“Hunger and Thirst”

Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)

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

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

If you ever have a few spare minutes on your hands… and if you happen to spend those few spare minutes comparing and contrasting the words of Jesus in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John… and if you happen to look carefully at chapter five of Matthew and chapter six of Luke… then you might discover that the Beatitudes, the reading we have been engaging together in these weeks after Easter, and which we heard again this morning, appears twice in the New Testament, in both Matthew and Luke’s versions of the story. The two instances have much in common, but they also differ in some interesting ways.

In Luke’s version, Jesus begins his sermon like this:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”¹

In Luke, Jesus blesses the poor, the hungry, those who weep. This is consistent with Luke’s special emphasis and concern for those who are vulnerable and suffering—for the poor, the stranger, the sick, the widow, the orphan, the outcast. Luke’s Jesus blesses those whose suffering is literal, physical, immediate.

In Matthew’s version, on the other hand, it goes this way:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”²

In Matthew, the blessing is a little more ethereal. Where Luke’s Jesus blesses those who are poor, Matthew’s Jesus blesses those who are poor in spirit. Where Luke’s Jesus blesses those who are hungry, Matthew’s Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

I don’t think we have to choose one or the other—and neither did the early church authorities as they were assembling what we now know as the New Testament, for they actively chose to include multiple, sometimes conflicting, accounts of these stories and sermons. Both Luke’s Jesus and Matthew’s Jesus have important things to teach us, and when we read the two versions side-by-side, the contrast can help us discover even more.

Today, since we are in the midst of a sermon series on Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes, we’ll keep most of our attention there. And what I think Matthew has to teach us today, the question I hear Matthew asking us today, as we hear his version in contrast with Luke’s, is this: for what do you hunger? Because what we hunger for matters.

If you were to look in my freezer at home, you would soon discover that I often hunger for ice cream… And if you were to look in my stash of snacks in my office, you’d discover that I may have a bit of a taste for dark chocolate… Maybe you share these hungers, or maybe for you it’s donuts, or potato chips, or soda, or alcohol, or something else. Most of us—or, at least, most of us who are fortunate enough to have consistent access to adequate nutrition and to get to make choices about our food—hunger from time to time for some form or another of empty calories, and those comfort foods and drinks can be very, well, comforting. But since Matthew takes the Beatitudes more figuratively, I wonder: what are the spiritual junk foods we might crave?

Are there things for which you hunger, things that may taste delicious and feel so comforting, but are actually unhealthy for you, or for the world? Maybe money or prestige or material things… Maybe the approval of others, to be popular or well-liked… Maybe control…

¹ Luke 6:20-21
² Matthew 5:3-6
Maybe revenge on someone who has hurt you… Maybe power to do what you want with no concern for the consequences… Maybe to go back to some previous version of life, some time to which we cannot return… Maybe for a world, or a community, or a church where you don’t have to deal with people who disagree with you…

But the problem with junk food is that it never truly fills, it never truly nourishes. I know from experience that if I eat all the ice cream I want, I might satisfy that hunger, but I won’t feel well. If I say something sharp and cutting in response to someone else hurting me, I might feel a perverse satisfaction in the moment, but it won’t make me any more whole. The problem with junk food is that it just sates you for a while but leaves you empty inside.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” The Greek word translated here as righteousness means integrity, virtue, justice, right thought and action—a state of being consistent with how we ought to be, how God intends us to be. Which is to say, a state of being in which we know that we are loved, that we enough, that we are works in progress, that better things are yet to come. A state of being in which we remember that true greatness comes through service, that we are bound inextricably to one another, that all human beings are part of God’s family, and that we are, in fact, our siblings’ keepers.

All the junk food in the world cannot satisfy the deep hunger of our souls: the longing to be seen and known, the yearning to be in right, reciprocal relationship, the desire to be part of something larger than ourselves, the need to devote our lives to something that matters. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that we humans are born with a God-shaped hole in our hearts. Or, in the words of the Psalmist:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise the Lord,  
my help and my God. 

We might think we are hungry for other things; we might try to satiate our cravings with other things. But in the end, it is only Love that can nourish, only Grace that can satisfy.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Those deepest longings of our hearts, those deepest hungers of our souls, those deepest thirsts of our spirits—they will be satisfied. We are seen by the very Author of the Universe. We are known by the very Source of Life. We are connected to something greater, something wider, something deeper than we can imagine. There is more than enough Love to go around. There is more than enough Grace to satisfy your needs, and mine, and all the world’s. The way things are is not the way they will always be, for everything—everything!—will be transformed, and all things—all things!—will be made new.

And even when those deepest longings of our hearts, those deepest hungers of our souls, those deepest thirsts of our spirits have not yet been satisfied—the yearning itself can carry us toward God. Even when it is an empty ache that goes unmet for longer than we can bear—the shape of the emptiness, its color and taste, can show us what or whom it is that we’re missing. Even when the thing for which we long seems impossible—the longing is evidence of what and whom we love. And when we are in touch with our deepest hungers—not for ice cream or dark chocolate, but for the purpose of our lives, for the meaning of our days, for the rightness of our relationships, for the saving of our world—those yearnings will lead us closer to God’s own heart, to God’s deepest hunger. And when our hungers and God’s hunger become one, then together, we and God and all creation will find our fulfillment.

In a little while, we will receive today’s offering. When the ushers bring the plates around, the deacons will also bring around baskets. You may place your tithes and monetary offerings in the plates as usual. In the baskets, you may place one of the small slips of blue paper that you’ll find in the pew racks in front of you. On it, I invite you to write down something for which you hunger and thirst, a deep longing of your heart. It might be something for yourself or for someone you love. It might be something for our church or for our community. It might be something for our world, for our planet. It might be something tangible; it might be something ethereal. Whatever it is, write it down. Make an offering of that longing. Let it lead you toward God, and toward God’s deep longing for you.

And then, as we share communion later in the service, bring that hunger or thirst to mind, and as you receive the elements, remember Jesus’ words: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

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3 Psalm 42:1-6a