

Empty

A sermon taken from Matthew 5. 6, and preached on February 6, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

I was in the ninth grade when my parents' marriage ended. It was a turning point in all of our lives, but life does go on. It goes on for a teenager, and I got on with life the way many teenagers do, playing sports, pretending to like everything my parents disliked and disliking everything that my parents liked! I pretended to be bored around adults and tried very hard to fit in with whatever my friends thought of as normal or popular. Of course, it is sometimes hard to be normal or even to fit in when you are six feet six inches tall, but that is another story.

When I turned sixteen, I got my driver's license and a job at a grocery store, and a car: it was a used Mercury Montego. I wrecked it a few months after I got it...that is another story too. As soon as I began to drive on a regular basis an interesting thing happened, something I never would have predicted: I began to drive to my grandmother's house, which was across town, most every day, after school, or, if I was not in school, around lunch time.

My grandmother was an amazing cook, and a teenage athlete has an almost insatiable appetite for food; so in some ways we were a perfect match. I still remember some of her dishes, and one in particular: she would marinate a roast in one of those small bottles of coca cola, and it was about the tenderest meat I have ever tasted.

But in hindsight, I know it was never just about the food. My grandmother's table was about grace and acceptance, wisdom and listening. Not that I would have articulated any of this at that time. But something very real was happening: I was hungry and I needed to be filled.

For all of us, life changes, life does go on. We remember times when there was more emptiness than fullness, more on the loss side of the ledger than the profit, more brokenness than wholeness.

Sometimes a crisis brings this on, an unexpected turn of events, like a divorce or a death or a move or a loss of work or a betrayal.

Sometimes it is a slow, gradual descent into emptiness---we simply use up the capital we had from somewhere in the past, all that our parents, teachers, mentors, coaches invested in us, we spend it down, down, down, until we are empty, and we know that we are hungry, and we need to be filled.

I have been thinking about the simple and profound wisdom of Jesus: happy are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, for they will be filled. It is a paradox: how in our experience of emptiness can we be happy? Isn't it the reverse? When we are full, content, we are happy then, right?

And yet the teaching of Jesus is rooted in a long tradition of spiritual guidance. To hunger and thirst is a basic metaphor for seeking after God, God's presence, God's comfort, God's intervention. It is there in the experience of Moses, in the words of the prophets, in the prayers of the psalms.

There are three different variations on the meaning of the word we often translate as righteousness (dikay-so-nuneh):

it can mean justice, the conviction that God in his own timing will vindicate all things---this week we think of the Egyptian people, hungering and thirsting for justice in their own country, and here the hunger and thirst takes the form of a protest;

it can mean holiness, the sense of completeness, maturity, and here the hunger and thirst is for the goal of our own growth into the image and likeness of a loving God, to be the person we were created to be;

and it can mean justification, a right relationship with God and with each other.

Of course, at a basic level we hunger and thirst because we are not filled. Some translations have the word "filled" as "satisfied" (the RSV, for example). We hunger and thirst because we are not satisfied with life the way it is, our relationship with God, or perhaps our relationships with each other.

William Barclay called this beatitude the most demanding and the most encouraging of the Beatitudes: demanding, he said, because the Christian life is not for the dilettante; it is not even for the interested and the attracted; it is for those who desire righteousness as a matter of life and death". At the same time, he insisted, it is a beatitude of encouragement; because the promise is not to those who have attained righteousness, but to those who hunger and thirst for it.

Jesus is not talking to those who have already arrived, who have it all together, who are perfect! He is calling disciples, those of us who are on the way, who have a foretaste of something that is life-giving, who want more. We are hungry and we need to be filled.

What do people do with their spiritual hungers? What do we do with their spiritual hungers? We fill them with whatever is attractively presented to us on the menu. There is a hunger and thirst in our culture for things that destructive and for that which is life-giving. And it is also true that we become what we eat.

It is Super bowl Sunday, some of you will be watching the game, some the commercials. Do you remember the commercial that went: less filling! Tastes great! This ad was reported by *Advertising Age* as the eighth best advertising campaign in history. And sure enough, lite soft drinks and lite beer lead, inevitably to lite spirituality: *it is less filling....but it tastes great.*

The question is, "does it feed us?"

Last year I visited a United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio. Dayton is often listed as one of the fastest dying cities in the United States. Thousands of people have left in the last generation, and one consequence is a number of church buildings left behind that once had two hundred in worship, one hundred in worship, and now have twenty, or ten, or five. One option would be to close the buildings, or sell them. Another would be to ask the communities surrounding these buildings a few questions: "*What do you need?*" "*How can the church help?*" The people who were interviewed in one neighborhood said, over and over again, "*we are hungry....people are just hungry.*"

And so the church responded. They took their fellowship hall which was no longer being used and decided to prepare a Sunday morning breakfast, for the community, each week. Further, they decided that their vision for the breakfast would not be a church fellowship hall with warm coffee in Styrofoam cups and cold donuts on plastic plates. In this decimated neighborhood they decided that the breakfast would be like the nicest breakfast you have had in a hotel: *bacon and sausage, biscuits and gravy, an omelette station, a waffle station with fresh fruit.* And that it would all be free.

Even when the church was near death, the remembered the simple words of Jesus: blessed are those who hunger and thirst...

The gospel is always asking, "*what do you need?*" The church, at its best, is always asking, "*how can we help?*"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "*happy are those who have the promise that they shall be filled, for the righteousness they receive will be no empty promise, but real satisfaction. They will eat the bread of life in the Messianic Feast. They are blessed now because they already enjoy the bread here and now, for in their hunger they are sustained by the bread of life.*"

Our emptiness may come upon us suddenly and unexpectedly, or slowly and gradually. Our hungers and thirsts, even among the most connected, respected and situated among us, touch the places of our deepest human hurts and hopes. "The bread of God comes down from heaven", Jesus says, "and gives life to the world".

I moved through my years of being a teenager and a young adult. Life goes on. When I went looking for a church, later on, I didn't quite know what I was searching for. But I was always looking for something like the experience of being at my grandmother's table: people who were gracious and accepting, people who were wise, people who listened. I don't use the language, but I was seeking the kingdom of God. I had found it, years before, or it had found me, sustained me, filling the emptiness. I wanted that again, I have always been looking for that again.

In communion we live between memory and hope. *Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.* I remember those meals, even as I approach this meal, today. And when I sit down at the Messianic Feast, I have the hope and confidence that the menu will include roast beef, marinated in a bottle of coca cola, and the guest list will include many of those left behind in the dying cities of this world.

Because I have experienced the foretaste of glory divine, I have the conviction that the promises of Jesus will come true.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for wholeness...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right relationships...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for a new heaven and a new earth...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for the bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...

They will be filled.