

“Blessed are those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness”

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First Congregational Church

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Isaiah 55: 1-3

Hear, everyone who thirsts;
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread
and your earnings for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

Matthew 5:6

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they will be filled."

My parents, George & Betty Wood, took a number of vacations on my father's motorcycle. I was never quite sure how enthusiastic my mother was about such ventures. She was a good sport! One summer, probably back in the 70's, they were riding cross country...passing through the desert in the southwest. My Dad had a terrible sense of direction. They found themselves lost...in the desert, on a motorcycle in the middle of the day with temperatures exceeding 100. The situation became dire.

They put on their rain gear in an attempt to protect them from the sun. My father recalls feeling my mother heavy on his back. She was losing consciousness...no doubt, on the verge of heat stroke. She was...*they* were...in desperate need of water.

He put the bike into high gear in hope that will get them somewhere. Of course, the faster they rode the hotter it got. He had to eventually use one arm to hold her to keep her from tumbling off the bike.

Finally, a hotel appears on the horizon...by now my mother barely conscious. He pulled into the hotel parking lot and, somehow, while holding my mother up, he stands the bike and manages to scoop her up into his arms. He raced into the lobby of the hotel. The desk clerk knows exactly what is wrong (who knows how many times he has seen this situation). Without my father saying a word, he points outside and yells, "Quick throw her into the pool."

My Dad raced outside to the pool and, with Betty in his arms, the lept into the pool. To my father's great relief, as they floated there, her body and spirit revived. To this day, I can see them floating there together, holding one another. I can imagine my Dad in tears of relief and my mother, as she recovers, laughing about it all. I see them together drinking deeply of the living waters in the middle of the parched desert.

Hunger and thirst are
Where did you learn hunger or thirst?
From whom did you learn to recognize the importance of hunger and thirst?

From our earliest days on this earth,
even before we knew what food or drink were,
we let the world around us know when we were hungry or thirsty.

What is more basic and essential to human existence than the experience of hunger or thirst?
Is there anything more fundamental to human existence than our need for food and drink?

Hunger and thirst are powerful longings that shape and order our lives daily.

While food and drink are the physical, material things we associate with being hungry and thirsty – those drives are also ways in which we speak of what drives us, what motivates us – it is a way we name what we long for and desire...

We are hungering and thirsting creatures.
THAT we hunger and thirst is a given.
WHAT we hunger and thirst for is not.

We live in a culture that spends a lot of time and money stimulating,
cultivating,
shaping our hungers and our thirsts,
and then guaranteeing their satisfaction.

The year was 1971...a time with it's own struggles and trials...and a commercial brought together our thirst for a better world and our physical thirst...

A group of people, mostly young people, were gathered on a hilltop somewhere in Italy and they formed a choir:

*I'd like to build the world a home and
furnish it with love...
grow apple trees and honey bees and snow white turtle doves
I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony*

*I'd like to buy the world a coke and keep it company
It's the real thing, what the world needs today....*

As one of my theologian friends put it, "It's Pentecost in a bottle."

It's pretty astounding how many commercials appeal to our hunger and thirst...

Actually, there is a lot in our culture aimed at whetting our appetites both for food and drink and a plethora of material things...creating our hungers and cultivating our thirsts.

The purpose of the advertising industry can be summed up as follows:
To turn stimulate our WANTS
and to turn those wants into NEEDs
and our needs into necessities.

It is a powerful thing to tap our hungers and thirsts.

There are longings and yearnings and hungers of the heart that we can tamp down...that call to us...that we can silence as we feed on the carbohydrates of distraction and amusement and anxiety that our culture offers up for us –
in the midst of it all, we can lose our hunger and thirst for goodness...for righteousness.

The danger is this culture is not that our lives are lacking or empty as much as they are filled with things that leave us empty...disengaged..untouched and unresponsive.

“Blessed are those, Jesus said, who hunger and thirst for **righteousness**, for they will be filled.”

Note that Jesus is not blessing or congratulating those who regard righteousness as something they have already achieved,...but those who are longing to be righteous..

God's righteousness is always in some sense beyond us, calling to us, moving us, beyond ourselves – engaging us with life – calling us outward. The righteousness of God that Jesus calls upon us to live is a way of life that is never settled...

As St. Augustine prayed:

“Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” That is about naming a restlessness that does not ever truly or finally leave us until we rest fully and finally in the presence of God...until then, we are destined for an enduring restlessness with the way things are...in ourselves and in our world.

Surely this runs counter to the common notion of the “good life” as the fulfilled life. Jesus seems to be advocating for a life that exists in a perpetual state of unfulfillment...but not in the sense of disheartening, despair, or despondency...or a life given to frenetic, anxious pursuits.

But a way of life that is open, vulnerable and responsive to a longing for the goodness that God makes possible for ourselves and for our world...

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.”

The righteousness Jesus speaks of is not just personal...not just about what happening in my own soul – as important as that is – it is also about how I see and experience the world around and beyond me.

The hunger and thirst Jesus speaks of is a DUAL LONGING:
A LONGING for righteousness to prevail in our own hearts (in our lives, deeds)
A LONGING for righteousness to prevail in the world.

The hunger and thirst Jesus speaks of is sense we have of where and how God's righteousness is not yet realized in the world....In light of God's righteousness, justice, mercy, compassion... we are not satisfied with the way things are...and it moves us to act in the world, for the world...we refuse to turn away or close ourselves off from the hungering and thirsting for justice, for things to be made right in our world...

We must not lose our hunger for goodness to be realized in our world. As William Sloane Coffin once warned: "If we hate the evil more than we love the good – we will be in danger of becoming good haters."

Jesus called upon his followers to have a RIGHTEOUSNESS that surpassed that of the scribes and pharisees...(Matthew 5: 20). Their sense of righteousness was akin to what we call "Self righteousness." It was characterized by self-justification Jesus sought to show how alien that understanding of righteousness was to God's righteousness...

The kind of righteousness that Jesus had in view, for which we are to hunger and thirst....
engage us in the practice
of Forgiveness
of reconciliation
of fidelity
of truthfulness
of Turning the other cheek
of love of enemies
of generosity
and of Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And all this just scratches the surface of how Jesus understood God's righteousness...a righteousness that always bears a correspondence to:
Mercy
Love
Peace
and Kindness

A righteousness that is no less about providing for those in need...of food, shelter, clothing health, and freedom. God's Righteousness is always a form of LOVE.

Beware of those who claim God's righteousness or justice for deeds and actions that
threaten
intimidate
are violent and violating
punitive and vengeful

Such actions are thoroughly alien to God's righteousness...

Beware of those who practice a righteousness that talks little of self sacrifice and a lot of talk about the need to sacrifice the well being of others. Such deeds and actions have no correspondence to the righteousness for which we are to hunger and thirst.

How much evil in this world has been perpetrated in the name of righteous deeds by those thoroughly convinced of the self-righteousness of their cause? For Christians, God's righteousness is always viewed and understood through the prism of the cross. "For God so loved the world..."

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

Let me say a word about the fulfillment that is promised in this Beatitude.

When God's Righteousness is experienced... it always brings a fulfillment...but it is a fulfillment that remains partial and incomplete and never fully or finally satisfies ones hunger or quenches the thirst for righteousness...the good intrinsic to righteousness is cause for joy and rejoicing...even in the midst its incompleteness.

Recall the dancing and celebration on the night of the Fall of the Berlin Wall...or the day, after more than 30 years of incarceration, that Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the fall of Apartheid in South Africa began.

Even with all the hunger and thirst among the citizens of Gaza...at the moment a peace deal was announced and bombs stopped falling, there is celebration...singing, dancing, and sharing of sweets...among the ruins in Gaza and In the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Even amidst its incompleteness, there is room and casuse for joy and rejoicing in the moment when true righteousness comes to pass..

This experience of fulfillment is no less true for us personally...when we experience forgiveness
when there is reconciliation of a broken relationship
when a wrong is made right
when something is awakened, or healed, or made whole...these moments always leave us fulfilled and, at the same time, deepen our longing for more...for ourselves and for our world.

True and final fulfillment is yet to come....but we can taste it in our lives and when we do, we know it is what we were made for. There is so much in this world that tempts us to forget what we were made for...

*The Kingdom of God is where we belong.
It is home, and whether we realize it or not,
I think all of us are homesick for it. (from Frederick Buechner)*

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

Amen.