

West Branch Friends Meeting
March 26, 2017
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We have been taking a look at Jesus' teachings on how to be blessedly happy during this season of Lent, and who doesn't want to be happy??!!

So far we've discovered that

- *we're happiest when we recognize our own inadequacies and acknowledge our need for God.

- *We also learned that we can be happy in our mourning because only when we mourn can we experience God's comfort.

- *And last week we discovered that by being humble and confident in God's role in our lives, we can receive God's inheritance for a happy life here on earth.

Today's beatitude, "Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled," is another one to explore a little deeper. This particular teaching of Jesus is another hard one for me because I've never experienced true hunger or thirst. So I think there are two things about this beatitude that we need to consider before we can truly understand its meaning.

First, we have to know what it is like to be hungry and thirsty. In 1998 there were 30 million Americans who received food stamps to help feed their families. Today that number has bloomed to nearly 47 million – food stamps feeding nearly one in seven Americans at an average subsidy of \$257 a month per household. That's not a lot, and I'm so happy to see many churches having food drives for local pantries, and providing backpacks of food for students to take home on the weekends when they won't have free breakfasts and lunches at school.

It's also sad to realize that many of our senior citizens are malnourished with estimates of over 30% of seniors skipping meals out of necessity. As the senior population continues to live longer with the help of Western medicine, of the millions of older adults admitted to the hospital every year, at least one in three is malnourished upon admission for a number of reasons including such as lack of appetite from decreased taste buds

or depression, or symptoms of medications, lack of energy to cook, or simply financial concerns. The economic impact of malnutrition is enormous. It is [estimated](#) that disease-associated malnutrition costs the U.S. \$157 billion each year.

Abram Maslow, a pioneer in the psychology of human needs, made a hierarchy of things we humans need in our lives, and food and drink are at the bottom of the pyramid, meaning we must first have our those physiological needs – especially food and drink - met in order to survive. Without ample nourishment a person is usually not going to be receptive to having an in-depth conversation about their spiritual life!

While I'm guessing few of us have ever truly experienced real hunger or thirst, we've all had some opportunities to be hungry and thirsty.

I'm remembering one spring when I was disking some ground on a farm away from home, and I got terribly thirsty because it was hot and I hadn't brought anything with me to drink. So as I drove along a creek running through the field, I stopped the tractor and went down to drink from the cool, clear appearing water. Let me warn you...NOT a good idea! Whatever microscopic creatures were living in the water were not welcome in my body and I paid dearly for quenching my thirst that day.

I can also remember fasting for a day or two, or if you've ever gone on a diet after over indulging, particularly after the Christmas holidays, that first day or so when your stomach growls is just one tiny glimpse of what it's like to be hungry.

But on another note, being hungry and thirsty isn't the same as craving food or drink. We all get cravings at times...my personal craving is for a little dark chocolate after a meal. And I'm partial to drinking Diet Coke, which I do try and limit; and there's the old saying that pregnant women can crave some pretty weird things such as dill pickles! Commercials teach us to crave certain foods, drinks and their products when we hear those cute jingles. But Jesus doesn't say 'Happy are those who crave righteousness;' He went way beyond cravings because those are not usually a result of hunger or thirst.

Cravings are things we want; food and drink are things we need to live. Someone once wrote, 'Hunger is when the navel is intimately acquainted with the backbone!'

So to understand this beatitude, we first have to know the true meaning of hunger and thirst, and fortunately, most of us will have to use our imaginations, but hopefully we can do that.

What Jesus is acknowledging here is that we hunger for things other than food and drink, and that desire is powerful! We hunger for recognition, for peace and happiness; athletes hunger for victory and business people hunger for lower taxes and more customers. But Jesus is referring to the deep drive we have for meaning in our spiritual lives, for peace, for joy.

The second thing we have to understand is what it means to translate physical hunger and thirst to spiritual hunger and thirst for righteousness. So how can we define righteousness?! The Greek word used in this verse for righteousness can mean the concept of justice. Social righteousness involves our desire to see the world reflect the character of God as seen in Jesus.

There's no question life is not always fair and I'm sure we can all think of times in our lives when we felt we were treated unjustly. But while we may sometimes be irritated with injustice, do we actually grieve, suffer, or die when we hear or see things being suffered by others? When we see families being torn apart by immigration, our tax money proposed to be increasingly spent on the military and cut from social programs? I will be the first to admit I'm just pretty comfortable with MY life just as it is most of the time. And that's NOT hungering and thirsting for justice.

The story is told of a man who went to see the pastor of an inner city church where many of the members lived in conditions of poverty and neglect. The man shared with the pastor that he knew of a woman confined to her bed, who had four children who were often hungry with little or no income, with back rent due so she was about to be evicted. This man told the pastor he was trying to raise \$600 dollars to help this woman. The pastor applauded this man's efforts, giving what he himself

could, and wracking his brain to come up with other ways he might help. “Of course I’ll help if I can,” he said. “If you can give your time to this cause, surely I can, too. By the way...how do you know this woman?” to which the man replied, “I’m the landlord.” This man had a craving, but it wasn’t a hunger for righteousness in the form of justice, even though his actions seemed to be wrapped up in a good deed.

The Greek word for righteousness goes even beyond justice, however, to include right living according to God’s wishes. In ancient Judaism, righteousness meant “to acquit, vindicate, restore to a right relationship.” The righteous are those who maintain right relationships—with God and with the people around them.

“Happy are those who hunger and thirst for right, holy living, living that includes God in our every breath.”

Or “Happy are those who want more than anything else to know God’s love and to have their greatest needs filled by God.”

What does that look like, then, in our daily lives, to hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice? We’ve all probably read or heard news stories about ways many are fearful ‘right living’ may be taken from the most vulnerable due to ‘less government’ being the rallying cry from many. For me, right living involves first making sure we are always seeking that ‘right-ness’ with God in our own lives. Our quest for rightness with God is not a one-time seeking and being filled, but rather a process where we are constantly seeking God’s rightness in our lives. Then, when we can do that, we are able to look beyond ourselves to crave God’s rightness for those around us.

Jesus challenged his disciples to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and provide shelter for the homeless. The reward? We will be filled....satisfied...renewed....refreshed....happy!!

The past several years I have participated with an organization called ‘Feed my Starving Children’ by packing pouches of rice, soy, dried vegetables and powdered vitamins for children in war-torn or countries experiencing drought or massive poverty.

But there are many ways we can give to food banks, volunteer during food drives, or simply seek ways to contribute what we can for the most vulnerable around us.

It also seems like the hunger and thirst in this beatitude represents the desperate longing of the previous beatitudes: to be poor in spirit, and humble. This hunger doesn't ask us to deny our burning desire for intimacy, beauty and adventure. Religion does that. Jesus invites us to intimate communion with God that satisfies the deepest longings of our souls. Jesus upset the religious system of his day by awakening the desires of people's hearts for a different, right way of living.

I think a good question we can ask ourselves is this: Do I hunger and thirst for right relationships—with God, with my co-workers, with my family, and my community? Hunger is a sign of life. Jesus says that those who have spiritual hunger will find their appetites filled.

The Christian faith has been the source of many of the greatest reforms in the work world, perhaps most notably the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and the United States, and the genesis of the Civil Rights movement.

But there is more to do...we have not arrived at right living for all. We still have battles that include identifying and finding solutions for our own racism, misogyny, and the inability to see that of God in ALL we come in contact with.

And did you know this past Wednesday was “World Water Day?” Are we thirsting for rightness when over a dozen Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) are prevalent in most third world countries where 663 million people live without safe drinking water and 1.4 billion without sanitation? And where Neglected Tropical Diseases kill an estimated 534,000 people every year? I know I need to be asking myself if I’m thirsting for rightness by contributing to groups trying to solve this problem of unclean water causing deaths.

Hunger and thirst for righteousness, which leads to happiness, will never be filled with food, sodas, money, drugs, prestige, or things. Pastor Nadia Boltz Weber says it best when she writes: *“Being known and loved*

and forgiven in our true form by our true God can quench our spiritual thirst in a way that no amount of success or admiration or romantic love or social justice work ever can."

So what can we do if we don't have this hungering for God and righteousness - justice? Perhaps we need a spiritual fast...when we've been overeating, or overbooking our lives, perhaps it's time to go on a spiritual diet, eliminating all those things that keep us from being hungry for more of God. Here are some things I have to ask myself:

Do I set aside a block of time to pray, meditate, and just seek those areas of my life where I've not included God?

Do I look for ways to seek justice for those who have no power? The poorthe sick...the hungry...those thirsting for pure, clean water?

Do I really need to 'do' all the things I have written on my calendar that may prevent me from hungering for more of God and right living?

Do my life and my interactions with others reflect that of God and God's righteousness?

The psalmist wrote, "As The Deer panteth for the water, so my soul panteth unto thee"and the reward?

"Happy are we when we hunger and thirst for righteousness for we shall be filled!"

That's another of God's promises in this Lenten season of reflection.