

Hungering for Justice and Righteousness

Matthew 5:6; Luke 6:21a; Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 23:23-4

This beatitude is about hungering and thirsting, hungering and thirsting for God, for God's righteousness and justice, for daily bread.

I

Perhaps hungering and thirsting itself can be an obstacle to understanding the beatitude. The first listeners to Jesus' beatitude knew what it meant to be physically hungry and thirsty in a way that few of us can imagine. They knew the fear of food insecurity. Some did not know where tomorrow's bread would come from. We are never far from a refrigerator.

So we need both Matthew and Luke's version of the beatitude to comprehend all Jesus was saying. Matthew's version was about hungering and thirsting for righteousness and justice, a spiritual hunger and thirst. Luke's version is about feeding hungry people: "Blessed are you that are hungry now, for you will be fed." Hungry now! Luke won't let us separate the spiritual from the physical. Jesus won't either.

Proximity to food may influence the way we read this beatitude. Proximity to justice may as well. The first listeners to Jesus' beatitude felt the boot of the Roman empire on their necks.

II

Now there's the matter of the word "righteousness" which is how the beatitude is normally translated. The word actually means both righteousness *and* justice. They are two sides of the same coin, twin moral virtues. The Hebrew prophets clearly put them together. As Amos roared: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). We are talking about personal righteousness and social justice here, personal and public morality.

The words "righteousness" and "righteous" may carry negative connotations. As in a kind of "self-righteousness", a holier-than-thou, purer-than-thou type of person—what Mark Twain called "a good man in the worst sense of the word." A person going around looking for a vacancy in the stained-glass window. In a short story by John Updike, he once described a deacon at church as "too much at home here."

Jesus called them "hypocrites" which means "play actors on stage." They pray on street corners to be praised by others. They blow a trumpet when they

give alms to the poor. So we back away from the word “righteous.” I heard the story of a young woman in front of a stained-glass window, saying to a friend: “My grandfather gave this window to this church *anonymously!*” My guess is that the gift was not that anonymous!

But true personal righteousness has to do with things like telling the truth, not cheating at work, being loyal to a friend. Do you ever yearn to be a better person? Then you know what this beatitude means. A Hawaiian minister friend told me this week that the Hawaiian state motto is “The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness”, righteousness meaning things like goodness, fairness, order and completeness. Righteousness sustains life.

Righteousness also means what feminist theologian Carter Heyward calls “right relation.” Right relation to God, which is bound up in right relation to others, to the ones you love, your spouse, your neighbor, and right relation to the earth. Some theologians speak of “eco-justice.” The care of creation is a form of the love of God and neighbor. The poor of the earth suffer first from our mistreatment of the earth.

III

Now to the word “justice.” We must join it to the word righteousness. We have misread Jesus and the gospels by failing to join the two words. It skews the meaning of righteousness away from justice. Jesus was a prophet of justice too.

In Matthew 23 Jesus was challenging the religious leaders and said,

Woe to you scribes and pharisees! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, and mercy and faith. (Matthew 23:23-4)

Or in my Southern translation (SRV, Southern Revised Version):

Woe to you, preachers and deacons, professors and denominational leaders! You leave a little tip for God and neglect the truly important matters of God’s teaching: justice, mercy and faith.

Jesus was echoing the words of Micah which we sing every time we have communion:

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

But justice and righteousness are more than moral ideals. They are the very power of God moving into our lives and the life of the world. They are God’s rolling-down waters, God’s ever-flowing stream. We may try to thwart the waters

of justice and righteousness, dam them up, but they are ever-flowing waters, and the river will meet the sea.

I like to think of God's righteousness as God's *righteous-ing* power and God's justice as God's *justice-ing* power flowing into our lives and the life of the world bringing it to flower. To use a carpenter's word, it is "right-wising" the world.

So we are called to be partners with God in God's desire for righteousness and justice. And, as the song goes, "Let it begin in me." Someone observed: "Beware the person who wants to change the world but is uninterested in changing the themselves!"

When we truly pray, "Thy kingdom come", something in our little kingdoms begins to crumble.

IV

So now we move to the second part of the beatitude: "for they will be satisfied". Fed! Filled! Both the spiritually hungry and the physically hungry will be fed. Fed by whom? God, yes, and by God through us. When Jesus fed the 5,000, what did he start with? A young boy's two loaves and five fish, the staples of the near-eastern diet. Jesus did not conjure them out of thin air. The boy offered them, and Jesus multiplied them. He's doing it all the time—through *us*!

We also address the social structures and structures of sin which keep so many in the world poor and hungry. We not only rescue the people drowning at the bottom of the stream, we go upstream to see why they are falling in.

In the year 258 the governor of Rome approached a young deacon of the church of Rome named Lawrence. He demanded that the deacon collect and bring to him all the riches of the church and gave him three days to do so. What did he do? The young deacon used the three days giving away as much of the church treasury as he could to the poor. When the day came for him to hand over the money, he brought with him those he had helped and presented them to the governor. These he said, were the true riches of the church! The governor was not amused and had Lawrence sentenced to death.¹ Lawrence embodied this beatitude.

What are the true riches of our church? The children and youth who have been brought up in the faith here through the years. Our members who have come and been fed by love.

How about all the people who have been helped through our fifty plus years through the 20% of our budget we give every year to missions, and through the Lenten, Advent and Season of Grace offerings. Or our friends at 5th Street, and those who come to be helped by Iredell Christian Ministries. These are the riches of the church, not our bank account, *them!*

The Gospel of Thomas discovered last century and sometimes called the Fifth Gospel has its own version of the beatitudes:

“Blessed are those who are hungry, for the belly of the needy will be filled.”

V

Finally, as we come down the home stretch, what about our hunger for God? Our spiritual hunger that Wonder Bread cannot satisfy? There is within us all what one has described as a “God-shaped hole”, waiting to be filled. We sometimes run from that need—for a variety of reasons—filling ourselves, our homes, our bodies with as much of other things as we can. We push that need of God way down.

We keep ourselves busy, we avoid silence and stillness. Maybe our Lenten fast should be a fast from *speed!* A fast from *loud!*

Sometimes life itself stops us in our tracks. We are given what the Recovery Movement calls “the gift of desperation.” We cry help. Anne Lamott says her two main prayers are “thank you thank you thank you” and “help me help me help me.” We could do worse.

Blessed, Jesus says, are those who hunger and thirst, for they will be fed. Later on in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus offers these simple words. They are both invitation and promise:

Ask and it will be given you

Seek and you will find

knock and it will be opened to you.

Ask. Seek. Knock.

Can it be that simple? Blessed are those who ask, seek, knock, God is on the way.

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1. Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 150-51.