

Hungry and Thirsty

Message #6 in the series, "Blessed (for Chaos)"

Matthew 5:6 and Mark 6:30-37

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Pastor David Woolverton

***⁵Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
(Matthew 5:6)***

We've been in a message series called, "Blessed for Chaos" – and we've been looking at the Beatitudes – powerful statements made by Jesus in what is called the "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus teaches these very specific character traits to His small group of disciples - twelve ordinary guys who eventually go on to change the world. These character traits are meant for us too – Jesus's followers in today's world.

First, we looked at "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.*" Then we explored, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*" Last week, we looked at "*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*" Today, we're being hit by another major life lesson – Beatitude number 4 – "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*"

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

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to lead a number of mission trips for groups of students and adults. One of those trips that will always stand out for me was the trip that we took to Washington, DC with the Center for Student Missions back in 1992. This particular mission trip was designed to get our participants into direct ministry with the homeless and hurting populations in the parts of the District of Columbia that most people don't pay attention to – the homeless shelters, the HIV-AIDS housing projects, the soup kitchens, and the like. It was an experience that was unlike our typical mission trips. Instead of building projects, we were going to focus on building relationships. Instead of pouring concrete, we were going to pour soup. Instead of laying bricks, we were going to lay foundations of faith – both by what we offered, as well as by what we received. It became the most life-changing mission trip I had ever led.

So, the way the trip was organized, our large group was divided into smaller groups and each group was sent to a different part of the metro area and to a different ministry agency. On one particular day, two of our small groups were sent to an organization called, "Martha's Table" – a soup kitchen and outreach center in downtown DC. Martha's Table was an amazing place. In fact, it still exists today – and its newer facilities are helping to reach out to the homeless and under-privileged in record numbers.

Back then, in addition to being an on-site soup kitchen, Martha's Table had another, very unique outreach ministry called, "McKenna's Wagon." McKenna's Wagon was a mobile soup kitchen. Every day, 365 days a year, McKenna's Wagon would go to strategic spots in the city (especially parks), bringing hot meals and sandwiches to the many people who were classified as homeless - or borderline homeless -- within the metro area. One of our groups had been assigned to take out that van, which was loaded with deep stock pots of soup, and to go to one of their strategic, designated spots – a community park -- to serve meals right out of the van.

In that small group was a guy that I'll call "Joe." Joe was not only a medical doctor, he was also a well-respected trauma surgeon. This was his very first mission trip. He joined us as an adult volunteer because his son was on the trip. When our groups met up later that afternoon, Joe shared with me what happened in their outing. He said that when they had gotten to the community park for their stop, it had started to rain quite hard. Yet he noticed that in spite of the rain, there was a long line of people – a really long line. These people had been waiting for a couple of hours for the mobile soup kitchen to show up.

Pelting rain or not, these people were hungry, and they didn't have the resources to care about getting wet. One by one they came to the van and bowl by bowl Joe and the group of youth distributed soup and sandwiches to the people. Joe said that they dished it up as fast as they could, but that because the line was so long, they ended up running out of food. As he told this part of the story, his eyes started to tear up. "They stood all this time in the pouring rain," he said, "but we ran out. We had no more food!" And then he said, "Do you know how hard it was for us to tell this line of soaking, hungry people that we had no more food? How heart-breaking to watch them walk away hungry!"

Have you ever been *that* kind of hungry?

Turn with me in your Bible to Mark 6. As you're doing so, let me give you a little bit of background. In Mark 6, we read that two things happen: First, Jesus sends His disciples out on their first "field education" experience. They are to preach, to heal people of their diseases (just like they saw Jesus do), and to cast out demons – all with the authority that Jesus Himself gave them. They go out, do their thing, and then return – ready to share their experiences with Jesus. Second, in Mark 6, we read that King Herod, the king over the region of Judea, had the prophet, John the Baptist, beheaded – as a way of appeasing his wife and step-daughter. In Mark 6, both of those storylines merge – the disciples return with their exciting news, and Jesus finds out about the brutal death of His cousin, John the Baptist. Then we read starting in verses 30 ---

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶ send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." ³⁷ But he answered them, "You give them something to eat."

Many of us know the rest of the story. It's an amazing miracle. Jesus ends up taking a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish and he miraculously feeds the crowd of well-over 5,000 people – so much so that everyone eats until they are full -- and they end up with 12 baskets full of leftovers.

Now, if you've been around me for a while you know that when I look at Scripture, I don't always look at just the obvious stuff. Many times, people tend to go right to the miracles or right to the pithy statements that Jesus makes. I'm actually drawn to the not-so-obvious, the things that we tend to gloss over. This is one of those times.

So, while there's a lot that I could preach on in this passage, for today, I want you to notice just a couple things about this passage. First, notice the words that describe the *body language* behind the story.

- ³⁰ The apostles **gathered around Jesus**, and told him all that they had done and taught. – Here, the Disciples (apostles) “gathered around” their teacher. They were excited to share their homework and to give Jesus their reports of what the Holy Spirit did through them.
- ³¹ [Jesus] said to them, “**Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.**” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they **went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.** – So, Jesus and His disciples need a break. They're exhausted – physically and emotionally – from all that had been going on. Jesus invites them to take a break. They all get into their boats and Jesus takes them across the Sea of Galilee to a deserted region.
- ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and **they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.** ³⁴ As he went ashore, **he saw a great crowd**; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. --- Here, what we see is just amazing to me. A crowd of people recognizes Jesus and His disciples, sees them get into their boats and head across the Sea of Galilee, and they go after them. Literally, they go running, on foot, around this huge body of water, the Sea of Galilee, to where Jesus is headed. And as they're running, the crowd gathers additional people from the surrounding towns and villages, and by the time Jesus and His disciples arrive at their destination, the crowd has grown pretty large and is already there waiting for them as they got out of their boats. Can you picture it?

Now, Jesus sees the large crowd and, as it says in verse 33, “*he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.*”

This is so telling. And so typical of Jesus. Here's the thing... it was also so typical of the crowds as well. Throughout the Gospel accounts we read that Jesus drew large crowds of people. Why did they seek Him out? Why did they leave what they were doing and literally run to be near Him?

Certainly, a case could be made that the crowds gathered around Him because they saw Him healing the sick and casting out demons – and they too wanted healing and deliverance. And, as we have here in this account that would become known as the miraculous feeding of well over 5,000 people with only a few fish and a few loaves of bread, a case could be made that people were drawn to Jesus because He fed them “miracle bread” - just like Moses did in the Old Testament story of the Exodus.

But rather, I think they were drawn to Jesus because – consistently – **Jesus had compassion on them.** He genuinely cared about them. He touched their pain, and spoke to their souls, and gave them freedom, and breathed new life into them . . . and by doing so, He gave them a glimpse of the hope that was yet to come. The people were hungry for that. They were thirsty for hope -- “*in a dry and weary land where there was no water,*” as it says in **Psalm 63:1.** We see it throughout the Gospels -- story after story, every encounter with Jesus brought about a compassion that was larger than life. Unlike with the religious leaders of the day, the crowds liked how Jesus treated them.

And that's the deal with all of these stories – they show us the heart of Jesus as He models for us how we are to live as His followers. Any time we start treating people the way Jesus treated

people, that's what I believe the New Testament refers to as "righteousness." In fact, here's my definition of righteousness –

**Righteousness is what happens when we treat people
the way Jesus treated people.**

I don't know about you, but for me – this is hard stuff. Treating people the way Jesus treated people is very easy when those people are nice to us. It's a different story when they're not.

But in reality, what Jesus taught -- and what the apostles Paul and Peter and James and John all taught -- is that **apart from a heart that is fully surrendered to Jesus Christ, we can't live a righteous life.** It's impossible – at least, for any length of time. Our humanness just gets in the way. Our selfishness, our entitlement, our anger, our lust, our need to control, our insecurities, our failures... it all just gets in the way of how we ought to treat others.

That's ultimately why Jesus had to die on the cross. HE is the only one who is totally righteous. In fact, **Jesus Himself – His life – defines righteousness.** So, **in order for us to be righteous, we have to have Jesus in us** – reordering who we are from the inside out, changing the way we think – of ourselves and of others, and giving us the capacity to love others in ways that, at times, go against logic, or go against our natural hard-wiring.

Therefore, when Jesus teaches us the Beatitude -- "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*" – He's basically saying, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst **for more of Me**" – **more of Jesus.** For when we have more of Jesus, we have more and more of the capacity to love others -- to treat others -- the way that Jesus did, because we ourselves have been on the receiving end of the compassion of Jesus.

We cannot give away what we do not have.

In John's Gospel, chapter 6, Jesus is in the midst of another crowd of people who had seen Him miraculously feed the 5,000-plus people and they start comparing Him to Moses in the Old Testament who gave them manna from heaven to eat. As you may remember from the story, the manna – which was a kind of bread – would miraculously appear each morning as God provided for the people of Israel while they were in the wilderness. In essence, the people in the crowd were saying, "Jesus, you're our new Moses. Moses gave the law and he gave us bread from heaven. You're our new Moses."

But as we read in verse 32, Jesus replies,

³² Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Notice a couple of things. Notice first the shift in the emphasis.

"... it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven."

Jesus is not another Moses come to lead the people out of oppression from the Roman Empire. No. God has a plan for deliverance that is much bigger than that: Jesus says in verse 33 -- ³³*For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*" Jesus was there as the ultimate Deliverer. His role was to bring life to the world . . . eternal life.

Notice also the response of the people: "*Sir, give us this bread always.*" The crowd wanted another miracle – an enduring miracle. But even in their response, they're still thinking about their physical hunger and the needs that they have in order to survive in their Roman oppressive climate. But God's mission is bigger than even that. As we read in that very famous verse from John 3:16 – "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, **so that** everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*" ¹⁷ "*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, **but in order that** the world might be saved through him.*"

Putting food in their bellies was important (otherwise Jesus would not have fed the 5,000-plus people); but it was not why Jesus was here on earth. Freeing the people from Roman oppression, while important as an act of social justice, was not why Jesus was here on earth. God's plan was much bigger than that. No, Jesus came so that, as we just read, "*everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*" He came so that "*the world might be saved through him.*"

In **John 6:35**, Jesus replied to the crowd, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

*"Whoever comes to me will **never** be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will **never** be thirsty."*

Notice the word choices here:

- "Whoever" – the invitation is open to anyone. Anyone. That includes you.
- "Never" – Never means . . . never. Ever. At any time.

No, Jesus is not another Moses. He is God in the flesh. And He's not calling down more bread from heaven as in the days of Moses. **He IS the bread of life.** He is the One through whom peace and justice and freedom from oppression are ultimately purchased on the cross. He is the One who knew no sin - that God made "*to be sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*" (**2 Corinthians 5:21**).

In John 4, as He talks with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says that He is the provider of "living water." Jesus says to her, in verse 13-14 . . .

*"Everyone who drinks of this water [referring to the well] will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will **never be thirsty**. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water **gushing up to eternal life.**"*

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

In truth, I think most people crave righteousness. We just don't know how to live righteous lives. Or we demand that we are treated righteously, but we are hard-pressed to offer the same grace to others. We want what we want when we want it . . . and when we're hungry, that's all we see.

But with the New Community, God has something else in mind for Jesus followers. That longing – that craving -- can only be filled with the living water that Jesus gives, with the bread of life

that Jesus is. In Greek, the words "hunger" and "thirst" are both present active participles. That means that what Jesus is really saying is, "Those of you who continue hungering and thirsting for righteousness – who continue pursuing more of Jesus, who continue treating others the way that Jesus would treat them . . . then everything that you are hungering and thirsting for, you're going to get in abundance."

This Beatitude makes a promise: When we hunger and thirst for Jesus, we will be **filled**. The word "filled" is interesting in Greek. It literally means "gorged" or "bloated." That's a "post-Thanksgiving dinner over-full" kind of filled. It means that our "cup runneth over," as it says in Psalm 23.

In other words, when we hunger and thirst for more of Jesus, everything that we are hungering and thirsting for, we're going to get in abundance. In fact, in Matthew 6:33, Jesus summarizes the point: "Seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," and everything else that you need will be given to you.

So, we'll have more than enough to enable us to love others the way Jesus loves them, to serve others the way Jesus serves them, to have compassion on others the way Jesus has compassion on them, to give our life away for them the way Jesus gave His life away.

Do you remember Joe from my opening story – the trauma surgeon who was so impacted by not having enough food to feed the hungry people who stood in line in the rain? Well, on that mission trip, the trajectory of his life shifted. He didn't have a mobile soup kitchen, but instead, he used what he did have – his professional skills. The following year, he participated in a medical missions trip that took him to Kenya, Africa where, in one of the villages, he performed surgeries – all day, every day for several weeks. People would walk for miles to this clinic, bringing their surgical and medical needs. And Joe would help them. The following year, Joe went back. And then again the next year . . . and the next . . . and the next. In fact, he's been doing it every year ever since.

Righteousness is what happens when we treat people the way Jesus treated us.

And we do that by drawing nearer to Jesus – hungering and thirsting for the One who changes hearts . . . seeking first God's mission, God's plan for humanity, God's heart for us . . . pursuing the One who pursues us in love. When we seek Him, when we hunger and thirst for Him, we will find Him – and we will be over-filled.

What are you hungry for?

Let's pray our prayer together . . . Lord, what do you need me to see, what do you need me to hear, what do you need me to know, what do you need me to do. I am your servant in Jesus's name. Amen.