

Unexpected Blessing:  
The Blessing of Right Relationships  
Matthew 5:5, Psalm 42:1-6a

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Psalm 42

<sup>1</sup>As the deer longs for streams of water,  
so I long for you, O God.

<sup>2</sup>I thirst for God, the living God.

When can I go and stand in God's house?

<sup>3</sup>Day and night I have only tears for food,  
while my enemies continually taunt me, saying,  
"Where is this God of yours?"

<sup>4</sup>My heart is breaking as I remember how it used to be:

I walked among the crowds of worshipers,  
leading a great procession to the house of God,  
singing for joy and giving thanks  
amid the sound of a great celebration!

<sup>5</sup>Why am I discouraged?

Why is my heart so sad?

I will put my hope in God!

I will praise my Savior and <sup>6</sup>my God!

Matthew 5:1-6 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them.

Jesus said:

<sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

**<sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

PRAY

When was the last time you were really hungry?

My doctor ordered some lab work which required a fasting blood draw. In other words, I could not eat between 8 p.m. in the evening and 8 a.m. in the morning, assuming I got to the lab when they opened. Then I could have breakfast. But I decided, since the lab was in a part of town that I did not often frequent, that I would do a few errands afterwards. That meant that I did not get home until almost noon. Just as I walked in the door, I received a phone call. Urgent need. Longer story shorter, it was about 2 p.m. when I finally ate "breakfast" or broke my fast. While far from starving, I actually felt hunger in a way I usually do not.

I daresay most of us have not missed a meal lately, and as for water?

No problem. All we have to do is turn on the tap and we have a ready supply of clean drinking water. We can satisfy our hunger and our thirst without breaking a sweat. We are truly blessed.

Yet almost 800 children die each day due to diarrhea caused by unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene. The world has pledged to solve this by achieving universal and equitable access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030.\* Lest we think this is a third world problem, remember Flint, Michigan? Yes. In addition to Indian reservations in the southwest, there are cities in the US where access to safe drinking water is a concern. (\*World Vision website)

But Jesus is talking about something other than physical hunger and thirst.

Just as we will die without adequate food and water, our souls will die if not nourished with righteousness and justice. It is to this hunger and thirst that Jesus addresses himself.

The Psalmist so eloquently expresses this deep longing and inner thirst of the human soul, which can only be satisfied in relationship to and in worship of the Living God, who alone is righteous.

In the OT, the Hebrew word for righteousness is *tsedaqah* and in NT Greek, *dikaiosune*. Both these words can be translated “righteous”, “justice” or “justification”. Before we can hunger and thirst for them, we need to understand their meaning.

The biblical concept of righteousness has to do with right relationships.

There are **three dimensions** to this idea of right relationships:

The **first** concerns our personal relationship with God: because of sin, our relationship with God is broken. It can only be made right or “justified” through the death of Christ on the cross. (Vertical)

The **next** or horizontal dimension is **two-fold**: It concerns my personal relationships with others and my relationships within society.

Sin has also had its impact on all my relationships.

Once I am right with God, I will want to be in right relationships with others. That is to say that a disciple’s behavior and character will reflect the character of the God whom we worship and serve.

And finally, this righteousness is not strictly personal, but has a social dimension. We do not live in isolation (no Covid pun intended!) but we live in relationship to all others in the world.

We are not free unless we seek the liberation of all who are oppressed, and seek justice for all, equally. The civil rights of each person should be promoted, as well as integrity in business dealings, and every person without regard to age, sex, race, or creed, should be treated with equity, and dignity. (The Sermon on the Mount, by John Stott, p. 45)

Here is another way to think of it:

About a year ago I had new tires put on my car. Not long after that I inadvertently hit a high curb in a parking lot. It soon became obvious that impact had thrown the tires out of alignment.

How many of you have ever driven a vehicle with the wheels out of alignment? What happens? Yes, if the wheels are out of alignment, the vehicle will veer to the right or the left. It requires extra effort on the part of the driver to steer the vehicle straight ahead. And, if one does not get the wheels re-aligned and re-balanced, the tires will wear unevenly, resulting in the need to replace them sooner rather than later.

Righteousness is evident in right relationships—in other words, if I am in right relationships, I am, first of all, living in alignment with God’s purposes. My life is in balance when I am loving God with all my heart/soul/strength, and my neighbor as myself.

But when I hit a bump as I am going down the road of life—when I sin—my relationships are thrown out of alignment. Often my priorities shift. My focus and first priority are no longer on loving God, but I veer off in my own direction, focusing on me, myself and I. My love of others is distorted, and God is often left in the rearview mirror.

It requires a radical re-set to get my life back in alignment and get going on the right path again. That requires repentance. Repentance means turning around—doing a 180—turning away from the self-centered road and turning toward a Christ-centered life again. When I make that turn, my life is realigned with God’s purposes and I am “righteous” – rightly related to God.

If I have sinned in relationship to another person, I need to get right with that person. How does that happen? I need to express sorrow over my words or actions (or inaction) which contributed to the break in relationship, and to ask for their forgiveness. If I am sincere, and my apology is accepted, the relationship is set right once again, and we can proceed together on life’s journey. The relationship is in correct alignment.

Hunger and thirst are created by and a gift of God, essential to our survival, our very existence. Without them, we will die. Similarly, to hunger and thirst for righteousness—to yearn for and deeply desire right relationships—is built into being human. Without a hunger for right relationships with God, with others, and within society, we will die. Our survival depends upon it!

What does it look like to hunger and thirst for righteousness in my relationship to society? How we answer this question is important because you and I are part of something larger than our own family unit, than our church family. We are a part of a community, a society, a nation, and yes, a global community!

The Old Testament prophets had a lot to say about justice. Their message was not their own, it was a message that God gave them, for they were God's spokesmen. Often God had some harsh things to say, so these guys were not very popular. They were not the ones that got invited to dinner parties or barbeques. Their job was not to "to win friends and influence people" (as envisioned by Dale Carnegie). Instead, the prophets were tasked with telling it as God saw it, no beating around the bush. They laid it on the line, even at the risk of offending people.

In no uncertain terms, the prophets called out sin--both that which is related to one's personal and private behavior (what one does behind closed doors), and sin as it related to public life, what we do where everyone can see. They spoke to both the individual and the corporate aspects of sin.

For instance, the Lord declares through Malachi (3:5):

*<sup>5</sup>Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the foreigner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.*

Can you imagine this? God's people oppressing hired workers, not paying them a living wage? Can you imagine God's people ignoring the widows and fatherless, who in ancient society were dependent on extended family as their only 'social security'? Imagine the Jews, rejecting foreigners, discriminating against those who did not speak Hebrew, or taunting those who wore different clothing, ate different food or had different customs.

Malachi is saying to God's people: We don't have the luxury of ignoring the needy, the poor, the oppressed. It is our job to care for these because we worship a God of Justice, not a God of just-us!\* (\*I am indebted to Rev. Heidi H. Anderson for this concept.)

What does it mean to hunger and thirst for righteousness—for right relationships—in our society today?

Here is one example—Amy Nelson, Principal of Sanford Middle School in a suburb of Minneapolis, knew that because of the pandemic, and because the nearest grocery store to her student's families was closed, many were hungry. In partnership with neighborhood organizations, she put out a call for 80 food kits. This is what happened. (View clip)

<https://www.today.com/video/principal-of-minneapolis-school-flooded-with-food-donations-it-snowballed-84289093573>

This demonstrates what happens when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, for Jesus promises that such hunger will be satisfied. In our community, physical hunger is satisfied through our support of the food banks, the blessing box and Full Bellies.

But the harder issue is to hunger and thirst for right relationships within or nation and our world, with and for people of color. Unfortunately friends, racism is not relegated to the likes of the Klu Klux Klan, but is far more subtle and insidious. It is unconscious and implicit in our society.

For example: When walking from your car into QFC, and a young man is walking toward you. Depending on the man's skin color, you will react one of two ways: you will quicken your pace and hold your purse closer to your body, or you will not blink an eye and simply keep on walking. This is an example of unconscious prejudice.

Friends, the issues of racism and injustice that have ignited recent protests across our nation and our world are not new. I daresay they have been with us since before the prophet Malachi! Interestingly these protests in 650 cities in all 50 states, spread to major cities on every continent! Why? Because we are fallen people who live in a fallen world. This is a part of our human DNA.

I find myself in agreement with Rev. Al Sharpton. During the memorial service for George Floyd, he quoted Ecclesiastes 3. "There's a time for every purpose under heaven."

Now is the time for us to repent of our unconscious complicity with corporate, systemic racism. It is time to increase our personal awareness and to educate ourselves; it is time to work to set broken relationships within our human family, right.

In a few moments we shall celebrate communion. This sacrament reminds us that the death of an innocent man, helps to heal our broken relationship with God. We honor Jesus' loving self-sacrifice when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, when we participate in healing the brokenness caused by inequity and racism. May Jesus' death not be in vain, but may it energize us to step out in faith, to be those who not only long for, hunger and thirst for righteousness, but take appropriate action to help heal and set right, wrong relationships in our society and world.

Why should we? Because we worship a God of JUSTICE and NOT Just-US!

PRAY