

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST...”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 5:6, Micah 6:6-8

(10-11-20) Thanksgiving

Have you heard of this thing called intermittent fasting? It's a way of controlling your weight and also perhaps strengthening your health. My brother told me about this sometime ago and he has been doing it for a few months. When I saw him this summer, he wouldn't eat anything after 8 pm and before 11 am. No late night snacks, no early morning meals. But between 11 am and 8 pm, well, you should have seen him eat! But it does seem to be working for him. He's lost weight and he says he feels pretty good. I know others who have done this as well. Actually, I tried it for a couple of weeks, but I got hungry. Now I know that this kind of hunger is really nothing. And besides, if you're hungry because of intermittent fasting, at least you know that you will be eating again in a few hours.

I remember early in my marriage I discovered that I snored, quite loudly. Well, the truth is I didn't discover that, my wife did. It was so bad that she couldn't fall asleep. I went to see a doctor who told me that I should have my tonsils and adenoids removed because they were restricting the airflow as I slept and caused the snoring. On his advice, and for the sake of my marriage, I had my tonsils and adenoids taken out. My advice is that if you're going to get your tonsils taken out, you shouldn't wait until you're a fully-grown man before you do it. Do it when you're young, you'll have more time to forget the pain. After surgery I couldn't eat for a week. Now that was a time when I felt hungry. Even just swallowing felt like shards of glass cutting into my throat. There was no way I was going to eat anything as long as my throat was still healing. The hunger after a day or two was quite intense, but after that, as you limit your activity, it gets easier to manage. It was the same last year when I was in the hospital for over a month. At first the hunger is intense, but without much activity, it's quite remarkable how little food we need to actually survive. Even if its hospital food which tastes nothing like what the label says!

Jesus said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

I wonder about how Jesus used the words hunger and thirst and what he meant by them. I can't imagine that Jesus meant to use those terms in the same way that I understand them. In the days of Jesus, to be hungry wasn't a temporary refraining from food. It most likely meant that you were perpetually hungry, belonging to a class of people who were poor, oppressed, marginalized. Hunger in the days of Jesus was about life and death, not a diet plan. And to be thirsty in the days of Jesus meant a quick and painful death. Water was, then, as it is now, basic to human survival. In the deserts of Galilee and Sinai, people could die of thirst if even the smallest thing went wrong.

All this to get at the point that when Jesus said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, **he's not saying, blessed are those who think that righteousness is a neat idea**

and something that should be aimed for, he's saying, **blessed are those who strive for righteousness as a starving person would search out food and a person dying of thirst craves even just a drop of water to quench their parched mouths.** When it comes to righteousness, to be blessed isn't about tinkering but about a passionate engagement. I also think that Jesus used these words, hunger and thirst, very purposefully to describe what he meant by righteousness. Sometimes we think that righteousness refers to a kind of interior, personal piety. To be righteous means to have a close and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To be a righteous person means that you read the bible daily, that you pray with regularity and conviction, that you attend church religiously and that you contribute to the work of the church generously. All these things are good and they are desirable as followers of Jesus Christ, but in this case, I don't think that it's the righteousness that Jesus was speaking about, **at least not entirely.** In this Beatitude I think Jesus uses the words hunger and thirst because they impart an understanding of righteousness that isn't interior focused as much as it is exterior focused, on the physical reality of living out this life. When we hunger and thirst for that righteousness, we align ourselves with a God whose nature is rooted in justice, mercy and love.

The prophet Micah cries out about this righteousness, about what God's righteousness looks like in us. **What does God require of us?** Shall I come before god with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? **No. He has told you, O mortal, what is good, says the prophet, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?** If we would hunger and thirst for righteousness, God's righteousness, it's not so much about sacrificial ritual or showy piety. Rather, it's about seeking God's justice, about loving kindness, showing mercy, living with compassion and doing it all with humility **because it's not about celebrating our own righteousness but about following after God's, which ultimately will then fill us.**

How do we do this? Like many of you, when I hear these words of Jesus, that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness as blessed, I know that I don't hunger and thirst for that righteousness enough, as if my survival depended upon it. **I'm complacent, and more often than not, I'm part of the problem, not the solution.** The Sermon on the Mount, which begins with these Beatitudes, **isn't Jesus saying that everything's just fine the way it is.** If this is Jesus' throne speech, his inaugural address, he's telling everyone who will listen that the world the way it is, isn't the way God intended it to be. And so Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven, an unfolding of a **new** reality, one in which he invites us to participate.

The good news is that Jesus doesn't say that those who **are** righteous are blessed, because then most of us wouldn't make the cut. He says that those who **hunger and thirst** for righteousness will be filled and they will be called blessed. It's about a **process**, about a

hungering and thirsting, not a finished state. We don't need to despair because we aren't righteous, we just need to start the journey, we need to be intentional about hungering and thirsting after righteousness. **But every journey needs to start somewhere.** Karoline Lewis, who teaches at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, writes that the gospel is a word of protest. I love that – **the gospel is a word of protest.** Jesus was person who stood up and said no. Those in power, those for whom the ways of the world worked well, they wouldn't stand for that and they put him to death. Of course, we all did because we were and are complicit in the ways of the world, the ways that stand in opposition to God's justice, kindness, mercy and love. Maybe we're not monsters, most of us, **but do we hunger and thirst for righteousness or do we look the other way? Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness or do we assume someone else will? Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness or do we explain away our perceived indifference because we don't want people to think we take sides, because we choose to play it safe?**¹ The gospel is a word of protest. If we would hunger and thirst for righteousness, we need to start somewhere.

It's Thanksgiving Sunday. It's a day to remember the blessings we know, even in this season of pandemic and to give thanks to God. But as we give thanks, we can't stop there. We can't stop there when there's still so much in the world, so many people in the world, who cannot share in the blessings we know. As we struggle with how to celebrate Thanksgiving in this season of Covid-19, whether to gather with family or not, we also need to remember that millions around the world still hunger for food and die for the lack of clean water. While we give thanks for what we know, let's not forget that this past week the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the World Food Programme for its efforts to combat hunger, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict. The World Food Programme is the world's largest humanitarian organization addressing hunger and promoting food security. In 2019, the WFP provided assistance to close to 100 million people in 88 countries who are victims of acute food insecurity and hunger. In 2019, 135 million people suffered from acute hunger, the highest number in many years. Most of the increase was caused by war and armed conflict. The Nobel Committee concluded its announcement of the Peace Prize by saying that the work of the World Food Programme to the benefit of humankind is an endeavour that all the nations of the world should be able to endorse and support. We could support it as well, it would be a start for those whose hunger and thirst for righteousness would help alleviate the physical hunger and thirst of millions around our world.

There are so many areas that require the hunger and thirst of the people of God. Issues of racism, poverty, the rights of people who have been oppressed for too long, whether because of colour, indigenous people, or for their choice of who to love, there are many countless examples. **We can't do it all, but we can do something, one thing.** March in protest, run for

¹ Karoline Lewis, Righteous Living, Working Preacher January 27, 2017.

political office, donate to a worthy cause, get educated. **Don't look the other way and don't assume that someone else will do it.** If we as the church don't believe that things are not the way they should be, as God would have them, but that the world is pretty good the way it is, then we have a problem with our basic identity. Martin Luther King Jr., wrote from Birmingham jail, **"There was a time when the church was very powerful – in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society... If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning..."**²

Sometimes the Word of God comes as a gut punch when we would just rather be filling our stomachs with turkey and stuffing. The gospel is a word of protest. We need to hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God's justice, God's mercy, God's kindness and love to be known by more people, by all people. **We don't have to do everything, but we do need to do something.** Let me be very clear. I know that many of you are doing something, that you do protest, that you do get engaged, that you don't look the other way and assume that someone else will step up. I know that as a church we want to care for our community, for those who are hungry and thirsty because they don't have enough to eat or a safe place to sleep. But let's keep our hunger and our thirst going. Let's increase in that yearning for God's righteousness. **The Beatitudes are a call to action to be church, a call to action to make Jesus present and visible and manifest in world that wants to keep things just the way they are.** The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines. And these days, we need this reminder, especially when we think what we do and what we say and what we believe doesn't matter. **It does matter, it can make a difference.**

Here's a final thought. Hunger and thirst are part of a normal, healthy life. When you're healthy, you get hungry. You need food, you have an appetite. Do you know who doesn't have an appetite, who has no desire for food? Those who are sick, those who are dying. We know that when a person begins to lose weight and stops wanting to eat that their bodies are shutting down, they are dying. **It's the same in our spiritual lives as well.** If we are spiritually unwell, if we are dying spiritually, we will have no appetite for God and for the things of God, for God's righteousness, for God's justice, mercy, kindness, love. **But if we are healthy spiritually, if we want to become healthier, we will be hungry and thirsty for God and for the things of God, for God's righteousness.**³ And as we hunger and thirst, we will be filled, and we will be blessed.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

² Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

³ Charmaine Braatvedt, Living with Blessings, January 2006.