

July 29, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

*"A Hunger That Satisfies"*

THE READING - Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus\* saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely\* on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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SERMON

(Play musical intro to Rolling Stones' *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*.<sup>1</sup>)

Do you recognize this music? This song by the Rolling Stones has been around since 1965, connecting to multiple generations since. It has also played well across cultures. The

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<sup>1</sup>Written by Keith Richards and Mick Jagger.

words and music apparently capture a prevailing frustration – a problem that its lyrics actually don't attempt to solve.

**Jesus, however, teaches that God wants to bless us all with satisfaction.** In our Beatitude for this morning, he reveals that this blessing *is* available to the world – to you and to me. It is a promised possibility for everyone.

**So why do you think it is that so many of us seem to get *no* satisfaction? What is getting in our way?**

After all, we certainly fill ourselves with all manner of things: food and drink, possessions and power, busy activities, media, overwork! We ought to be satisfied, but we aren't. It even seems as if we want to distract ourselves from feeling any hunger, loneliness, or insecurity!

I'll speak for myself. The family I grew up in, for instance, loves food. When we call each other, even today, it is not unusual if one of us has attended a special event, for us to ask what was on the menu, or in regular times, what the other just had for supper. The description seems to allow us to enjoy the food vicariously.

Mother has always been a great cook – not fancy foods but good tasting and plentiful. She has also battled being overweight. I've tried to keep an eye on my own, adjusting intake and exercise over the years, wanting to feel good in my skin. This last year, as I tried to fit in my slacks, a new realization dawned on me: I don't think I've often let myself feel hunger; I generally fill my stomach before it can alert me that it is getting empty! Now I'm working at a new way: waiting to eat until I'm actually hungry and stopping when I'm full, because there is a theological/spiritual link to these behaviors.

Jesus says: "Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst*."

In the 1943 novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*<sup>2</sup>, pre-teen Katie is growing up in the 1920s in an impoverished, immigrant family, facing physical hunger and hopelessness. But she also has a hunger for knowledge and a better future. Katie is like the tree that she observes growing between the cracks in the concrete sidewalk outside their apartment, reaching up to the sunlight. By God's grace, Katie gets into a school with a teacher who supports her tenacity and talent.

**Once you and I allow ourselves to feel hunger – the pangs of what isn't yet – something to aspire to at home, school, church, work, as a nation, or in the world – Jesus declares that God *will* satisfy us.**

**Another truth about our society is that on the whole, you and I have plenty of choice about what we consume.** I bet I'm not alone in the experience of opening the refrigerator, staring in at stocked shelves, and wondering: "What in the world can

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<sup>2</sup>Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1943).

we have for supper tonight?" Then there's a menu of shows and movies on the television and a smorgasbord of apps on our phone. **So much so that you and I don't always know what we're hungry for!**

For instance, I'm guessing that many of us who attend church find it difficult at one time or another to identify our hunger: to name WHY we do so, WHO we long to meet here, and WHAT we desire to find. With some moments of reflection, though, you might fill in the blank: "community," "hope," "new life," "a moral compass," "an opportunity to help someone else." **What are we hungry for?**

Flora Slossom Wuellner is a spiritual director who helps people articulate their deepest desires so that they can then make more progress in the way God is leading them. On one occasion, she conversed with a woman who loved to garden, asking, "What is it, do you think, that so appeals to you in this?" "Well, I love to work in the soil and attend to plants." "What would you identify as the longing behind *that*?" Answering this took her a little more time. "I want to help living things grow." And what's at the source of this desire?" The woman sighed with new awareness: "I think that I want to be in communion with Creativity – with the Creator."

**We might ask Jesus what he was hungry for when he uttered these blessings. What did he think his audience thirsted for? The word that Jesus used to fill in the blank was "righteousness."**

Now, the word "righteousness" deserves some clarification.<sup>3</sup> The religious context of this Greek word is the Hebrew concept, which points to righteousness as the state of being in loving and right relationship with God and one another. One could possibly use "communion" or "fellowship" as a synonym, but a good and healthy relationship with God and others.

Righteousness also carries the theme of law and justice, but it is not a legalistic concept, so it is *not* the same thing as being *self-righteous*, *better-than-thou*, or judgmental. It also involves reverence, but righteousness is not really about just being holy or pious on the surface. It is not anchored either in some abstract, ethical ideal. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is wanting to belong and to be in relationship; aching for and acting in accord with the love of God.

I revisited a news story from two years ago that illustrates righteousness. Maybe you recall the image out of the civil war in Syria of the 5 year-old, Omran Daqneesh, dusty and bloodied, sitting in an ambulance in shock after an airstrike. The picture sparked compassion in many corners.

Upon seeing Omran, 6 year-old, Alex Myteberi of Scarsdale, New York wrote to President Obama: "*Dear President Obama, Remember the boy who was picked up by the*

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<sup>3</sup>I constructed the following description from several sources, among them the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible and the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Matthew.

*ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother... In my school, I have a friend from Syria...I will introduce him...We can all play together.”<sup>4</sup>*

The good news is that Omran recovered from his injuries and was reunited with his own family, but another piece of good news is that Alex had been able to name his hunger: to help another in the love of God and live together in peace. *This* is righteousness. The hunger for righteousness is the key to understanding Jesus’ beatitude and to receiving the blessing of *true* satisfaction!

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted by John Allen in “Letter from Alex,” in *EverFlowing Streams*, an online justice newsletter from the MACUCC, 10/7/16.