

**Learning to See as God Sees: Blessed Are Those Who
Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness
Isaiah 25:6-10a Matt.5:17-20**

This morning's (4th) beatitude is: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

"Righteousness" is a massive concept; it's one of the great pillars of the Old Testament (along with justice, though they overlap quite a bit in meaning), and it is inclusive of many things. So, this is the broadest of the 8 beatitudes in its inclusiveness, and the one that perhaps many of us, today, can hear and say, "That's me right now!" Because this beatitude speaks to basic human desires and longings, especially in a tumultuous world.

For our text this morning, I'm reading from Jesus' first teaching about righteousness, which he gave almost immediately following the beatitudes. The beatitudes begin the sermon on the mount (Matt.5-7), and then right on the heels of these beatitudes, Jesus talks about righteousness—which he talks about frequently during his ministry. Here is the first instance of it, following the beatitudes:

Matt 5:17-20:

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This is the word of the Lord!

As we dive into this 4th beatitude, I'd like to point out, right off the bat, how non-religious (we might say not churchy) Jesus' language is here—and everywhere else, too. Now, the word “righteousness” is a word that needs unpacking a bit and we'll do that momentarily, but I love it that Jesus uses basic human needs and longings, like hunger and thirst, to describe spirituality and a relationship with God. Jesus doesn't say “Blessed are those who have a Ph.D. in the theological concept of righteousness, for they shall be admired by everyone.” Or, “Blessed are those who practice better behavior than others, for they have earned God's favor.” No, this is earthy. Hunger and thirst. Jesus uses these words, and those like them in other places, to affirm that we are people who have desires, longings, and they are good—and God affirms those good and basic desires, and fills them.

This is a good time to mention, as part of this series, that an important aspect of spirituality is paying attention to desire, and longings. As has been said over the centuries, any and every human desire and appetite leads us to God. Which is why desires and appetites need to be paid attention to, and reflected upon. When not reflected upon, we often simply *react* to our desires and appetites. We try to fill or fulfill them reactively, on our own, rather than in relation to what they are revealing to us about *God's desire* to fulfill them in us.

So, something as basic as hunger and thirst, when paid attention to, tells us that God wants to meet our basic needs—to fill us with what we truly need. If we don't reflect on our desire, then we might be tempted to consume, reactively.

This applies to any good desire.

So, healthy spirituality involves paying attention to desire, to our longings and appetites. "Give us this day our daily bread" is an earthy part of the Lord's Prayer, which reflects Jesus' acknowledgement that we are human beings created with basic needs (appetites) that we look to God to fulfill, day by day.

So today's beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" invites us to pay attention to our desire, our longing, for... righteousness. Which, I'm sure keeps you up at night. "Oh God, I need more righteousness..." Perhaps after we unpack this a bit, you may find that to be true!

As mentioned, righteousness is a large Biblical concept and practice. It's one of the pillars of the Old Testament—you can hardly turn a page in the Old Testament without running into the word or the idea of righteousness. In fact, several times in the Old Testament it says, "Righteousness and justice *are the foundation of God's throne.*" That's a pivotal and astonishing statement. It tells us that the ground of God's being and God's action is righteousness, fairness, and love. We heard it in our call to worship from Psalm 89.

And what Jesus is doing at the beginning of his ministry, is taking this big and beautiful concept of righteousness, and returning it to its rightful place of being expansive and inclusive. Because, by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Pharisees and the scribes (teachers of the law) had taken the big and beautiful and inclusive concept of righteousness, and made it *small* and *exclusive*. They had missed the point, which is why Jesus says he came to *fulfill* what the law and the prophets truly meant by righteousness. Which is not the small, side-tracked version that the Pharisees and lawyers had reduced it to.

Jesus makes a statement here that's a bit of head-scratcher, on the surface. He says "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and law teachers, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven." That would've raised a lot of eyebrows and caused some "Huh?" head-scratching reactions.

Because, upon hearing these words one can imagine the disciples saying, “Whoa, wait a minute! These serious people (the Pharisees and legal experts) calculated that in the law there are 248 commandments of what one should **do**, and there are 365 prohibitions of what one **shouldn’t** do, and they kept them (almost) perfectly. And now you expect us to **surpass** that?!?” How do you surpass perfection?

I don’t know about you but a surface reading of this makes me feel kind of heavy—“ugh, more righteousness”—like I need to do more or try harder. You know, so God won’t smite me. But that’s exactly how the Pharisees defined it. The Pharisees understood righteousness to mean: obedience without fault. And that’s a big problem. First of all, because that was never the true purpose or intent of the law, at heart. And second of all, because no one can measure up, ever, if that’s the expectation.

So Jesus comes along and says (my paraphrase of verse 20), “Your righteousness needs to go beyond rule-keeping and perfectionism, and focus on the things that truly matter to God, which are at the heart of the law.”

So, based on how Jesus expands the concept of righteousness in his actions and his teaching, when he pronounces blessing upon those who hunger and thirst

for it, and promises that they will be filled, he is talking about 3 main desires.

Here are 3 righteousness-related desires to pay attention to:

~the desire for justice (the desire for the righting of wrong)

~the desire for right relationship

~the desire for God

So, this beatitude could be translated in one of 3 ways: blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice* (blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *wrongs to be made right*); blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *right relationship*; and, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *God*.

Can any of you relate to one of these? Or all of them? They do overlap. How many people are hungering and thirsting for specific injustices, or systemic injustice, to be rectified? How many are longing for wrongs to be made right in our world right now? In our country? Or, on a more personal level, how many people are longing for a relationship(s) to be made right? Or perhaps you have this deep desire to know God better and feel closer to God.

Btw, (warning: word nerd at work!) the word “righteousness” and “justice” in the New Testament Greek are the exact same word. It is translated as righteousness or justice depending on the context in which it is used. And even in Hebrew (Old Testament), the words for righteousness and justice come from the

same root: Tzedek (justice), and Tzadik (righteousness). So, quoting the Old Testament: “Tzedek and Tzadik are the foundation of God’s throne.” And, importantly, the Hebrew word “tzedakah” is also related, as you can probably tell from the sound of it. Tzedakah means “charity” but is much more than a just a financial transaction or a donation of goods. It means to build a reciprocal relationship of trust through generosity, where the giver receives as much as the one who has received goods or money. So you can see where righteousness and justice and right relationship play into the concept of charity. Hebrew is a beautiful language. If really hard to learn!

I think of this first desire—hungering and thirsting for justice—on the part of those who have been unjustly imprisoned, or are on death row because of falsified evidence and a criminal justice system that sometimes tries to hurry up and find someone guilty and put them in prison so the anxious public can feel relieved.

I’d like to remind us of the great and important book, *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson. He is a civil rights attorney from Alabama who works almost exclusively with death row inmates who have been unjustly convicted. He has argued cases before the supreme court and gotten innocent men and women

released. It's one of the best books you'll read. And it's one of the most disturbing books you'll read, because of the truth it reveals.

Bryan Stevenson hungers and thirsts for righteousness (justice) and so do those he represents. And his charity (pro bono work) builds relationships (putting families back together, and communities), which is beautiful. What's also beautiful about Bryan Stephenson is that he doesn't have a vengeful or retributive bone in his body. He does what he does from a place of grace and love and humility.

Along those lines, a brief note: Jesus did not say, "Blessed are those who hunger for *revenge*." Revenge is not justice (or righteousness). If it were, then the good Samaritan, for example, after tending to the victim who was robbed and left half dead by the side of the road, would've gone and hunted down the robbers, Clint Eastwood style, to exact a little payback. We love those kinds of resolutions in novels and movies.

But revenge is not justice. Revenge is bad for us, and bad for society, and that's why Jesus taught against it in the sermon on the mount when he said, "Love your enemies; don't follow the 'eye for an eye' method of retaliation and revenge." Revenge *is* quick and somewhat satisfying; but it doesn't truly resolve anything—even if we leave the movie theatre thinking that the bad guy got what

he deserved, and everyone rode off happily ever after into the sunset. It isn't that neat and tidy. True justice usually takes longer, but only true justice brings resolution and results in abiding peace and well-being.

God designed the world in such a way so that justice will prevail. We hope it prevails through proper administration of laws and systems that ensure fairness and equality, and through God's people who work for true justice. And, we are promised that justice *will* prevail through God's intervention, at the fulfillment of all things. When God will set the world right and fulfill all human longings.

The beatitude calls attention to the desire for justice. It calls attention to the desire for things to be made right, or to be right—as God created them to be.

This beatitude also calls our attention to the desire for right relationship. Much of Jesus' teaching suggests that he defined righteousness this way: as right relationship. This is where the Pharisees got off track. They stopped caring about people, and missed the point that the heart of the law is about people, and relationships. This is why the apostle Paul summarizes the entire law this way in Romans 13: *⁸Owe no one anything, except to love another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as*

yourself.”¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Notice that Paul uses the same language as Jesus: fulfilling the law. Jesus says he came to fulfill the law, Paul says the law is fulfilled by love, when we choose to love our neighbor (as Jesus taught). This is righteousness as right relationship.

It’s why Jesus taught so frequently about things like forgiveness and reconciliation. Those are righteousness words and concepts and practices, because they contribute to right relationship.

So, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right relationship.” In their family relationships, in their marriages, in their friendships, in their next-door-neighbor relationships, and even work relationships. We want love to be what defines and motivates and fuels our relationships.

Finally, the beatitude also calls our attention to... the desire for God. Ultimately, this is what all righteousness leads to. Relationship with God. As I mentioned at the beginning, every spiritual tradition, world-wide, at heart and at its best, pays attention to desires/longings/appetites. *All* appetites and desires: food & drink, sleep and rest, intimacy and relationship, work and creativity, the desire to be outdoors and experience all of nature, and so forth. All spiritual traditions pay attention to these desires because they lead us to God, if we’re

paying attention. That's why the Bible is such an earthy book, and why it talks about things like work and creativity and sex and nature and our bodies and suffering and pain and all of that. Because there is nothing in our lives and our desires that does not lead us to God, if we're paying attention to those desires.

It's why Eugene Peterson (in the Message) translates the 4th beatitude this way: "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God is food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."

There is wonderful Eucharistic significance to this 4th beatitude: Jesus offering himself, the elements being symbolic of eating and drinking and having our hunger and thirst satisfied, in soul and spirit and psyche.

Jesus promises that those who hunger and thirst *will be filled*. Notice the passive voice in the grammar: we don't fill ourselves; it is done for us. What Jesus is saying is, we can't fill ourselves. Only God can fill us. Only God can provide the righteousness that we crave (whether it's for right relationship; or for things to be made right/justice; or the need for spiritual connection and transcendence). God is the great fulfiller of desires.

The Isaiah 25 passage speaks to this... God will fill/fulfill our hunger with a rich feast, Isaiah is saying. It's symbolic of all things being made right; where there is no scarcity, no poverty, no hunger, no more suffering. No more despair,

darkness, depression, or even death. Just a feast, where everyone is filled. It's what we strive for now, and work for.

And, it's what we look forward to and long for. While we wait for that day, remember what Jesus said to us:

Matt 6: ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

God fills us, and fulfills our desires.