who view those who have little or nothing to be like family or neighbors to whom one is duty-bound, responsible, and compassionate. The moral ideal is not a “survival of the fittest” competitive mindset—it’s the wellbeing of all in a commitment to justice and cooperation. Those who don’t hoard things to benefit only

themselves understand this. Knowing that others care and will help each person access resources they need helps to diminish the foreboding sense of worry that those living on the edge face each day. Worrying is diminished because we know we'll be there for each other as the needs arise.

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap [traditional male roles in an agrarian culture] nor gather into barns [typical hoarding practices of the wealthy landowners], and yet your heavenly Father feeds them [not an abstract consequence of Nature, but of the intentional providential divine Spirit of life]. Are you not of more value than they?

...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil or spin [traditional female roles in his culture], yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these [King Solomon who was notorious for opulence and used his imperial power to expand his private wealth in unjust and idolatrous ways].

...But strive first for the kingdom of God and righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

Strive for just relationships—right relationships—merciful relationships, and the realm of God will be evident. All your needs will be provided. In God's providence, everyone will be fed if we keep on passing the bread.

I grieve that this compassionate caring outlook has somehow become a spirit and philosophy in short supply. It upsets me that so many view personal freedom in economic terms to push back against social justice and responsibility; it's become freedom to hoard resources for my own personal use, often at the expense of my neighbor. The American dream so many aspire to has less to do with building a fair and just society and more about the ambition to acquire as much wealth as possible. Let's call it for what it is: the glorification of millionaires and billionaires has made Mammon the god in whom we trust. And it's plainly written on our currency.

Ricardo Mayol understands this well. He has lived apart from this adoration of money nearly all his adult life. He was a graduate of M.I.T.,

and could have gone on to a lucrative career, as did most of his classmates, I would imagine. Instead, Ricardo has chosen a different career path and set of values by devoting his life to live among the poor of Central America to help empower their communities—in Costa Rica, Mexico, El Salvador, and now Guatemala. He has few personal possessions and shares what he does. He has not bought into the idolatry of western society, where how much money you have determines your value and so many of life's choices and privileges. Instead, his values are shaped by living alongside the most vulnerable, where he experiences God's providence every day. He doesn't worry. His is a chosen life of sharing few resources; like his *compañeros*, he will always make do. He's embraced the wisdom of Jesus, reflected in G.K. Chesterton's brilliant observation: "The way to find satisfaction in life is not to acquire more, but to desire less."

God provides, but usually not in the ways we think. Sometimes, it's not by helping us acquire more, but by inspiring us to desire less; more often, it is by leading us to share what we have for the wellbeing of everyone. A community of sharing is where divine providence is evident. That's where the righteous express eternal values.

The beauty of it is that every time we do this, we are sowing the seeds of righteous relationships. When we sow these kinds of seeds and nurture them well, we continually bear a harvest of goodwill and spiritual trust that will feed us in our bodies and our souls till we want no more.

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