

The Be-Attitudes: 4. Righteousness

Matthew 5.1-12 [New King James Version]

Mason United Methodist Church

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To be hungry and thirsty: two terms that describe realities which are not very well understood in our current American culture.

“I’m so hungry I think I’m gonna starve.” “I’m so thirsty. I’ve just got to have a drink.” These are phrases that almost any parent or caregiver has heard at one time or another, and often in the middle of the night.

Fact: Hunger is one of the leading child killers in our world, contributing to more than half of all child deaths. A child dies from hunger-related causes every seven seconds. Every year nearly 5 million hungry children die. Even if a child is just moderately underweight, that child is four times more likely to die from an infectious disease compared to well-nourished child. Worldwide, approximately 145 million children are underweight and at risk of dying – simply because they do not get enough nutritious food. [Source: UNICEF and World Vision]

Hunger and malnutrition rob children of their future. A hungry child is less likely to stay in school. Yet education is crucial to long-term food security. A farmer with four years of elementary education is almost 9 percent more productive than a farmer with no education. Hungry families are unable to invest in their own future. Hunger costs the world an estimated \$20-30 billion per year in economic development. [Source: Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Program, World Vision]

At least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day. More than 80% of the world’s population lives in countries where income differentials are widening. The poorest 40% of the world’s population accounts for 5% of global income. The richest 20% of the world’s population accounts for 75% of the world’s income. [Source: United Nations Development Program]

There are organizations working around the clock to make a difference in the lives of people in need around the world to provide food, education for farming, and potable water so that people can slake their thirst without fear of malaria or other water-borne disease.

It is into a similar scenario that Jesus spoke the words in today’s scripture: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

The fact is that very few of us in modern conditions of life know what it is to be really hungry or thirsty. In the ancient world it was very different. A working man’s wage was the equivalent of eight pence a day, and, even making every allowance for the difference in the purchasing power of money, no man ever got fat on that wage. [Barclay, William. The Gospel of Matthew. Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1956. Page 94]

Barclay says that a working man in Palestine at the time ate meat only once a week, and in Palestine the working man and the day laborer [and their families] were never far from the border-line of real hunger and actual starvation. It was still more so in the case of thirst. In the ancient world a person could not just turn a tap and find the clear, cold water pouring into their house. [Recall the woman in John 4 who had to carry her water two miles back to her home in Sychar.] A man might be on a journey, and in the midst of it the hot wind which brought the sand-storm might begin to blow. There was nothing for him to do but wrap his burnous [sic] and turn his back to the wind, and wait, while the swirling sand filled nostrils and throat until he was like to suffocate for breath, and until parched from imperious thirst. In the conditions of modern life there is no parallel at all to that. So, then, the hunger which this beatitude describes is no genteel hunger which could be satisfied with a mid-morning snack; the thirst of which it speaks is no thirst which could be slaked with a cup of coffee or an iced-drink. It is the hunger of the [person] who is starving for food, and of the [person] who will die unless [they] drink. [Ibid]

This beatitude presents a demanding situation and paints a dark picture of what the heart and mind craves: Righteousness. And Jesus goes on to say that the person who *hungers and thirsts for righteousness* – in the same way that life-giving nourishment and water bring life – shall be *filled*.

Righteousness means “a life fully conformed to the will of God in thought, worship and act.” [Floyd Filson. A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew. NY: Harper Brothers, 1960. Page 77]

Choices in life often come down to the basic question: *What is the next right thing to do?*

The desire for righteousness is much like the desire to respond to hunger or to slake a thirst. Real hunger and thirst lead a person to act on meeting the need.

Hunger and thirst can be painful things. The person who is hungry and thirsty for the right things for sustaining life is determined to meet the need. When the heart is heavy amidst a dearth of that which is right and righteous, there is pain in the spirit.

Hunger and thirst are satisfied only with nourishment and water. No other things, however fancy, will meet the basic need. When things are wrong about us, the only actions that will satisfy are those which strive to right the wrongs.

Hunger and thirst lead to the consumption of the food and the water that satisfy. When provision is available, the body responds to its nourishment. Where we can see the need for change in the world about us, we have the opportunity to do the next right thing: in our own home, in our immediate neighborhood, in our churches or schools, and ultimately in our world. When the needs of hunger and thirst are met the body is at peace. When righteousness prevails, the world around us becomes a better place.

We will frequently be faced with choices that will lead us to the opportunity to do the *next right thing*. The choices we make can have a tremendous impact on us, and on the world about us.

A familiar poem became quite meaningful to me during my later years of high school. And yet today I am often reminded of the truth of the words of Robert Frost, penned in 1915 in his immortal work, The Road Not Taken.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The choices we make today have untold impact on the future.

The next *right thing* we do may make an eternal difference in the life of another person.

When we are hungry enough, and thirsty enough, for righteousness – we will be filled. And because of our actions, others will be *filled* and *blessed*.

Amen.