

Meditation July 8, 2018, Practicing Faith
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This is a kind of inaugural Sunday in a series of Sundays. Here the focus is practicing faith, in the sense of improving faith through practice. In the weeks to come, we'll be looking at specific ways to practice faith by practicing particular spiritual disciplines. When I signed up for this Sunday, I wasn't particularly drawn to the theme of practicing faith- I found it a bit up in the air. But I was going to sign up for something, and this was a week that needed to be filled. And as I looked at the passages, I did find them interesting- a little troubling, as I'll get to, but interesting and relevant. I'll be concentrating mostly on the passage from Matthew.

As human beings, we can do an amazing number of things. And with modern technology, the number of things we can do has gone up dramatically. We can do some things faster than ever before. We can have more things on the go. But each of us still has to process and prioritize what we do somewhere. And here we find that we're limited. When the emails come in, you still have to read them.

Ultimately, we can only actively think of one thing at a time, we only actively care about a limited number of things. We get most of our cues and affirmation from a small number of places. We see things through a particular perspective.

This is being human. And according to the passage in Matthew, this is where faith happens. The passage is all about prioritizing what's valuable, for people like us who can't prioritize everything.

The starting point, I suppose, is being able to prioritize. Yesterday my father and I biked to an MCC party for Bisna. My father asked me why I didn't change bike gears more often. I know how to change gears and usually do change gears when I bike. The truth is that I hadn't slept well during the heat wave. I was putting the mental energy I had into the things around me on the bike path and not into thinking about gear-shifting. The tool to shift gears was there and I knew how to use it, but I wasn't willing to give it the priority that would have been needed to use it properly.

Thinking about this later, I was reminded of something I once heard, that sometimes the most important thing you can do spiritually is to get a good night's sleep. I think that's true, and I think that's because when we're rested, we're a lot better at sorting out priorities.

But what should we prioritize? And how do we do that?

For many years, I've been connected with an Anglican para-diocesan organization based in NDG that does children's day camps. Each camp is 5 days, with each day based around a connected Bible story. Some of you may have crossed paths with it; my initial connection was through the Stoez family, who were part of this church in the early 1990s. I really like their philosophy- I have found and continue to find it Biblical and very organic. In the last fifteen years, six of the summers that you haven't seen me it was because I was off animating children's day camps across Canada- doing arts and crafts, organizing games, leading songs, doing puppetry, retelling stories, time-keeping, chairing meetings, finding tasks for people to do. I'm now on their planning committee, struggling to keep the program from becoming a fossil of the 1980s. For

me, this is a very important context in which I've practiced and I think improved at faith. Leading day camps, together with helping people move, is when I feel closest to God.

But it's still a time commitment (volunteer), and can be quite burdensome. A few weeks ago, I had agreed to lead a training team for one week. I was happy to do this. I was then asked for another week, as overnight supervisor at their training retreat. I was less eager to do this, but again I agreed. Finally, I was asked for three more weeks. They asked me to pray about it. I did.

And that's when I looked at the passages that I was going to speak on today. "God's love is better than life"; "Don't store up treasures on earth- store of treasures in heaven"; "You can't serve God and money;" "Don't worry- seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well."

I thought- committing to these three extra weeks still makes no sense and now I feel guilty.

I eventually told them no (and they respected that and ended up finding someone else).

I do see Jesus' words as normative for my life. The Sermon on the Mount asks to be read that way. But does seeking God's kingdom first mean prioritizing church activities? I think it can, but I don't think that's what Jesus is really getting at here.

But if it doesn't mean that, what does it mean?

In terms of practicing faith, this passage doesn't actually use the word for faith- it's a contrast between what money prioritizes and what Jesus wants us to prioritize. We're prioritizing anyway, but there are two ways to prioritize.

The whole point of pricing is that it identifies some things as more valuable than other things. A sandwich might be \$4.00. A computer might be \$400.00. A house might be \$400,000.00. The whole thing is based on the point where supply meets demand. If we enter fully into the logic of money, we might say that the point where supply meets demand is what the thing is actually worth. Economic value = ultimate value.

But there's another way to price and to prioritize. Maybe the truly valuable sandwich isn't the one that's most sought after. Maybe the truly valuable sandwich is the one that you share with a homeless person. Maybe the truly valuable computer is the one that you use to send encouraging emails. Maybe the truly valuable house is the one where you host a refugee family for dinner.

When we see things this way and to act on it, then, in Jesus' analogies, our eyes are seeing properly. We're storing up treasures in heaven. We're serving God rather than money. In other words, we're practicing faith- practicing faith in the conviction that the way that Jesus describes things is how things actually are. And practice makes perfect.