

WHAT ARE YOU HUNGRY FOR?

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 26, 2016
based on John 4:7-14, John 6:35, Matthew 5:6***

The sermon this morning is the third in a summer sermon series entitled, "Bless you," during which we are considering what it means to be blessed by God and how we are blessed by God. Jesus had a lot to say on this subject, and his teaching is particularly encapsulated in the Beatitudes, the eight "blessed are" sayings that begin the Sermon on the Mount. This morning we will focus on the fourth Beatitude, where Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." Let us begin with a moment of prayer—

What are you hungry for? You ask that question when you are thinking about what to pull out for dinner, or what restaurant to go to. In that context it means, "What do you want?"

So what do you want in life? What are you seeking in life? It might seem that this should be the foremost question in our minds—the question as to what is our ultimate aim in life. But the reality is that often we become so consumed with the flurry and the demands of our daily activity that we just don't give much thought to our ultimate goal.

There's a story about a businessman who arrived at an airport and who was in a huge rush to get to a meeting. He ran out the terminal door, hopped into a cab, and shouted to the driver, "Hit the gas and drive like mad!" The cabbie took off, speeding down the road; but after a couple minutes the businessman noticed that they were heading in the wrong direction. He shouted, "Where in the world do you think you're going?" "Beats me," said the cabbie. "You just told me to hit the gas." Amidst all the rushing around that we do in life, do we know where we are going?

In the fourth Beatitude, Jesus talks about where our life ought to be going, as He says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." The word "righteousness" is such a common word in the Bible that if you were to study either Old Testament Hebrew or New Testament Greek, it would be one of the first words you would learn—z'dakah in Hebrew, dikaiosune in Greek. The basic meaning of the word in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and New, is "to be rightly related to God"—to live in harmony with God and to live in God's ways.

But we would have to say that righteousness is not exactly what many people are aiming for. Often, as we've noted, people are so caught up in the hubbub of life that they are not really aiming at anything; or if people do have a goal, very often the goal is to get themselves ahead in the world. People want to climb the ladder, or get rich, to be a big success. Yet no matter how furiously people seek after wealth or status or notoriety, they never seem to quite arrive at their hoped-for destination.

In 1930, the renowned economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that the world would experience extraordinary economic and technological progress in the coming decades; by the year 2030, he suggested, the world would have achieved such a high level of productivity that people would only need to work about 15 hours a week. It doesn't look like

we're going to get there; but why not, since Keynes was actually correct about how far we would advance? We are vastly better off than people were in 1930. Warren Buffett recently made the remark that the average middle class person today lives in greater luxury than John D. Rockefeller, with regard to everything from personal conveniences to entertainment to transportation. But if, as Keynes predicted, we have advanced so far, why is everyone still working like mad to get themselves further ahead, including people who are quite prosperous in today's terms? It is, of course, because we always want more.

Jesus spoke about the futility of aiming your life at heaping up things on earth. He points in another direction in the Beatitudes as he says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled, or it could be translated, they will be satisfied." The reality is that no amount of wealth or possessions or status or notoriety will ever satisfy the soul. But when we focus our desire upon God, it is then that we find what truly fulfills. Jesus reiterated this teaching at various points in his ministry. In His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus said, "Those who drink of the water that I 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." [John 4:14]; or again he said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." [John 6:35]

We find real satisfaction—we find blessedness—when we direct our life toward Christ, and the life into which he brings us.

So Jesus calls us to aim our life in the right direction; he calls us to seek righteousness—life in harmony with God and God's ways. But there is a further aspect to this that is brought out in the idea of "hungering and thirsting" after righteousness.

If you are really hungry, what are you thinking about? Well, of course, you are thinking about pizza or hamburgers or some sort of food. Or if you are really thirsty, you are constantly thinking about getting a drink of water. So to hunger and thirst after righteousness means that our attention is directed continually to God and God's purposes. Moreover, if you are really hungry or thirsty, you are not just thinking about food or water, you are actively trying to get yourself to some food or water. Likewise to hunger and thirst after righteousness means that we are actively seeking to grow in our relationship with God and to participate in what God is doing in the world.

We often use the idea of being hungry for something to talk about being really dedicated to some cause. The Cleveland Cavaliers were hungry for a national title. That meant they were passionately and energetically focused on the goal, and deeply devoted to working for the goal. In the aftermath of the wonderful victory of this past week, there have been a number of sports stories about just how hard the Cavs worked over the past year—how Kyrie Irving spent hours in extra shooting practice as he sought to fully rehabilitate after a broken knee, hours that paid off in his ability to make extraordinary moves and to hit that decisive "three" near the end of game 7, or how LeBron James spent hours studying game films to enhance his strategy, hours that contributed to his being finally

the most valuable player. The Cavs—and all of northeast Ohio—were finally satisfied, because they hungered after the goal.

With the same energy, the same devotion, and the same persistence, we are called to hunger after righteousness. Can we get as excited about God's righteousness as Cavs fans were excited about a national title? Can we work as hard toward God's purposes as the Cavs were working toward a championship? There was a good deal of excitement and energy expressed in that amazing parade this past Wednesday. But as exciting as the Cavs victory was, there is even more reason to be excited about the eternal promises of God, and as committed as the Cavs and their fans were, there is even more reason to be committed to the works of God. No goal is greater than to be a part of God's Kingdom, now and forever. So Jesus calls us to engage ourselves with passion and dedication to live as God's people, as he calls us to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

There is one more important aspect that comes through in this idea of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. When you are hungry, you eat and are satisfied; but then you get hungry again, so you eat again. You don't just eat once and then you are done; hungering has a progressive, ongoing quality.

The same is true in the spiritual life. We find fulfillment in Christ, but we never get to the point where we complete the spiritual journey and are done. Rather, we seek God in an ongoing way, and God continually fills us. It is significant in this regard that the verb forms for "hunger" and "thirst," in the original New Testament Greek, indicate a progressive or ongoing activity—the verse is best translated, blessed are those who keep hungering and keep thirsting after righteousness, for they are continually satisfied.

We could note that this same principle holds true for Cleveland sports. We won, and we are satisfied, but we are not done. Maybe the Cleveland Indians will stay on a roll. Maybe the Browns will get better. And for the Cavs, there is next year. We never quit.

So if we persevere in our spiritual journey, can we arrive finally at righteousness? The good news is that while we are always spiritually imperfect, through Christ we are forgiven and put right with God—we are made righteous—and through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to live as children of God. When we put our faith in Christ, and open ourselves to His Spirit, we can experience what he was saying in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be satisfied."