

For Future Generations: Hunger

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 6:20-31

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on November 10, 2024

If you grew up in the church, you learned that the section of Matthew 5 Cathy just read was called “The Beatitudes,” since they all begin with a formula of “Blessed are they...” But rarely is it mentioned that Luke’s gospel has a similar section at exactly the same spot in Jesus’ ministry. And both of them begin a longer section referred to as a sermon. Because Jesus travels up a mountain before speaking in Matthew 5, the chapters that follow are called the Sermon on the Mount. Since Jesus travels down from a mountain in Luke 6, Luke’s version is called the Sermon on the Plain.

But in both cases, the scene is the same. When you zoom out, there are large crowds who were generally in need of healing in one form or another. Luke tells us in chapter 6 verse 18 that, “They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” The last paragraph of Matthew 4 paints a similar picture of the crowd.

In Matthew, Jesus physically separates himself from the crowd and goes up a mountain. At that point in his ministry in Matthew, Jesus has only chosen four of his twelve closest disciples—two sets of brothers—Peter and Andrew, James and John. They follow him up the mountain and they are who he is teaching. The crowds of those in need, who can still be seen—it’s not a very tall mountain—are a reference point—the opening Power Point slide as it were, as Jesus tells the four men, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In Luke’s version Jesus has just chosen all twelve of his closest disciples up on a mountain and then descends to the plain with them, joining what Luke describes as “a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and coast of Tyre and Sidon.” Luke tells us that in the initial proclamation of blessings and woes in verses 20-26, he looks specifically at his disciples, directing his remarks at them, although everyone nearby could presumably hear. In verse 27 he expands his remarks beyond his disciples, beginning with, “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”

In both cases these chapters are the first actual teaching of Jesus’ ministry. He’s laying out the basics—the ground rules for his disciples to follow as well as an indication of what the broader public can expect to hear from him. The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are his creed, if you will; the beliefs that shape how he intends to live, his understanding of who God is, and his vision for what life looks like in the kingdom of God.

A question I’ve always had is why Luke includes the “Woes” as well as the blessings, when Matthew doesn’t. This is just my speculation, but in both accounts, Jesus is only addressing the disciples he has specifically chosen during that part. In Matthew’s version those disciples only include four fishermen. Fishermen in the Galilee in Jesus’ day were not rich or full or laughing; we’ll look at why that was next week, but the short version is that they don’t live in a free country and had to turn over their catch for Roman feasting, not their own. Jesus didn’t need to lay any woes on fishermen—they had enough of their own.

But in Luke’s account, the ranks of Jesus’ disciples included a tax collector and Judas Iscariot, who was chosen to be the treasurer for the Disciples, presumably because he had experience with money. For several of the twelve we don’t really know their financial situation; But what’s clear is that Jesus is looking at his disciples when he speaks those woes, indicating that he knows at least some of them to be comfortably wealthy. It is not “Woe to *those who*,” but “Woe to *you who are*...”

Apart from Luke including the woes, the starkest difference between the Beatitudes in Matthew and in Luke is the focus in Matthew on the inner condition and the focus in Luke on the outer. Matthew begins “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke says, “Blessed are you who are poor.”

And the contrast I want to look at most closely this morning is where Matthew says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,” and Luke’s version, which says “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled,” not to mention “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry,” which doesn’t have a counterpoint in Matthew.

Until very recently, I saw the version of Matthew’s Beatitudes as being about the inner life of individuals. I thought the “poor in Spirit” were those whose prayer life was perhaps lacking and those who “hungered and thirsted for righteousness” were people who wanted to work harder at getting sin out of their lives; or, in Wesleyan terms, those who were eager to “move on to perfection” in their own faith and practice.

But that is a very Western way of looking at things, and in the Bible, we are not reading a Western document. In Eastern cultures, the basic unit is not an individual but a group—a nation, a faith, an organization. In both the Old and New Testaments, any laws about individual behavior are not ultimately about the personal righteousness or salvation of that particular person; laws are given for the common good, with the understanding that the individual is part of a greater whole; and for the whole to flourish, every individual needs to do their part. The whole Bible is like your therapist saying, “It’s not all about you, you know.”

It’s in Matthew 6, still part of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, giving them the example of the Lord’s Prayer. All the teaching that comes, both before and after that, is done in service to the hope within that prayer that God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

And what that teaching emphasizes is that an earthly king can’t just decree that God’s kingdom has arrived and impose his own will—although throughout history many have tried. The message brought by Jesus, both verbally and in the witness of his life, is that the coming of God’s kingdom to earth is accomplished only by the word of God becoming flesh; that is, by the teachings of Jesus becoming embodied in his followers, by their own choice.

“Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” are not merely individuals who want to be better disciples of Jesus or up the game on their own spiritual disciplines. The “righteousness” for which they hunger and thirst is justice. It’s systemic change, not personal piety, that the hungry and thirsty at the bottom of society’s ladder crave.

And the hope that Jesus could usher that in is exactly why the sick and the poor and the leper and the outcasts were chasing Jesus from town to town. They were literally hungry for a society that would acknowledge their value; dropping from thirst in the desert of indifference to their plight.

Jesus’ promise to them in both Matthew and Luke is that they will be filled. Of course, many of the individuals crowding around him would die without seeing that justice; but the promise was not about the particular individuals in front of Jesus; it was the vision of the kind of society that would reflect God’s kingdom. It’s the same kind of visionary promise given through the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, as the prophet Isaiah says in chapter 11,

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; . . . righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

Or again in Isaiah 55, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” I will never in a million years understand how those who hold up the Bible as a rule for life get worked into a frenzy at the thought of giving kids free lunches. Free food given just because someone is hungry is so prevalent in both Testaments that it’s almost a trademark.

The hunger and thirst of the poor for righteousness is both real and metaphorical. They want the promises of God made manifest in the world so much that it is a hunger that drives them by the thousands to follow Jesus everywhere, hoping beyond hope that he is the one to do it; but they are also physically hungry.

They live in an occupied country. Their wages are controlled. The land that they once could use to grow food for themselves has been bought up by the Romans and leased back to them to work for a pittance wage, while the food they harvest on the land that used to be theirs goes to the occupiers. They live in a desert; thirst is an ever-present and deadly danger. But the soldier on the street who forces them to stop what they're doing and carry his heavy pack for a mile doesn't end that hike by giving them water.

Once I saw that hungering and thirsting for righteousness was both a physical hunger **and** a craving for a society that would care for all its people, it became a snap for me to connect the way that Luke handles the Beatitudes. "Blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness;" "Blessed are you who are hungry now." The people surrounding Jesus are both, because physical hunger is the predictable outcome in a world that is not righteous.

That is Jesus speaking; but it is also the prophets of the Hebrew Bible speaking through him. Here are the beginning verses of Ezekiel 34:

"The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.

"You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

"So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:

"Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them."

Or, you know, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." And "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

Like in Ezekiel, in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus follows the blessing with the promise that the hungry will be filled. He doesn't mean the individuals listening will go home and miraculously find a meal on their table.

He means that the purpose and calling of his ministry is to help bring the Kingdom of God to earth and, should his disciples manage to do that, the hunger for justice will be filled, which will, in turn, naturally result in the physical needs of all being met.

Throughout the Beatitudes, the promises are manifestly untrue when taken on an individual level. It's not about that. It's Jesus announcing that he stands for a different way of being in the world; a way where no one goes hungry, where there is water for all, where those with nothing enter the kingdom happily while the wealthy weep.

Why? Because the poor having everything to gain and nothing to lose; while the wealthy have to learn to trust in a different god for their provision. Where anyone is hungry, there is not yet righteousness; because righteousness in the kingdom of God will always result in the basic human needs of every person being met.

I don't know if this is still done; but when I was a kid in our Baptist youth group, every so often we had what was called a "Heaven and hell dinner." Our leaders had cooked up actual food for a meal that would be our supper. We all sat down at the table. But before the food was served, our arms were put in splints so that we couldn't bend our elbows.

As the plates full of good-smelling food were put before us, the solution soon became clear. In order for anyone to eat, we had to feed each other. It was called a "heaven and hell" dinner because those who helped each other created a heaven where all were fed and creating community; and those who either didn't help others, or wouldn't accept the experience of someone else feeding them, created hell—and the sign of hell was hunger and isolation.

Same food; same table; equal access; equal hurdles, different experiences. Heaven and hell—not in different places where some are tortured and others are pampered; but rather in the same location with the same people with identical circumstances, each with the ability to create either heaven or hell at any and every moment through their own choices.

Opportunities to feed the hungry are legion; and every one of them is necessary. We participate in several of those efforts, from stocking our Micro Pantry, to drives for Thanksgiving Baskets and support for the Woburn Council of Social Concern, to cooking and serving meals at The Dwelling Place.

A couple of years ago our Church Council voted to sign onto a petition to the state legislature to support a bill giving every child in Massachusetts free meals at school. It became law. Project Bread reports that, even with that, kids in Massachusetts are going to bed hungry. One in six households in Massachusetts face hunger every day. 170,000 children in our state are living in food-insecure homes.

Moving to the nation more broadly, the group Feeding America found 47 million people in the US were food insecure in 2022. Fourteen million of those are children, and that was before the child tax credit was allowed to expire. Seven million are seniors, a risk that rises if they're caring for grandchildren, since they go without so that the children can eat. Food insecurity exists in 100% of US counties. We are rich; but those numbers prove we are not righteous.

Globally, 733 million people faced hunger in 2023. That's one in 11 people in the world. War and a changing climate make all of that worse by the day. Aid agencies reported in October that 96% of the population in Gaza were facing food shortages. 50,000 children under five in Gaza need urgent treatment for malnutrition. Aid agencies are not able to get through.

And yet, too frequently, alleviating hunger is scorned. People who need it or who use the programs designed to help them are labeled as parasites on society, when it is the very lack of righteousness in society that has caused the hunger in the first place.

Those who are physically hungry and thirsty also hunger and thirst for a truly righteous community which ensures that every person has their basic human needs met. But the problem will never be solved until those of us who have *plenty* to eat and drink **also** hunger and thirst for righteousness, both in ourselves and in our neighborhoods, towns, states, and nations.

Not just hope for it; not just vote for it, although that's a start; the ones who are blessed, the ones who will be filled by seeing God's kingdom come to earth as it is in heaven are the ones who hunger for it like a starving person, even when they themselves have enough to eat—the ones who have a water bottle with them but still crawl through the scorching sands with six water jugs on their backs to those who have none, thirsting for righteousness on the earth and hungering to make it so.

It is the sight of the desperate ones around Jesus—the sick, the disregarded, the unwanted—as the well-fed looked on and wondered aloud what sins those people must have committed to land them in such a plight—it was in that setting that Jesus declared, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.”

Things could easily have escalated from his words to that crowd. First-century Palestine was a tinderbox of political and social unrest that would erupt in armed rebellion just a few decades after Jesus death; and Rome squashed that rebellion like a bug, burning the Temple to the ground. But as much as Jesus was infuriated by a society that allowed its people to go hungry, he followed those “Woe-to-you’s” with these words,

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

In John 6, Jesus calls himself the “bread of life.” When we celebrate Communion, we remember that the bread of life was broken so that the world might be fed. Jesus was hungry enough for righteousness that he gave his life to make it so. As he was dying, he said, “I thirst.”

Be wary of those who claim that the kingdom of God has arrived on earth. Where there exists a single person who hungers or thirsts; it has not yet arrived, nor will it until every one of us hungers for righteousness enough to accept the invitation of Christ to take up our own cross, willing to be broken ourselves to become bread for the world. Amen.