

“Holy Hunger”

#3 in the *BOUNTIFUL BLESSINGS* series

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Texts: Matthew 5:6

Community Christian Church – Kansas City, Missouri

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8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. (Sanctuary), 10:45 a.m. (Sanctuary)

We’ve all been hungry and thirsty. From the first moment of life beyond our mother’s wombs we are little bundles of hungering and thirsting. We desire nutritional nourishment and hydration out of necessity. We’ve been made to yearn for that which will insure our surviving. We are creatures constituted by hungering and thirsting.

It seems clear to me that Jesus knew this, as he gazed upon his listeners on the Judean hillside, offering his Sermon on the Mount.

Surely he knew how hungry and thirsty they were.

Surely he knew the experience of hunger (and its satisfaction) from the countless times he broke bread with his friends, and with strangers too, along his travels as an itinerant rabbi. Wasn’t this what he was criticized for? – *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*¹ Yes, he knew.

One of Jesus’ most famous parables, known traditionally as the story of The Prodigal Son, is a response to criticisms by the Pharisees and scribes that *“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*² His rejoinder was to talk about what happens to one who experiences the degradation of satisfying one’s hunger with pig slop and then being welcomed home with a sumptuous feast.³ Yes, Jesus knew all about hunger.

Jesus himself was acquainted with such feelings and desires. During Holy Week, on Good Friday especially, during our observance of the Seven Last Words, we will all hear how he expressed and identified with the universal human capacity for thirst. Yes, he knew. Jesus knew what we know all too well.

We’ve all known hunger of one sort or another.

You miss lunch, and you didn’t have much breakfast, and it’s dinner time, and you’re almost to the point of a headache. You’re hungry.

The baby cries, and you go through the inventory of possibilities of what’s bothering her – check the diaper, put another blanket on, hold her. Nothing works, still she cries. Then you get a bottle. Ah! That’s the trick. All along she was just hungry.

You haven't had grandmother's goulash in a long, long time. It's the best, you tell your friends, and she's having you over for dinner tonight. It's real soul food to you, this goulash. The more you think about it, the more you can imagine how you will enjoy that treasured goulash. What's going on? You're hungry.

Before the words of thanks are said on the fourth Thursday of November – turkey and dressing are on the table, everyone is in their place, pies are waiting, more food than we could ever imagine consuming, but we will try! – we're hungry.

Jesus knew, and we all know, about hungering and thirsting. It's normal. It's the way we are made.

Hunger of Another Kind

There's another kind of hunger that both the Hebrew prophets and Jesus spoke about: hunger for righteousness and this is ultimately our topic for today. This is "Holy Hunger."

The question for us is "Why did Jesus commend such hunger for our consideration in his Beatitudes?"

A holy hunger is what drove Jesus himself to preach and teach with such persistence and power for the three brief years of his earthly ministry. Among the poor and with the poor in spirit. For those who were hopeless and those who were helpless and frequently homeless. To those asking him pesky questions about trifles and trivialities – about healing on the Sabbath, for example – and to those asking after the truly substantial satisfactions of "the living water" and "the bread of life."

Hunger & Thirst - Desire, Longing

The kind of hunger Jesus was proclaiming as central to the experience of blessedness is a willful, focused wanting. It is honed and disciplined liking. It is the mounting anticipation of the best that is yet to be. It is an aspiration to do the best that we can do.

This kind of hunger is a fundamental surrender into the very image in which we were created and by which we have the most fulfilled life possible. It is a sacred dissatisfaction. It is a hungering for something so much that you can nearly taste it. It is a hoping-for-with-all-your-heart. It is a leaning-into-with-all-our-soul. It is a desire that compels. It is a holy hunger.

Tchaikovsky

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky knew such hunger in relation to music. His music is beloved the world over because he pursued the fulfillment of his hunger for music.

Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, long a favorite in the world of ballet, is even more well known these days because of the movie *Black Swan*. The number of people who've seen *The Nutcracker* ballet and gloried in the familiar strains of its music are too many to count. And countless awestruck onlookers have experienced the spectacle of a fireworks display to the accompaniment of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*.

But recall with me how he began his trek to musical immortality. His father did not approve of his appetite for music nor his passionate pursuit of it as a young person. His passion for music was so fervent that he suffered from headaches and insomnia. To top it off, his instructor in musical composition never liked what he created, in his humbler, less-well-known days nor when he became world-famous. How did Tchaikovsky maintain such focus, what compelled his musical genius, seemingly against all odds? He had a holy hunger to produce music that would make his heart sing and the souls of his hearers become suffused with beauty.

This is what the honoring of our administrative and building staff members is also about today. Be sure to express your appreciation to each and one of our staffers who maintain their own brand of holy hungering after high standards of achievement at Community, thus benefitting our whole community of faith.

This is, I would contend, what motivates Fred Rollins and the entire cadre of volunteers in our Food Pantry. Month by month, year by year they have gathered the food, and sacked the food, and distributed the food to those who would go hungry if not for the Food Pantry's provision. Why do Fred and the Food Pantry volunteers do it? In filling the needs of those who are physically hungry, they also attempting to fill the needs of their own spiritual yearnings. It's a holy hunger, for sure.

What has moved Rev. Jerry Porter to be the stellar pastor he has been, blessing so many congregations? How has he been such an exemplar of what Christian stewardship is all about? Today, 22 of his family members from all across the country have gathered here in celebration of his 80th birthday. Surely among his many gifts and graces, someone will be thinking of Jerry's holy hunger.

Holy hunger is the persistent desire, the enduring dream, the constant theme, the fervent hope for the ultimate things of life.

This kind of spiritual hunger has several notable characteristics:

- (1) It's voluntary.
- (2) There are no ill physical effects.
- (3) It can be experienced with grace by either individuals or groups.
- (4) It leads to peaceableness instead of conflict.
- (5) Rather than shunting the growth and development of children, it uplifts them and provides them a future.
- (6) It's an expansive dynamic, compounding the multitude of possibilities within human experience instead of reducing life to its basic necessities.
- (7) It leads to a satisfied life, rather than a truncated one.

Righteousness

Hunger always has an object. We don't simply hunger, in holy or profane fashions. We hunger for food, we hunger for something substantive.

In Holy Hunger, we hunger for righteousness. Which means we hunger for goodness to prevail in all relationships.

Have you begun to imagine what would happen in your life if you hungered for the righteousness of acting kind in every encounter you have with another person? It would be a nearly incredulous revolution! But just think of it, think of the vast transformations you would create and contribute to, if you decided for kindness to be the dominant theme in every one of your relationships.

Holy Hunger also means we hunger for justice to prevail in all policies. When we hunger for such substantive realities with passionate intensity, we are yearning for the prophet's dream to come true: "*... let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*"⁴

What would happen if we had a hunger for righteousness to prevail in all of our relationships and justice in all policies? To answer such a challenge, let me speak a little bit more this morning about the kind of hunger which very few here this morning have ever known.

Hunger in Drastic Relief

Life-threatening hunger is mostly an abstraction to the majority of U.S. citizens and folks in other countries with similar sophisticated food delivery systems. But real, gut-wrenching hunger and thirst are challenges for the global community nonetheless. The World Health Organization estimates that malnutrition touches the lives of one in every six people on earth. Estimates vary but most experts agree that at least 20,000 of the world's children die every day from hunger-related deaths. Dire hunger and thirst come in various stages and with varying dynamics. Malnutrition is a kind of hunger, with devastating effects on those who suffer from it. Famine is a collective malady that thematizes the suffering of hunger in large groups of people because of a widespread lack of access to sufficient food. Starvation, in individuals or among groups of people, is hunger lurching toward death.

Questions of responsibility and justice concerning global hunger have endured for a long time, with institutions like Bread for the World leading the way in the discussion. What is obvious is a simple, moral necessity: those of who have enough food should see to it that those who do not have enough receive the nutrition they need. No process for answering that challenge will ever be perfect, but we must try, especially for the sake of the children. We certainly can do better than the prevailing norm.

This past Monday, during Community's weekly staff meeting, Kim Rios, our Office Manager and Publications Director, gave as an example of "where I see God in the world" the extraordinary individual Narayan Krishnan. In 2002, Krishnan was on his way to be a premier chef at a five-star hotel in Switzerland. But something he saw in his village of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, caused him to change the entire direction of his life. He saw a man eating his own waste. He decided that serving the poor of India, and particularly the "untouchable" class in the caste system in his village, was something he just had to do. Krishnan's activities over the past eight years earned him a spot in the "Top Ten" in the "CNN hereos of 2010."

Every day Krishnan offers food and nutrition to 400 poor and elderly people in Madurai. He also bathes, and shaves them, if they need it. Most of all he provides them love. How and why does he do it? It's a holy hunger. Rather than talk about him, let's see the Youtube video clip about him.⁵

If you ask me, Narayan Krishnan looks a lot like Jesus.

*If we could hunger and thirst
for righteousness*

If we would hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake, we would begin to put a huge dent in the physical hunger problems of the world!

If we could hunger and thirst for righteousness like Jesus commends us to do in the Sermon on the Mount, we'd begin to understand Eugene Peterson's translation of our text this morning in his Message version: "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. [God]'s food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."⁶

If we could hunger and thirst for righteousness, not only would we be blessed, the whole world would be blessed to the *nth* degree.

If we could hunger and thirst for righteousness we'd know that in all circumstances, individually and collectively, the enemy is never possession but excess. That is to say, to hunger and thirst for righteousness is to yearn for every one to have enough. "Enough so that we can all break bread together, so that everyone's prayer can be answered - 'Give us this day our daily bread.'"⁷

Picture it now, with your sanctified imagination:

- The table is laden, so much so that the wood of the table creaks with the strain of holding it all up: your favorite entree... the most thirst-slaking, delicious drink that has ever touched your tongue... the best homemade rolls you've ever tasted the most scrumptious desserts you've ever seen. And not only that but it would be gravy without any cholesterol meringue pies without any calories ... food without any fat... everything heart healthy.

Picture another feast

Picture now, again with your sanctified imagination, another kind of feast:

- Every dealing in the public square would be on the up and up. Prevarication would have no place in public debate.
- Honesty would truly be the best policy and all would abide by it.
- We'd all follow a premier rule of St. Ignatius: *exhaust all possible positive interpretations of every person, place, statement or experience before going negative.*
- For every child there would be sufficient inoculations to ensure a healthy life.

- For every senior citizen, there would be protection, shelter and food enough that they'd never fear for their future.
- For every community there would be citizens who'd volunteer in impressive numbers so that high schools could be safe and students would maximize their opportunities to learn.
- In every home and hamlet, among all municipalities and manner of other governance, the first question would be "Is it good for the children and youth of our community?," whether or not you yourself had children or youth in your home.

Are you getting hungry, yet? I hope so. I hope we all will begin to think about the savory satisfaction of our hungers, both physical and spiritual, with such passion and intensity that we'll heighten our hungers.

John Wesley pointed us all toward the situating of a holy hunger within our hearts and souls and minds when he said:

*"Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can."*

Amen. As always, remember, from one hungry soul to another, I love you, and God bless us all.

NOTES

- 1 Matthew 9:11.
- 2 Luke 15:2.
- 3 Luke 15:11-24.
- 4 Amos 5:24.
- 5 At this point in the sermon, in the 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 a.m. services in the sanctuary, the congregation viewed the youtube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiC_9RHTvsA
- 6 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NAVPRESS, 2002), p. 1750.
- 7 William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2004), p. 57.