



Minimum Viable God

By

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First Lesson | Exodus 12:1-14

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. This is how you shall eat

it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

“This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Second Lesson | Matthew 18:15-20

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as

a gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.””

Sermon

In the summer of 1975, my in-laws, Doug and Ann, went on their honeymoon to Pipestem Resort State Park in the southernmost part of the great state of West Virginia. They picked it based on a brochure, which made it look like what it is: an Appalachian Shangri-la. Pools, lakes, streams, fishing, an 18-hole championship golf course, a par-3 9-hole course that will use every club in your bag, a nature center, hiking trails, restaurants, and on and on. Pipestem is built on the top and bottom of a gorge formed by the beautiful Bluestone River, and you could stay down in the Mountain Creek Lodge, accessible only by a Swiss-built tram. If you're staying in the lodge or cabins on the topside, you have to pay

to ride the tram. But pro tip: if you stay down in the Mountain Creek Lodge, you can ride it for free whenever you want. And there was a dining room down there, too.

Karen and her sister Amy grew up going there, staying in the Mountain Creek Lodge. My brother-in-law Jeff and I were inducted into the Rohrer family on trips to Pipestem, and my beloved nieces Emilia and Romy have spent every summer of their lives visiting Pipestem. This summer was the 51st year that Rohrers have been to Pipestem.

The park has had a few tough years. Various amenities have been privatized to concessionaires who added things like ziplining and big inflatables down on Long Branch Lake for a fee. Much of the arboretum was paved to put in a splash park, again, for a small fee. The Mountain Creek Lodge Dining Room closed, and the dining options in the park were contracted to the Bluestone Dining Room, with views over the gorge, and the Black Bear Café, a beer and pizza spot near the lobby of the main lodge. The outdoor pool had some structural problems, and they filled it in a few years ago.

This year, we learned upon arrival that the concessionaire who had operated the zipline and inflatables on Long Branch Lake wasn't going to open. Somehow, this meant there was no swimming permitted on the lake, which meant no options for my mother-in-law who loves swimming outdoors. Only one of the restaurants, the Bluestone Dining Room, was going to be open before Wednesday. And then there was the tram.

Last summer, 2025, the old mechanical tram was closed for replacement, and this summer marked the grand opening of the new bottom side of the gorge, accessible by a shiny new computerized tram. Karen, her sister and I decided to take the tram down to hike Farley Loop, a mythically steep trail, and then take the tram back up to the top side and reward ourselves with some lunch in the Bluestone Dining Room.

Feeling triumphant and very hot from our hike, we arrived back at the tram to find Butter, one of the tram operators, on a ladder with a screwdriver and a can of WD-40. There was a problem with a sensor or something. The van would be down in 90 minutes – because that's how long it takes to drive there, hence

the tram – and maybe he'd be able to fix it. We could wait, or we could ford the Bluestone River and hike 1,200 feet up and out.

I should say here that Karen and I have a tendency in our marriage to “and another thing!” to each other. One of us will point out something terrible from the news, and the other will say, “Not only that, but have you seen this!” We've learned that we can't go too global with our observations about what's wrong with the world, lest we send ourselves into a real downward spiral.

So on that hike out, I tried very hard not to rant too much about the trams. About how the former tram was old and mechanical but at least it had been installed before the widespread adoption of built-in obsolescence. At least its purpose was to take people up and down a gorge; at least its purpose was not to deliver value to shareholders. At least the old tram could be fixed by people in Summers County with a screwdriver and a can of WD-40. I say I tried but you can see I didn't succeed. And when we finally got up to the Bluestone Dining Room to find that the air conditioning was broken and that a part had been ordered but

that it wouldn't be there for 6 to 8 weeks, not even I could muster up "and another thing!"

It was difficult not to go too global about shrinking municipal budgets, privatization and public-private partnerships, staffing challenges, the cascading effects of less disposal income and vacation time for middle class families to go to a state park on vacation, the ongoing effects of the pandemic, the systemic neglect of and national contempt for Appalachia, and the insufficiency of individuals to fix any of these problems.

Molly Farneth, professor at Haverford College, in a book on the importance of rituals in our life together, has summed it up well: "Decades of the increasing privatization and individuation of American public life – the defunding of public institutions and spaces, the community-destroying mobility of workers demanded by a neoliberal economy, the diminishment and collapse of associational life." I would add the tyranny of AI bots interrupting what we're doing to demand that they be helpful with what we're doing; sports betting and prediction market

companies ruining every diversion with their predation; climate chaos and global ecocide. Indeed, the world feels like it's breaking down all around us, but, hey, at least it's election season!

One wonders where Jesus could possibly be in the midst of all of this. Where is God when the systems are breaking down? How do we be faithful amid the comprehensive failure of the institutions that have ordered our lives? How would Jesus direct our associational and institutional life?

I want to say here that if I were God, and my goal was to correctly run institutions, I would have approached things differently. If God decided to become incarnate in Jesus today, he could have spoken directly to a global audience. He could have had millions of followers on YouTube or TikTok. He could have taken these healings and miracles that he did in 1s and 2s and operated at scale. He could have said very directly how to operate a transnational corporation or a global treaty organization or a multilateral trade agreement. He could have galaxy-brained the Strait of Hormuz or sustainable growth without fossil fuels.

Yet the frustrating truth is that of all the times to become incarnate in the world, God chose a no-account nation living under Roman imperial occupation, who organized themselves in small households in an agrarian economy. As a result, Christians have always struggled with just who we want to be in relation to institutions – do we act as double agents and stand within them? Do we disengage from them entirely? Do we take over them and direct them in “Christlike” directions? In Acts chapter 3, Peter and John go into the temple and encounter a beggar, a man unable to walk from birth. He asks them for money, and Peter says, “Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk.” Fast forward to the 12th century to a story – God, I hope it’s not apocryphal, but it probably is – of Thomas Aquinas being summoned to the Vatican, where the Pope is counting a massive sum of money. And he says to Thomas, “Never again can the church say ‘silver and gold have I none,’” to which Thomas responds, “Neither can it say ‘stand up and walk.’”

Yes, there is something in the Christian life about trying to have the right amount of resources and institutional power – if

we are too poor, we cannot do anything with our money, but if we are too rich, we think only about preserving it. If there are too few of us, we cannot accomplish our institutional desires, but if there are too many of us, we will not be able to have the personal touch. Christian institutional life is all very Goldilocks.

This summer, I went with Karen to a conference she attends every year called the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures. It’s a group of pastors, missiologists (that’s people who study Christian mission), sociologists, and theologians who get together to think about the future of the church. They meet in a different place every year, and the hosting organization offers a description of their context for discussion. And then people from all over the world bring papers in response, putting their context in conversation with the host. This year, we went to Rättvik, Sweden, to discuss the deacon ministry of the Swedish state church. The question for discussion was: What is the role of deacons after the establishment of a welfare state with a strong safety net and, more pressingly, what is the role of the deacons when that welfare state is falling apart?

The South Africans in the room were perplexed by a state church – after all, their state church invented and maintained apartheid. One person from the South African delegation, Marius, asserted that to institutionalize the deacons was to institutionalize hope. And by extension, when the institution falls apart, so too does the source of hope.

He quoted the Brazilian philosopher Roberto Unger, who says that there are four features of the human condition: mortality, meaning we will die and we know it; groundlessness, meaning we cannot make ultimate sense of the cosmos or our place in it; insatiability, meaning we always want more; and belittlement, meaning we are often diminished by our treatment in society. Marius pointed out that an institutionalized deacon ministry, meaning one run by the state, could only really address that last one, belittlement. The promises of political reform or well-run institutions at their best are still no match for feelings of mortality, groundlessness, or insatiability. Only a community of faith, only associational life lived in Christ, can address those concerns.

So I turn again to Jesus and to the vision of community he lays out for us in Matthew 18. If you have a problem with somebody, go to them. If you can't get them to listen to you, take a few others. If that still doesn't work, take the whole church, which, let's remember, the church at that time was the size of a household. 30-50 people, tops. Even then, even if you cannot get the whole church to bring this person back, the wrong one is still to be as a gentile or a tax collector, which is to say still a part of the broader community. You still have to live with this person. You're going to run into them at the grocery store.

Or that last line, where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there among them. The only time I ever hear us reference this scripture passage is when an event is underattended, and we decide to soldier on with the crew that decided to show up. It's for people who are weathering a disappointment because, let's be honest, we have taken this text to mean that if God is there with 2 or 3, then how much more must God be present with 2 or 3 thousand.

And yet, God does not operate on economies of scale. God did not become

incarnate in a time when some kind of global hegemony was possible. God did not promise to be faithful when we were fully insured. God did not promise to be faithful after we correctly dialed in the asset allocation of our endowment fund. God did not promise a blue wave or a renewed mandate; God didn't even promise free and fair elections. God did not promise that there wouldn't be CECOT or that Cubans wouldn't be deported to the Central African Republic. God did not promise healthy institutions, the post-war global order, or the end of history. God promised to be there when we gather.

The gift of a God born in a stable in first century Roman-occupied Palestine, who became a refugee as a baby, who was put to death by the state on a garbage dump, is that that God can be present in a well-resourced congregation, when the money is flowing, when the state is functioning, when workers are protected, when everybody has dignity and enough. But when we can no longer count on those things, we count on the one who is revealed in the everyday sadnesses of life in 2026, in the jackal dens of institutional failure, in abandoned data centers after the bubble bursts, in the

one who promises to be wherever people gather. The one who can speak good news not just to our belittlement, but to our mortality, our groundlessness, our insatiability. Healthy institutions are good but an associational life of faithfulness is where God promises to be.

Saturday night, July 4, our last night at Pipestem, we went to the Black Bear Grill right when they opened. We knew from 51 years of collective knowledge that the pizza oven gets backed up, so you needed to get your orders in early. There was to be a cover band that night, but we learned upon arrival that they were not going to be able to make it. Not to worry, Ranger Scott is on his way back from Wal-Mart with a karaoke machine. We ordered some pizzas and beers and waited to see what this was going to be. After a while, Ranger Scott arrived, and the cooks, waitstaff, and some guests set about figuring out how to connect this dang thing. They eventually got it sorted, and the cooks and waitstaff sang a few songs to get the party going. There was a bit of a lull for a while where Ranger Scott vamped while we all looked around at each other and willed somebody else to go, and finally I couldn't take it anymore, and I called up Glory Days by Bruce

Springsteen, which always gets people going. From there, several other people sang their favorites. I scrounged up some tourists to join me for Love Shack by the B-52s and then Friends in Low Places by Garth Brooks. Some kids took over and sang emotional songs like Iris by the Goo-Goo Dolls with full camp. One of the park rangers sang original sea shanties a capella and you could hear a pin drop. Ranger Scott emceed and told stories from growing up outside Charleston, WV, big fish stories with great punchlines like, “I grew up with Monsanto down the street that way and Dow Chemical down the street that way: ain’t nothing a little Covid gon’ do to me!”

It had become a magical night, and we all felt it. At the appointed time, Ranger Scott brought the evening to a close. He thanked us for coming and then said, “I don’t think y’all will need the words for this one. But can you believe this is a soccer song now? Everybody from all over the world is singing our song.” And even with that acknowledgment of the World Cup, with all of its greed, corruption, and terrible geopolitics, we all wept through Country Roads together. We walked back to the cabin through the mist, Romy on my shoulders, fireworks

going off in some distant holler, and somewhere on the walk home, either Karen or I said to the other, “Silver and gold have I none,” and we knew we would be for a 52nd summer at Pipestem.

A healthy institution is better than an unhealthy one. A robust endowment is better than a dwindled one. A suitable physical plant is better than one that’s falling down. A healthy democracy is better than an autocracy. But none of these things are where we place our faith. Our faith is in the God of humble gatherings, networks of faithfulness, households and communities trying their best, staying faithful against all odds, fighting against unjust systems, looking out for neighbors.

Networks of faithfulness holding each other accountable, inviting the presence of the living God, knowing that God will show up. And no matter what else happens, that is not going to change.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

