

The Beatitudes' Worship Series: "Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:1-12)
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Verse 6)
Exodus 16:2-4a; 17:3-6; Psalm 42:1-5; Romans 3:21-26
Salem United Methodist Church; July 29, 2018
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Jesus began his most significant sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, with eight blessings which are called the Beatitudes. These blessings are a summary of Jesus' mission and ministry on earth. Each one identifies a human condition and follows it with a promise. The first three blessings were presented the past three Sundays. Today we are focusing on the fourth one: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Most of us do not know what real hunger or real thirst is. When we are hungry we grab a snack, or go to the grocery store where we can buy whatever item we are craving, or we can decide on what type of food we want to eat by the restaurant we choose. We know what it is to be hungry, but few of us have experienced hunger, the type of hunger where even a few morsels of gruel once a day is a feast. And few of us know what it is like to be parched from thirst. When we are thirsty, we have our choice of drinks: water, soda, juice, tea, or coffee, to name a few choices. Again, we can grab what we like to drink and never experience real thirst, the type of thirst one might experience if lost in the desert and hallucinate an oasis on the horizon. The first century peasants would have known real hunger and thirst. If they could find work, a day's wages paid enough for them to have one vegetarian meal. If they could not find work, they did not eat. Also, they knew real thirst from working in the hot Palestinian sun. Water was then and still is a precious commodity in the Middle East. So when Jesus mentioned hunger and thirst, his listeners would have related not to a brief desire, but a deep longing for food and drink.

A deep longing for something more than food or drink is what this beatitude is about. The Psalmist refers to this deep longing and compares it to deer searching for a cool drink of fresh water from flowing streams. These deer lived in the hot, arid climate of the Middle East where flowing streams were not common. Our souls thirst, are starving, and long for a God connection. We starve and thirst for the One who created us. Some people go their entire lives without satiating their hunger or quenching their thirst for God. They may not even know what this deep longing is all about. They may try to fill it with overeating, or with drinking too much, or binge shopping, or gambling, or having multiple sex partners, or creating an exaggerated sense of self-importance. None which will satisfy their real need, their need for God. This need to connect with God is why we make time to be here on Sunday mornings, to be in Bible studies, to do our devotions and develop a prayer life. We strive to satisfy this deep longing, this hunger and thirst for God by being with God.

Jesus identified this deep longing as righteousness, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst or long for righteousness." The Greek word, *diakaiosune*, has three meanings: right living, justice, and justification. All of these connect us with God. Right living is about loving God, trusting God, obeying God and doing what is right in the eyes of God. Right living is about honoring God with one's whole life, making God first, above everything. Right living is about us having the desire to connect and live according to God's plan and vision of love, peace, and joy for humanity. If we look back to the first century, the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, viewed right living as a strict obedience to the interpretations they gave God's laws. Right living became about putting the law above everything, including human needs. Remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? It was the priest and his assistant, the Levite, who walked past the injured man so they wouldn't not become "unclean" and then couldn't perform their duties at the Temple. Part of Jesus' mission was to bring us back to the true meaning of right living: Love God and love each other. The promise Jesus gives later in the Sermon on the Mount states that we are to seek God and God's righteousness first, and we will receive righteousness. We ask and we will receive.

The second meaning of God's righteousness is justice. God is just and offers justice. When the enslaved Israelites cried out to God in Egypt, God heard them and rescued them. When they were hungry and thirsty in the wilderness, God provided them with food and water. When later generations forgot these acts of God's justice and began to mistreat and enslave the poor and weak, when they indulged themselves at the expense of the poor, God called the prophet, Amos, to remind them sternly to act justly to all people. "The end has come upon my people Israel...Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land" (Amos 8:2, 4). Through

the words of Amos, God still calls us to act justly, to do all in our power to not oppress those who have less, and to seek justice for those who are suffering at the hands of another. The first century people were suffering from grave injustices at the hands of the Roman Empire. The peasants had little to no hope of a decent life after being highly taxed and enslaved by the Romans to support the extravagant Roman lifestyle. Today, there are still people suffering from the injustices caused by another. William Barclay, a well-known biblical interpreter, wrote in the mid-twentieth century, “Those that hunger and thirst for justice...could never be content in a civilization in which the law is weighed in favor of one color or one class; in a society in which the few have too much and the many too little; in an economic system in which [people] are treated, not as persons, but as things.” How do we hunger and thirst for this kind of justice today? Social justice has been part of right living in the Methodist tradition since the beginning. John Wesley called for the abolishment of slavery in England. American Methodists in the nineteenth century brought medical care to the working classes and education to their children. Today the United Methodist Church owns property on Capitol Hill which houses the General Board of Church and Society. This Board lobbies on behalf of the church for just laws, speaks out against injustices in our world, and educates us on a variety of social justice issues. This is one way in which the today’s church hungers and thirsts for righteousness.

The third meaning of the word righteousness is justification. Paul uses the word, *dikaioisune*, when he speaks about justification by faith. Justification does not mean that we are right and everyone else is wrong. Justification means that God sees us as we are. God sees the potential we have, the good things we do, but also the things we do that are wrong, that hurt others, that hurt us, and that diminish God. These things, Paul calls sin. “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory...” (Romans 3:23). There is no discrimination here. Every one of us: those who strive to have their longing for God satiated with worship, prayer, and reading the Bible and those who have this deep longing, but satiate it in other ways; those of every race and culture, those who have too much and those who have too little, all of us fall short of God’s righteousness. If we all sin, should we give up and throw in the towel? No, because God has provided a way to justify us, to make us right with God. Paul wrote, “All are treated as righteous freely by [God’s] grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). As Christians we believe that Jesus’ death on the cross paid the price for our sins so that we could be in a right relationship with God. To be justified by faith is to be in this newly created right relationship.

At first glance these three definitions may seem to be entirely different, but they are actually three legs of a stool: the leg of right living, the leg of justice, and the leg of justification. If one leg doesn’t exist, the stool will not stand. All three are needed. We need to be in a justified or right relationship with God to live rightly, according to God’s will. And if we are living according to God’s will, we will act justly in all our dealings with family and neighbors, at work, in the church, in business, and yes, even in how we govern ourselves. How do we seek justice for all as our Pledge of Allegiance suggests?

The hunger and thirst for righteousness is our human condition. Every person has a deep longing for things to be made right: right with God and each other. Now comes the promise: “for they shall be filled.” The word used for filled is a term that means to overstuff until one is ready to burst. In Jesus’ day, this term was used to fatten a calf for a feast. All who are starving and dying of thirst to live rightly and justly, all who are hungry and thirsty for justice, and all who seek to be made right with God, will be filled with God’s love, power, justice over and over and over again until they can hold no more. Think of that overstuffed image on Thanksgiving when you have to loosen your belt and/or push yourself away from the table. We who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be blessed until we can want no more. God will honor us. God will remember us. God will be with us.

Jesus said “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). God will honor all who hunger and thirst for a right way of living, for justice, for being in a right relationship with God and fill us until we can hold no more, until our longings are achieved and our souls are satisfied.

Reflection Questions: What is your deepest longing? How is that longing satisfied? How have you received God’s righteousness? And how is three legged stool of God’s righteousness a part of your daily living?

Resources: *The Beatitudes and Lord’s Prayer for Everyman* and *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1* by William Barclay; *Blessings that Make Us Be* by Susan Annette Muto

