

OLD TESTAMENT Psalm 18:20-24, 30-31

NEW TESTAMENT Romans 3:19-26

MEMORY VERSE Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they
will be filled. Matthew 5:6

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

This morning we are continuing our study of some of the first teachings of Jesus – the Beatitudes, found at the beginning of his first recorded major teaching – The Sermon on the Mount. Over the past several weeks we have focused on the blessings that have been conferred on some of the least important groups in the Jewish community – those who are poor or in mourning or are meek.

The next group that Jesus told his listeners were blessed were those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Have you ever been hungry? Or thirsty? Really hungry or really thirsty? I’m sure we can all relate to times when we have missed a meal or have worked or played a sport outside in hot weather and felt the need for more than just a glass of water.

Therefore, we can all say that we know something of what it means to be hungry and thirsty. Yet, if we are really honest with ourselves, we all have to admit that, although we have felt hunger pangs and symptoms of dehydration, we have never truly been really hungry or really thirsty.

Some of you may remember the Tom Hanks movie – CAST AWAY – in which Hanks plays a systems analyst for Federal Express who becomes marooned on a deserted Pacific Island. He has few survival tools and no way to communicate with the outside world. His survival depends on his finding three things: food, water, and shelter. The movie is gripping because Hanks is able to involve his audiences in his ordeal. People can almost feel his agony that comes from lack of food and pure drinking water.

Hanks was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal – because he was able to play this difficult role so well. Hanks had to gain 50 pounds in order

to look the part of an overweight, middle-aged man. The first part of the film was shot and then production went on hiatus for a year to allow Hanks time to lose those 50 pounds and more so that he could convincingly play a character who was able to survive, but barely, for four years before being rescued. If we imagine ourselves in such a predicament we can begin to imagine what real hunger must be like.

Thirst is a bit different – while Hanks’ character could survive years with scant food, lack of water can kill in just a few days. There is a progression, levels of thirst – and there are Latin words to describe these levels. The first, eudipsia, is ordinary thirst, probably the kind we have all experienced. The next level is hyperdipsia – an intense thirst, which is only temporary. Some of us may have even experienced this level, especially top-performing athletes. But it is likely that none of us have experienced polydipsia – sustained excessive thirst – the kind of thirst that drives people to drink salt water or antifreeze – even though they know that these things are poison to their bodies. Thirst can drive people to do such things.

Those who truly hunger and thirst are feeling pain and discomfort. This is not the miss-a-meal kind of hunger – it’s the *Cast Away* kind of hunger. The same for thirst – this isn’t eudipsia but rather polydipsia – real and prolonged excessive thirst.

This Beatitude confirms that God blesses those who hunger and thirst – for righteousness. This word has a slightly different meaning in the Bible than we commonly use today. Righteousness today, I think, carries the meaning of doing the right things, being law abiding, following the Golden Rule. It carries with it the idea that being righteous, living rightly, is something that can be attained, a level that can be reached. We can talk about feeling righteous indignation, because we were treated in ways that were not fair or caring. And once attained, being righteous is something that can be bragged about – the Pharisees fell into this category.

Righteousness was a big deal in scripture. The Psalms and Proverbs contain almost 100 references to righteousness, the prophet Isaiah speaks of righteousness 65 times. This concept remained important to New Testament writers, too. Paul, in his letter to the Romans gives advice regarding

righteousness 35 times. So I think it is safe to say that righteousness was one of the central themes of scripture, in both Old and New Testament.

As stated earlier, the meaning of the word righteousness has changed somewhat over time. First, let us look at what Old Testament righteousness is not – it is NOT acting in ways in order to meet an ethical, legal, psychological, religious, or spiritual standard. It is NOT only doing things that are dictated by either human or divine nature. It is NOT only actions meant to achieve a specific goal. It is NOT only impartial ministry to others. It is NOT only the same as treating others justly. These, I think, are many of the ways we view righteousness today.

Instead, the Old Testament concept of righteousness is the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship is with others or with God. No matter what relationship we look at, all relationships bring with them specific demands, and according to the Biblical meaning, the fulfillment of these relational demands constitutes righteousness.

The New Testament concept of righteousness presumes that this covenantal relationship already exists. To maintain this relationship, both parties are to actively participate. Those who participate and uphold such covenantal relationships are called righteous. Those acts which preserve a covenant relationship, either between God and people, or between individuals, are righteous, while those acts which break this relationship are unrighteous.

There is an obvious connection between thought, word, and deed when it comes to righteousness. The only way we can show our commitment to relationships is through our actions. This is a case of the WHY being more important than the WHAT. Why we do “right” things is more important to being righteous than what we actually do. Doing the right things for the wrong reasons would not meet this definition of righteousness

This Beatitude tells us that those who hunger and thirst – really desire, not just with lip service but with heart-felt desire – those who hunger and thirst to be in a right relationship with others as well as with God – these are the folks who will be pleasing to God and who will receive the blessings from God that come from being righteous. God approves those who long for right relationship with

Him and with others, not those who mistakenly think they have already achieved it. Those who realize their lack in this area rather than those who boast of their attainments will receive what they long for; they will be satisfied.

Let me tell you a story that might highlight the difference that caring relationship makes in a situation. A couple, let's call them Fred and Ethel, have been married several years. Fred likes to see Ethel happy, and what makes Ethel happy is jewelry. Fred doesn't like shopping for jewelry so he makes a deal with a local jeweler to periodically pick out “something that Ethel would like” for her birthday, their anniversary, Christmas – you get the idea. The jeweler keeps track of those special days using a list that Ethel dropped off for him, picks out an appropriate gift, wraps it in pretty paper, calls Fred to come pick it up, and then Fred presents this gift to Ethel – as a gift from him. Ethel is always happy with her jewelry gifts. And that makes Fred happy, too.

End of story? Maybe. After all, Fred got what he wanted – he was able to make Ethel happy by giving her a jewelry gift on her special days, and Ethel got what she wanted – jewelry that she liked given to her by her husband on special occasions. But what does it say about their relationship when the result is pleasing to both, but neither of them really participated in the selection? Could their relationship be closer and more satisfying if they both felt the need for deeper commitment to one another and together searched for ways to improve this gift-giving scenario? I believe that the answer is yes.

In similar ways we can make decisions to “do the right thing” out of guilt or humanitarian reasons. Doing these good works is a good thing, but these works are not as pleasing to God as those which are done out of a desire to give back to others because we recognize God's great gifts to us. The greatest gift is, of course, salvation through Jesus Christ. God works with us in this way, not because it makes Him feel good, but because His desire for relationship with us is, was, and always will be of primary concern for Him. God has continued through the ages to reach out to His people in order to deepen relationship with us.

God's commitment to deep relationship with us goes without question – it is our commitment to deep relationship with God that is problematic.

Let me share with you some examples of doing the right thing for the right reason. These are not my stories but come from Shane Claiborne. His is a name some of you may recognize. He is from Philadelphia and is one of the founding members of a group called The Simple Way. He is committed to living gently and helping others, especially the poor. He has learned some important lessons from the poor, whether in Philadelphia, Calcutta, or Iraq. This is what he says:

I saw one woman in a crowd as she struggled to get a meal from one of the late-night food vans. When we asked her if the meals were really worth the fight, she said, “Oh, yes, but I don’t eat them myself. I get them for another homeless lady – an elderly woman around the corner who can’t fight for a meal.”

Again, he states: I saw a street kid get \$20 panhandling outside of a store and then immediately run inside to share it with his friends. We saw a homeless man lay a pack of cigarettes in the offering plate because it was all he had.

Finally, we met a little girl who was homeless and asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up. “I want to own a grocery store,” she said. We asked her why, and she said, “So I can give out food to all the hungry people.”

In each of these instances good was being done, and the good was being multiplied by those who weren’t thinking only of themselves but were giving to others even though their needs were great. They each were connecting to others in caring relationships. And in doing so, they were acting with righteousness toward others. These are examples of people hungering and thirsting after righteousness. And notice that each has been given the feeling of satisfaction – they have been filled – filled by God in accordance with this Beatitude.

Another translation for the word – righteousness – is justice. Although this word often has a somewhat legal and political connotation, it is also used by the prophet Micah in a familiar passage: Micah 6:8: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” What is Micah saying? First, we are to act justly – to do those things that are just and right.

How are we to act in this way? We are to embrace mercy, love mercy. We do this by showing compassion, sympathy, empathy, forgiveness to others. We are to acknowledge and embrace these attributes of God that He has showered upon us. We need to pass on to others the great gifts God has given to us. What should our attitude be?

Micah finally says we should walk humbly with God. We are to develop a deep relationship with God – one of understanding and action that comes out of this relationship – not actions that are done to achieve such a relationship – but one that rather comes from, wells up from, the love and understanding that naturally comes from such deep and committed relationships.

God is asking us to examine our heart condition – to do the right things for the right reason and that reason rests on our ongoing desire to have deeper, committed, covenantal relationships with God and with those around us. It is not something that is once achieved, but a life-long commitment to live in right relationship with God and with others.

This Beatitude – blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be satisfied – is one of the most challenging statements in the Bible. We are to pursue righteousness in everything we do. That’s a difficult assignment. However, this same statement is also one of the Bible’s most comforting statements. It is the pursuit of righteousness that will be blessed – it is the trying to live rightly and justly that is blessed – not the success of the outcome. We can try and fail – and be blessed – if we are motivated by the relationships we have with others and with God.

Righteousness and relationship – they walk together – one coming out of the other, reinforcing and deepening one another – a beautiful dance of sharing and love. That is what God desires of each of us – to be in such relationship with Him and to be in such relationships with those around us. Thanks be to God.