

Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset

4th in 8-Sermon Series:

Blessed are Those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Matthew 5:1-6 ~ Philippians 2:1-11

8th Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 26, 2020

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Introduction to text

Did you ever wonder how the very first hymn went? What were the words? How did the tune go? I'm talking about the first hymn of the very first Christ followers who gathered to worship even *before* the gospels were written down, even *before* Paul dashed off his passionate letters to his new churches like the one in Philippi. Today's second lesson gives us a glimpse. We don't have the tune. But we do have the words. And what we find is poetry, not prose. In Philippians 2:4-11, Paul is quoting here a pre-existing hymn. Likely a hymn they already knew. Kind of like if I were to quote, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound" in a letter to you, saying, "Remember, this is why we are a church: remember what we sing. Drink in the words."

This hymn has been analyzed and scrutinized for centuries. Yet as theologically rich a statement as it is about the divine and human natures of Christ, Paul's original intent was not that, as best as we can surmise. Paul used this hymn as a call to action. Not as treatise on Christian dogma. And so, I invite us to listen for our invitation to action from this earliest, essential hymn of our faith. Listen for its call to do your life differently. To do our lives together differently, because of Christ. Because of how he chose to use the power that was given to him, how he chose to sacrifice for others, during the short time he lived on this earth in human form.

Paul front loads this text, starting with "how-to-live" directions, (verses 1 – 3), then riffs into what is known as "the Christ hymn" –the "Amazing Grace" of the First Century. Let us listen for our 21st Century call to action from God, within these words of scripture, as I read from Philippians 2, beginning at verse 1.

Sermon

What are you hungry for? French fries? How about a ball park frank? That you are actually eating at a ball park watching the Brewers beat the Cubs. Or maybe you are thirsty for a drink with friends in a booth in a crowded restaurant or bar, without the need to "social distance" or wear masks because the threat of catching or spreading COVID-19 is gone. If only. Remember back when we could jump on an airplane and our main dilemma was whether to check your bag or pack light and go only with a carry on? The things we take for granted until they are gone. They are legion. Of course, the daily increase of COVID cases across the country and tragic daily loss of life are what we most long to see the end of.

Being here in this empty sanctuary without all of you in the pews, week after week has made me hungrier than ever for worshipping together. I long to see the children standing on the stairs here, singing so beautifully, with Tracy Olson, their director, on her knees animatedly leading them through their song, with Patty Faber, accompanying their melody, strumming her

guitar. I also no longer take for granted the fresh glass of ice water that magically appeared every Sunday by my chair, thanks to our angel Deacons. Nor do I take for granted any longer the chance to gather in the Fellowship Hall for Second Sunday breads, for conversation, hugs and laughs, and sometimes tears. That almost seems like a distant dream, doesn't it?

Our fourth beatitude begins as the others do, with the word "Blessed are" which you may recall can be translated as "Happy are" or "God is pleased when" or "God's approval rests on." This is the fourth of eight attributes that lead toward life, for each of us and for all of us, and it goes like this: "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.** If you think about it, today's beatitude is really more of a "do-attitude" than a "be-attitude." Yes: at its heart, this one is a call to action. Our first clues are the verbs to "hunger" and "thirst." When we get hungry or thirsty, don't we do something about it, if we possibly can? We will find something to eat or to drink. We will do almost anything to satisfy those desires. Yes, they are essential to our survival. If we don't eat or drink, eventually we will die.

Think about young mothers and fathers with their first baby: "Is she eating enough? Why is he crying? He must be hungry. Time to feed him. Again." Now leap forward to the other end of our earthly lives when we are caring for a parent or a spouse who is nearing the end of their days on earth. "Shall we put in a feeding tube or not?" This can be one of the toughest decisions we ever have to make for someone we love. Ultimately it can become a life or death decision, for which there is no easy answer.

I remember perhaps the most poignant conversation I ever had with my dad a day or so before he finished his life on earth. He said to me, between gasps for air since talking meant he had to take off the BiPAP mask, that was helping him to breathe, "If I can't eat and I can't drink and I can't talk, what's left?" (I have to say, my dad absolutely loved to eat and like most preachers, also loved to talk way more than the average person.) More to my point: the basic human desire to eat and drink, this is core to our very existence.

Could Jesus be telling us here in this fourth beatitude that *righteousness* is a matter of life and death? Don't be confused by the idea of "self-righteousness" which is what this word is often diverted to or diminished by. *Self-righteousness* is actually the opposite of Jesus' meaning. The Hebrew word *tsdk* which we translate as "righteousness" is a word that is used 525 times in the Old Testament and 200 times in its Greek equivalent in the New Testament. It meant something very specific to the people of Israel and to Christ followers in Jesus' day. Righteousness means, to do the right, or to be in right relationship with God, humans and all of creation. It is an expansive and exacting term. So, could Jesus be saying in this beatitude that the desire, the drive, the hunger for a right relationship with God; the command to love God and neighbor, more than self: is the key to our survival?

Righteousness personified by Jesus' model of self-emptying (kenosis), the choice to self-sacrifice, is clearly portrayed in that first Christian hymn. But it is also overwhelming. We are not Jesus. How do we do that? At our "First Look" Bible Study last Wednesday on Zoom, one person asked that very question. Here are a few ideas from Erik Kolbell's book, *What Jesus Meant*, with

a few minor amendments from me: “Be hungry, Jesus is saying. Live more simply than you have to, in only just a bit, if only every now and then, if only today...put yourself second and others first. Allow yourself a little less so that others might have a little more. Travel lighter than you might. But one less Christmas gift and give a little money to the poor. Cut back on your own screen time a little, and give more time to your children. Pray for others before you pray for yourself. Cut out a meal this week, or maybe just a snack, and use your savings to pick up a few groceries for SOS. Volunteer same time there. Call or text the neighbor no one else can stand... Take a cold bath if only to remind yourself that you’re not among the world’s billions who, by necessity, do so every night.”ⁱ

OK: I have never done that last one. But it’s a challenge I might try. Each of these actions tips the balance, ever so slightly from me and my wants first, to others. They may feel awkward, take more time, and these kinds of moves will draw us out of our comfort zone and help us internalize gestures of self-sacrifice. And they move us into the holy zone to which Christ is calling us. The zone where our hearts and our world can more aligned with God and God’s will. More righteous, more just.

I have two other self-emptying actions to challenge us in different ways. The first, is to practice “deep listening” whenever you can. I just finished participating in a 3-session Zoom conference for church leaders called “Coping with COVID.” We learned a lot about trauma, trauma response, and ways to help others and ourselves as church leaders to be healthy, present, and responsive to the challenges of the pandemic. The act of “deep listening” requires the gift of time, attention, and self-emptying. It is an action that we are all capable of. But it takes practice and intentionality. How often does someone start talking to us and our minds seize on what we think they are going to say? Or perhaps what our counter argument will be. That is not deep listening. We have to consciously empty our busy, monkey minds, to give that person time and space, without trying to reformat what they are saying into our preexisting framework of thinking.

As life giving as “deep listening” can be for two people in relationship, “deep listening” is an action that can also lead to social righteousness, to justice in the wider community. Imagine if we all decided to do our best to listen deeply to those people and groups who are different than we are. Isn’t that a way of following Paul’s advice to “regard others as better than yourselves.” (Phil. 2:3) Or to “Look to the interests of others.” We do that by listening to what they are really saying. Not what we expect them to say. The call to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness is a call to allow space, emptiness: physical, spiritual, emotional in order to open ourselves up to people whose lives are very different than ours. Yes, this is a challenge to step out of and beyond transactional relationships where we are thinking: “what can I get out of this conversation? What’s in it for me and for mine?” That approach comes from a place of hunger. But not the hunger for righteousness that Jesus is talking about here.

The second self-emptying action I am choosing to raise up today, is in part, to honor the legacy and witness of congressman and activist, John Robert Lewis who was born in 1940 in Troy, Alabama and died a week ago Friday, on July 17. His life and witness embody a person who

hungered and thirsted for righteousness for the 80 years that God gave him to us to live on this earth. “His parents were sharecroppers, and he grew up spending Sundays with a great-grandfather who was born into slavery, and hearing about the lynchings of Black men and women that were still a commonplace in the region,” as David Remnick wrote in *The New Yorker*, “When Lewis was a few months old, the manager of a chicken farm named Jesse Thornton was lynched about twenty miles down the road, in the town of Luverne. His offense was referring to a police officer by his first name, not as “Mister.” ...These stories and the realities of Jim Crow-era segregation prompted Lewis to become an American dissident.”

“In his long career as an activist, Lewis was arrested forty-five times and beaten repeatedly by the police and by white supremacists, most famously in Selma, on March 7, 1965—Bloody Sunday—when he helped lead six hundred people marching for voting rights. After they had peacefully crossed a bridge, Alabama troopers attacked, using tear gas, clubs, and bullwhips. Within moments of their charge, Lewis lay unconscious, his skull fractured. He later said, ‘I thought I was going to die.’ ...Bloody Sunday led directly to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.”ⁱⁱ That was in 1965, and yet 55 years later, to his dying day, the suppression of voting rights persists throughout our land. In the last few years of his life Lewis worked tirelessly to get the Voting Rights Advancement Act into law as a way to guarantee every American’s right to vote, a right that had been compromised by the Supreme Court’s *Shelby County v. Holder* decision in 2013. “I have said this before, and I will say it again,” Lewis said in June 2019. “The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

If you think about it, the right to vote the right to be heard--which is foundational to the healthy functioning of our democracy. Dr. William Barber III, (American Protestant minister and political activist) proclaimed that the right to vote is a theological issue. In his sermon I was blessed to hear in May of 2019, Dr. Barber called upon churches to address the sin of voter suppression.^{iv} Voter suppression is an example of systemic racism that we can do something about, moving forward. Giving every citizen the right to vote, and reasonable access to vote is a political and nonpartisan action. The vote gives voice to people long silenced. This is a righteous, cause. Jesus’ fourth beatitude, calls each of us to choose to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Being righteous, being in right relationship with God is the way toward justice.

Just imagine if we were as quick and as persistent in our work for justice as we are to make sure we have enough to eat and drink every day of our lives. When we were little, I remember my sister who would ask my mom to “pile it up to the sky!” when she was being served her dinner portion, would also say just at the end of dinner. “What’s for breakfast, mom?” Perhaps it wasn’t by chance, that in Matthew 25:35, Jesus begins this parable, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.” We get being hungry and thirsty.

As John Lewis wrote in his book: *Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, “Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe

even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part.”^v I have good news about our next generation of rising young adults! They are already working to do their part. Right here in our Marshfield community, this Friday night, July 31st at Columbia Park a group led by our FPC member, Aria Rens, of about 15 young adults, half in college and half in high school. They realized after participating in Black Lives Matter protests, that they wanted to do more of an educational event. Aria said, “People see marches and lots of time don't understand what it's about and why. Especially in our area, a lot of people don't understand systemic racism, have never really talked with a person of color, or get why it's an issue that effects all of us.” They wanted to make more of an impact. And so, they are taking action with this educational event on Friday night. I hope you can find a way to support their efforts.

I will give John Lewis the final word this morning. These words he said on March 1, 2020, atop the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. These are words which I believe echo and amplify Jesus’ fourth beatitude, and our first Christian hymn. I have put them together like this:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will

"Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America."

To which I would add, and help redeem the whole world that Jesus came to save. Is not this global pandemic a call to self-emptying, a call to action from Jesus, to look to the interests of others before self, like never before?

ⁱ Erik Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2003), p.79.

ⁱⁱ David Remnick, “Redeeming America,” *The New Yorker*, Voices of American Dissent, An Archival Issue, July 27, 2020, p.11.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/john-lewis-quotes/>

^{iv} My notes from *Festival of Homiletics, Preaching as Moral Imagination*, Dr. William Barber III, Minneapolis, MN, May 14, 2019.

^v Congressman John Lewis with Brenda Jones, *Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, (Hachette Books: New York: NY, 2012), p.43.