Sunday, March 16, 1980
BLESS ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS (No. 4 in a Series: Beatitudes)
Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 5:6,20

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Most of us have probably not ever known intense hunger, the kind which comes from not having anything at all to eat for many days. To go without anything to drink is even a more burning experience. The desire for water can become so strong that a person will do almost anything to obtain it. People who live in desert areas know the meaning of thirst. In Israel, in Jesus'time, water cisterns and wells were frequently a matter of life and death. To hunger or thirst is to know intense desire. So it is that Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

The words have a gracious meaning. Who among us can claim to be righteous? But the requirement in this beatitude is not having righteousness but hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The beatitude is saying — happy are those who desire, who work for righteousness. Happy are those who are on the side of righteousness, not only for ourselves, but on behalf of others.

The New English Bible has a more revealing translation of this beatitude — "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see the right prevail."

Some people don't believe this beatitude. They point out that some of the righteous people they've known have not been very happy. And they are right. For there is a kind of righteousness which narrows people, which constricts their spirit and outlook, which makes them judgmental and condemning and therefore unhappy. All they seem to want to do is to punish people who don't meet their own standards. This is the kind of righteousness which causes us to believe that we are better than others and deserve more. Jesus described such a man who prayed: "I thank God that I am not like other people. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get." In other words, "I'm a very righteous person." No hungering or thirsting for righteousness here! He believed he already had all he needed. But that's not the kind of being satisfied that Jesus promised.

The beatitude is not talking about this kind of irrelevant righteousness of which so many of us are so proud; the righteousness which is only concerned about correctness of belief or proper religious practices. Nor is the beatitude describing the righteousness which is made up of avoiding the small personal sins, but never the larger wrongs which exist in society. There are people and we may be among them who worry only about the minute rules and regulations, the letter of the law, but never the spirit of the law.

In Jesus'time this irrelevant righteousness was concerned mostly with religious rules and regulations, and with personal morality. Jesus was not against personal or individual righteousness, but he knew how it could mislead people. It can cause us to believe that since we are personally righteous in individual matters — because we do not abuse our spouse or children, because we do not engage in petty shoplifting; because we are regular in our re-ligious practices; because we have not been unfaithful in our marriage vows; because we are decent and well-meaning, everything is all right with us.

But Jesus knew that individuals who are personally decent and loving and law-abiding; people who would not let their next-door neighbor go hungry; at the same time often be-come part of structures and institutions in society that are unrighteous and unjust or are oblivious or indifferent to injustice around them. They can come to believe that since they are personally righteous, that's all that's necessary — but the hungering and thirsting to see the right prevail which Jesus is talking about in this beatitude is missing.

Jesus knew, in other words, that social injustice and unrighteousness in its many forms, large and small, often makes our personal righteousness, our individual morality irrelevant. It can even blind us to the larger evils all around us. If we are decent and loving and nice to someone whose whole life is at the same time twisted by the system in which he or she lives, and which we wittingly or unwittingly help to maintain, then our personal righteousness is not enough.

We're all familiar with the Nazi persecution of the Jews. In Nazi Germany, Jews were forced to identify themselves as aliens in their own country. At first, they had to wear armbands decorated with the Star of David. They were robbed of their businesses and property. Often, they were mobbed and beaten. Finally, they were forcibly removed to concentration camps and six million of them were murdered.

Now suppose you were a next-door neighbor to a Jewish family, and you were very fond of them. You yourself were not particularly antisemitic and you personally did not approve of minority group persecution. You even had your Jewish neighbors to your house for dinner and you listened with them to Mozart's music and your children, and their children played on the living room rug together.

But if you did not protest against the public policy which made them wear armbands, which defrauded them of their property and shipped them off to death, your little personal righteousness was not of much overall consequence, and it is doubtful that it could be said of you that you hungered and thirsted to see the right prevail.

Ironically, many of the churches in Germany at that time preached a gospel of personal morality and ignored a society that was going to hell.

But now let's come closer to home. Most of us are not mean, cruel, insensitive people. But as a group, we may condone things which we would not think of doing personally. In the first church I served on the south side of Chicago, black people were beginning to buy homes in the neighbor-hood near the church building and in which many of our church members lived. In an attempt to persuade black people not to buy in such neighborhoods which previously were all white, someone tried unsuccessfully to burn down the home of one of the new black families. If we had been hungering and thirsting to see the right prevail, then we should've gotten our tools and gone to help that family rebuild their home. That would've been a signal to those who opposed black people moving in that as Christians we could not condone such tactics.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those who work for justice and righteousness in our society. A lot more hungering and thirsting is needed.

Over and over again the Bible reminds us that righteousness is more than avoiding a few individual or personal vices.

You may remember the Billie Sol Estes case some years ago. Mr. Estes prided himself on being a Bible-believing Christian. He was so personally righteous that he did not smoke or drink, and he wouldn't allow the guests in his home to do so. He had become a wealthy individual and was so concerned about personal morality that he would not allow men and women to swim at the same time in his private swimming pool. At the same time, Mr. Estes was defrauding the government of millions of dollars in a complicated grain swindle.

In a similar fashion shortly after World War II, the editors of a leading church magazine decided that they would designate and honor some American political leader as the Christian Statesman of the Year. After much searching, these conscientious people selected the governor of selected one of our southern states, a man notorious for his leadership in the forces of racial segregation. The editors explained their choice in these terms: "The governor neither drinks nor smokes and will not serve liquor in his official residence."

This is not hungering and thirsting that the right might prevail, but it has been typical of too much ethical reasoning. A leader of Moral Rearmament announced in the 30's that Adolf Hitler could not be as bad as he was reported to be since he was known to be both a tee-totaler and a vegetarian. A popular radio preacher proclaimed his political views in these words: "I ask one thing about any candidate for political office: 'Is he a regular reader of the Bible?'"

Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." And remember the scribes and Pharisees had a lot of personal individual righteousness, but much of it was irrelevant to the issues of the day.

Jesus was like Amos the Old Testament prophet who said, "God desires much more than religious services, solemn assemblies and personal righteousness, but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." In our time in particular we need those who follow this beatitude, those who work so that the right will prevail.

Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "We cannot build our individual ladders to heaven and leave the total human enterprise unredeemed of its excesses and corruptions. For the church and individuals to urge kindness to our brothers and sisters, one by one, while ignoring social structures that drew them all in all, is to be irrelevant to our society and unfaithful to the fullness of the Gospel."

This beatitude concludes with the promise — "They shall be satisfied." Jesus could make this promise because he knew as the Bible testifies over and over again, God is on the side of justice and righteousness and God's will be done. Movements for equal justice, movements to help the poor help themselves, movements to end the evils of segregation, movements that work for peace — all these may be slowed down or delayed by our stubbornness or sinfulness, but they will not forever be denied. The right will ultimately prevail. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied!

Today, I invite you to be among those who are blessed because you hunger and thirst for righteousness. Amen.