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The National Presbyterian Church

The Beaitudes: Hungry and Thirsty

Psalm 42:1-5; Matthew 5:27-30, 38-42; and Isaiah 5:8-13

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at Jesus' teaching in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters (5,6,7) in the gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapters from which so much of what is familiar in Jesus' teaching comes. These three Chapters begin with a section of scripture that we call the Beatitudes. These Beatitudes are statements about "blessedness" or "happiness" which remind us that Jesus is not just concerned with changing our lives so that we become "good" people (though he is concerned with that). Jesus is not concerned with our lives being changed so that we become "holy" and "godly" people (though Jesus is concerned about that). Jesus is not just concerned that when we die we go to heaven and are with him eternally (though Jesus is concerned about that). But Jesus, foundationally, at the beginning of all his teaching declares to us unequivocally that he is concerned with our happiness, right here and now. To be sure this is not an ephemeral happiness, that comes and goes quickly, as if it doesn't mean anything; but it's the kind of happiness in our life, the kind of joy or blessedness in our life, that nothing can shake: which, once it is there, is rock solid – and Jesus actually speaks about this kind of "solidity" at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.7:24-27), when he says (to paraphrase him): "if you listen to my word you will be like a person who builds the house of their life not on sand but on rock. And when the floods come, when the rains fall your house, your life will not be shaken."

And this is what he wants for you: the kind of life that will not be shaken, that knows a happiness and a joy that nothing can take away. But, says Jesus, if you want that in your life, then you're going to have to find it in places that you might not expect. The world will not show you the right path to that happiness. Listen to my voice. You're going to find it in unusual ways. So Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by saying in the Beatitudes:

- Happy are the poor in spirit. (Is that what we normally think happiness comes from? I don't think so! But Jesus says that that's where it begins, with being poor enough in spirit to know our need of God. Always. Happy are the poor in spirit. He goes on . . .)
- Happy are those who mourn.
- Happy are the meek.
- Happy are the peacemakers. (We heard about this last Sunday from Archbishop Chacour. In the midst of strife in Israel and Palestine here is a man who is a peacemaker pulling both sides together.)
- Happy are the merciful.
- Happy are the pure in heart.
- Even happy are the persecuted.

And then we come today to the statement about happiness where Jesus says “*Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.*” Happiness, in other words, says Jesus, is linked, among other things, to our appetites and our desires. Happiness is linked to what we hunger and what we thirst for. And this is a theme which we see repeated throughout the length and the breadth of Jesus’ teaching in particular in the Sermon on the Mountain.

In fact, today more than in any of the previous sermons in the series, we’re going to tie together the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount with verses and teaching of Jesus that we find scattered throughout these particular chapters – chapters in which Jesus challenges his disciples, and challenges you and me, to discern what is driving us, to choose what is feeding us; and to control what is nourishing us, and to be aware in all of this, ultimately, to be aware of what is deceiving us – what is promising us much but leaving us on empty; promising us that if we fulfill our appetites and desires, our hungers and thirsts we will become happy but it doesn’t turn out that way.

Check it out, says Jesus. Discern, choose, control what you hunger and thirst for. There are many lies out there, and half truths. But if you want to be happy listen to me and to the thoughts and desires and appetites and hungers and thirsts that I lay before you and ask you to control.

Hungering and thirsting says Jesus is important. But in our world it gets complicated and difficult very easily. So let’s explore a little (before we come to Jesus’ words about hungering and thirsting for righteousness), let’s explore a little bit about other hungers and thirsts which can get in the way of the happiness that Jesus wants us to share in.

The first hungering and thirsting is of course the literal hungering and thirsting which is a part of our lives from the moment we are born: our hungering and thirsting for food and drink. This is, of course, a critical component of our lives, and leads to a massive industry in the world in which we live, over and above the basic production of food and drink itself . . . So we hire dietitians, and we join weight loss programs, and we check out web sites because our appetites are, in so many different ways, confused or out of control. Not only do we often not know what we ought to eat (the quality of what we’re eating), but we get confused as well about the quantity of what we are to eat in our world of abundance. How do we stop? How do we know when it is that we’ve had enough, when we’re really satisfied, so that we don’t go overboard and end up on the wrong side of satisfaction?

It’s in the face of such confusion (which I would guess was also true in Jesus’ own day) that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks for example about fasting which is a simple activity by which we control what we eat for a higher purpose for God. We limit our appetite for a higher purpose for God.

So Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount says this about fasting (Matt. 6:16-18). He says

“whenever you fast do not look dismal like the hypocrites for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you they have their reward but when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your

Father who is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Now I really don't want to speak about fasting this morning: there's a great deal could be said about it. But there's one thing I do want to draw to your attention from what Jesus says here. He does not say “if you fast,” but he says to his followers “when you fast.” He doesn't call us to have a month of fasting or a week of fasting or even a day of fasting, but he does say that at some point in our Christian lives, in the name of God we are to bring our normal, natural God-given hungering and thirsting for food, under control! For the sake of God! Control your appetite as part of your discipline as my follower! You need to know that you are not being controlled by your hungers and thirst but in some measure at least you have control over them.

And this is just the beginning. As Jesus addresses various issues in the Sermon on the Mount, this business of appetite, of hungering and thirsting, surfaces not only in connection with what we eat and drink, but in connection with other appetites as well. Jesus goes on, for example, to speak *about the issue of wealth and money and stewardship, and the accumulation of things.*

Now, keep in mind, not all of this is bad. Indeed without the “things” that God has made, life would not be as God intended. It's God who made the material world for us richly to enjoy; and I, for one, am deeply grateful that we live in a land in which there is enough wealth to have the educational institutions on which all of us rely; and enough wealth to have the institutions for health and welfare on which we all rely and which (perhaps more than at any other time) we are aware that others in our world do not have. And all of this comes because of wealth and abundance, so that we can be safe and healthy in a world which is often not safe and healthy.

The scriptures do not say that money is wrong. It is not money that is the problem in this world but it is the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10). And, indeed, as we look at Jesus' own ministry: were it not for some wealthy women who followed Jesus and the disciples his ministry would not have been supported. Luke's gospel at the beginning of the 8th Chapter (8:2, 3) has a couple of critical little verses which speak of a handful of women who, out of their abundance, out of their resources, supported the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. In their case Jesus did not say “Give it all away.” He (presumably) said, simply, “Thanks for using it, using it for me and for my ministry.” So Jesus had wealthy friends on whom he depended. There is nothing in his teaching which says that money is bad.

But for Jesus and for the rest of the scripture the issue becomes more problematic when we put it in terms of appetite, and when our appetite is out of control, when we accumulate and we do not know when enough is enough, and when we are unable to let it go for the purposes of God.

So it's in the Sermon on the Mount that we find Jesus saying these words. He says “*Do not store up for yourself treasures on Earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal*” (or where the stock market can go

down a few points in a day or two and thousands of dollars are simply wiped off the chart), *but store up for yourselves treasure in Heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also* (Matt.6:19-21).” To be prudent is one thing. But to have no limits is another. And Jesus says that with our money, it’s not what we have that matters, it’s how we give; it’s our ability in a world of accumulation to give away, which is so often at stake.

So Jesus deals with our appetite for money and our appetite for food and drink. And he goes on in the Sermon on the Mount to deal with *our appetite for sexual intimacy*. In a deeply personal passage Jesus speaks like this (Matt.27-30): “*You have heard it said. “You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin then cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.*”

He knows well that this too is an appetite given by God that in and of itself is good and right and perfect. It is part of God’s creation. BUT, says Jesus, like everything else, it has to be put into its right place, held in proper perspective and held under control for the use for which God intended it. One man, one woman. *You’ve heard it said you shall not commit adultery but I say to you everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* Our whole society screams, “Indulge your appetite to the fullest. That is what they are there for.” Whereas Jesus, across the board, says “Right! God gave us our appetites but we’re on a diet. Hold them in control for the purposes that God intends and then, and only then, will be found the happiness for which we were created, the happiness to which these appetites and these desires would lead us. Be aware, be aware, be in control! says Jesus, and then your happiness will be found.

But this is of course easy to say and very hard to do. How is it that we’re going to put the brakes on? How is it we’re going to stop in this society in which everything it seems is fair game and in which we have such abundance that there do not seem to be any natural limits at all?

Or let me rephrase the problem like this: sometimes when we attack a problem directly the harder we try the more difficult it gets. So we want to go on a diet and we want to stop eating certain foods and what begins to happen? The only thing we can think about is that cookie or that ice cream and it’s before our eyes, before our minds all the time. Whether its food or drink or sex or power or money or recognition at times when we try to put the brakes on all that happens is that we become more and more consumed . . . until something or someone comes our way and provides a distraction, pulling us out of our own little world and placing us into another world by which almost inadvertently our desires and our appetites begin to be placed back in their proper perspective. And perhaps this leads us to the way that Jesus would think about our own personal control.

Let me put it like this -- Maybe what we need is a Godly distraction? Maybe what we need in life, if life is to be kept in proper perspective, is a hungering and

thirsting which if it becomes central in our life (becomes the main distraction in our life) keeps all our other hungering and thirsting, all our other appetites and desires, in perspective and under control? But does such a hungering and thirsting exist? If we were to ask Jesus if there was such an appetite out there, such a desire out there; if there were such a hungering and thirsting out there, that is *so right and good* that it will help us with all of the other appetites and desires, what would Jesus say?

Well, I believe Jesus would say, “YES”!! And that that is exactly what he is saying in the Beatitudes and in particular in the statement that we read earlier about hungering and thirsting for righteousness: “Hunger and thirst,” says Jesus, “for righteousness,” and then, he says, “you’ll be filled, you’ll be satisfied. You’ll find that happiness that all these other cravings promise but so often don’t deliver on.” Hunger and thirst for righteousness!

But even as Jesus says that a couple of questions certainly enter into my mind.

- The first question is this, it’s whether or not hungry and thirsting “for righteousness” is even on my list of the top 10 things I want to hunger and thirst for? When you think about all of those things that you would quite naturally hunger and thirst for, does “righteousness” appear on the list? Is it near the top, or is it even on there at all?
- And, second, even if it is, what exactly is it that we are to hunger and thirst for when righteousness is in view? What is this “righteousness” that we are to desire with such a passion, with such a strength that all our other desires are put into perspective?

A quick word, then, as we close, about the meaning of righteousness. Hungers and thirsts are part of life. Jesus knows this. At the center place righteousness. So what does it mean?

Well, first of all a negative word about righteousness. When we speak about hungering and thirsting about righteousness in a Biblical sense, we are *not*, first of all or primarily, thinking about a moral and religious (or theological) standard of perfection. We are not first of all thinking primarily about moral or religious character as if I were to hunger and thirst to reach moral perfection. There is a sense in which reaching for such a standard is natural and good; but it is not first, and it is not first of all what “righteousness” in a Biblical sense, means.

When in fact in Christian history, and when we see this view of righteousness being played out in the Middle East today, (that is, people, in the name of God hungering and thirsting for perfect moral and religious truth, they so often go astray; their lives becomes brittle, and ugly, and at time harsh, cruel and wicked. The quest for perfection can be a very dangerous thing. And history shows this to be true.

But when we come to the scripture and we look at the word “righteousness,” it isn’t first of all about meeting a perfect moral and religious standard. “Righteousness,” in the scripture and with Jesus (to put it positively) is first of all about right-relatedness to other people and to God; not first of all about a perfect standard of moral character, but about a passion to be rightly-related to God and to other people.

Which means that Jesus is saying something like this; that if this is your passion, a passion I want you to pursue to your heart’s content until you are

absolutely filled, if this is your passion, to be rightly related to God and to others through Jesus, then you'll never regret it! You'll be filled! You'll be happy! AND, more than that (I think he would add) your moral character will be transformed and your religious life will be transformed, becoming more and more conformed to the high standard of God's holiness.

But—and this is critical to see – it is the relationship which precedes the character; it is the quest for right relationships that contains the transformative power. This is the righteousness that Jesus calls us to pursue with an unending appetite, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength: to be rightly related to God and to one another.

Let me illustrate this from Jesus teaching elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, where we find Jesus speaking about righteousness in relationship to God at the beginning of Matthew Chapter 6 when he speaks about prayer and piety. Jesus says *“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them for then you have no reward from your Father in Heaven.”*

It's as if Jesus is saying here, “Who are you trying to impress? In all your religiosity are you trying to impress other people or are you still hungering and thirsting for in this case recognition? Or are you really hungering and thirsting like the Psalmist – for God? (“As the heart pants for water so my soul thirsts for God, says the Psalmist). Is it for God that you are thirsting, so that you really don't care in a sense, first of all, what others think? Or are you out to impress others by who you are? Get it right, says Jesus. Get it right in the soul of your being: hunger and thirst for right-relatedness to God!

And Jesus also says that this right-relatedness to God needs to be complemented by a hungering and thirsting to be rightly-related to others, especially when relationships have been broken. So Jesus (once again in the Sermon on the Mount, in the middle of Chapter 5) says *“when you are offering your gift at the altar if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you leave your gift before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come offer your gift.”*

As if to say, “If you want to be rightly-related to me, so you come to worship Sunday by Sunday, for goodness sake, have a similar passion, the same kind of passion to be rightly-related to others. And when those relationships are wrong, even though you cannot always fix them, be passionate about bringing healing wherever possible, just as much passion as you put into being rightly-related to me.

Hunger and thirst for right-relatedness with me and with others. Do whatever you can so that other hungers and thirsts don't get in the way. And, Jesus warns, specifically, be aware not only of the danger of doing nothing to bring healing, but of giving in to the power (the appetite for) revenge (in some ways the very opposite of righteousness): beware of hungering and thirsting for revenge which leads to bitterness. Give no room to that hungering or thirsting:

“You've heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, don't resist an evil doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also and if

anyone wants to sue you and take your coat give your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile go also the second mile."

No hungering and thirsting to get your own back! Hunger and thirst only for righteousness, for right-relatedness. Whatever it takes. With God. With others.

Jesus knows our lives. He knows that we are human beings created by God with natural hungers and desires. It's a part of the way that God has made us. But he also knows that in this world in which we live, in which there is sin and evil, those hungerings and those thirstings so easily become twisted and changed, and out of control. And he says to us throughout the Sermon on the Mount, as well as at the beginning in the Beatitudes, "Sort out and be aware of what you hunger and thirst for," and ask yourself, "Do you control those hungers and thirsts? Or do they control you?"

You need to be, by the grace of God, in control. And if you're going to do that, then make sure that there is one hungering and thirsting which rises to the top, that is on your list, and to which you will give yourself heart, soul and body: "Hunger and thirst," says Jesus, "for righteousness" – for right-relatedness with God, and right-relatedness with others – and when you do that, the other thirsts and hungers will begin to regain perspective, and your whole being will be changed; your actions will be transformed. Righteousness in relationships will lead to righteousness in moral and religious character, and to finding the fulfillment and satisfaction that Jesus promises, which you cannot get elsewhere, and which will lead ultimately to profound happiness.

"Happy," says Jesus, "are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

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