

Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Essay 5 in the series “The Beatitudes”

Now we pick up again with our reflections on Jesus’ Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12, which is both one of the most familiar texts in Scripture and one of the most casually disregarded. Almost no one pays the Beatitudes much attention. Almost no one – including millions of churchgoers in America – feels any great concern for being more poor in spirit, more meek, or more pure in heart. And I keep coming back to this thought – to what just might happen if followers of Jesus instead of reveling in divisive doctrines would dedicate themselves to being poor in spirit, to mourning, to learning what it is to be meek, to passionately pursuing what is right, to being merciful, to becoming pure in heart, to becoming peacemakers, and to holding on to these counter-cultural values even in the face of the inevitable persecution that goes with them. What might begin to happen if groups of people all over the world banded together and made it their quest to do these things? This is what Jesus intended. And still does.

So now we come the fourth of the Beatitudes – “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Again this is so counter-cultural. We know what it is maybe to hunger and thirst. In the words of The Boss, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.”

Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack
 I went out for a ride and I never went back
 Like a river that don’t know where it’s flowing
 I took a wrong turn and I just kept going

Everybody’s got a hungry heart
 Everybody’s got a hungry heart
 Lay down your money and you play your part
 Everybody’s got a hungry heart

And more often than not, we seek to be filled in all the wrong places.

So it was in Jesus’ day. To those in his time who hungered for justice, justice on a battlefield, justice by the quick thrust of a razor-sharp knife into the gut of a Roman official in a busy marketplace, who in a word hungered for vengeance, Jesus comes saying, not that way, not by force, not by anger. Instead: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

But across the ages to all of us with hungry hearts who seek to be filled by work or education or music or art, or by sex or romance or by some dream friendship, or by drink or food, or by exercise or adventure, who in the words of the poet Vincent Byrne, gambol and pant after this or that with all the noisy generosity of a St. Bernard in heat, Jesus comes saying, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

In the sense of the word “righteousness” in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is saying: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to do what is right. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to do the right thing. Blessed are those who passionately pursue what is right, what is loving, what is honest and honorable, what is humane and just, what is compassionate and wise, what is fair-minded and truthful. Blessed are those who know in their heart what is right and who do it regardless of the consequences to themselves. It’s not rocket science. Blessed are those who do to others what they would wish done to themselves. It is they who will be filled.

Now there may well be here an eschatological sense, a sense of good times in the last days, of celebration at the messianic banquet which features prominently in the Gospel of Matthew (8:11-12; 22:1-10; 26:29), but something else is going on in these Beatitudes. It is in the poverty of spirit, in the grief itself, in meekness (in that extraordinary strength that comes only from humility), and now in the passion to do what is right regardless of the consequences to themselves, that one is blessed. It is by doing such things that people find abiding joy, radiant joy, unshakeable joy, a state called beatitude.

But now it comes down to how much you want this goodness, this righteousness. Most of us want it, sort of want it. All things being even, we want to do the right thing. If it doesn’t ask too much of us, if it doesn’t take great sacrifice, we want to do the right thing. But what Jesus is saying here is: How much do you really want it? Do you want it as much as a starving person wants food? And he draws here on the powerful image of hunger and thirst in the Middle East, the dry, dusty Middle East, where pretty much everyone knew what it felt like to be a long way from your next meal, or what it felt like when a hot wind blew up, and now the sand is swirling all around you, and your throat is parched, and you have no idea where the closest well is. This, Jesus says, is how passionately you are to feel about doing the right thing. When your hungry heart cries out for sex, or vengeance, or whatever it is that feeds your ego and makes you feel safe and strong, will you still want to do what is right more?

But now notice one other thing about this Beatitude: The person who is blessed is not necessarily the one who achieves this goodness; instead it is the one who longs to do what is right with his or her whole heart. Blessed is the one who, in spite of failures, in spite of screw-ups and mix-ups, still passionately loves what is good, what is gracious and compassionate, what is loving and merciful, what is just and honest, what is protective of the weak, poor and oppressed. It is the one who never lets go of this quest. It is in the very act of hungering after righteousness that one finds joy, radiant joy, radiant, unshakeable joy. So just do the right thing. Or rather just hunger and thirst to do the right thing.

And still we despair. How abstract goodness often seems! How strong our egos fight back and misdirect us! So perhaps we could understand this fourth Beatitude better if we read it as hungering and thirsting for God, in the words of the Psalmists, thirsting for God, panting for God, longing for God, remembering God on our beds at night, thinking of God through the long watches of the night, finding satisfaction in God’s embrace. I am reminded of what the prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, once wrote (this in

Jeremiah 29:13), “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” Is this so very different from what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount when he promises, “Seek and you will find” (Matthew 7:7) or observes in this fourth Beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”? And we all know this. We find what we look for. We all become good at what we most want. I remember the cellist Yo-Yo Ma as the headliner at Caramoor one summer afternoon. His featured pieces were early in the program, and they were good. Yo-Yo Ma is always good. But this was what was amazing. Shortly after his featured pieces, and out of the sightline of much of the audience, Yo-Yo Ma snuck quietly back into the edge of the orchestra and kept playing just of the joy of it. His face was almost beatific.

In the end, we all get what we hunger for. From the standpoint of eternity, the universe plays out perfectly. Everybody gets what they truly want, but be careful then what you want, what it is you truly hunger for. We cannot find goodness, or righteousness, or God when all the time we give this pursuit is a minute or two throughout the day, or an hour a week in church, or some intention of a few years left over at the end of the life. God can be all around us, as close as the air we breathe, and we never notice. God can be like in this fourth dimension in which we live and move and have our being, but with our 3-D habits of perception, we don’t see God. So all this glory, all this light, this state called beatitude, is there for the taking, and we pass by with only the faintest of premonitions.

It’s all a matter of what I hunger for. So I have good days and bad days, right? And I don’t even really complain. The bad days are entirely my own doing. It all comes down to hungering and thirsting for what is truly good, to seeking God with all my heart, everywhere and in everything. On the good days I put God first early in the morning. I remember God often during the day. For short bursts of spiritual joy, when I’m really in the zone, every breath I take is God’s. In the food I eat, the work I do, the people I meet, the struggles I face, the fun I have, I mindfully sense the Presence of God. I still eat what I eat, but it’s different now. I still do the work that I do, I still meet the people I meet, I still face the struggles I face, I still have the fun I have (only more so), but it’s all different now. Now I sense the Presence of God. And I am deeply filled. I am healed in all my broken places. I am satisfied in ways that nothing else can. Now streams of water flow out of me. All this becomes mine in a state called beatitude.

– Dale Pauls