

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
First Sunday of Lent- February 25, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 42:1-5a & Matthew 5:1-2, 6

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Hunger and thirst are basic facts of life. We hunger and thirst for things outside of ourselves because that's how we're made. Without food and drink for our bodies and our souls we shrivel up and die.

We're among the fortunate few who readily have enough food and drink for our bodies. Unlike those who first listened to Jesus, we don't have to worry much about where our next meal will come from or whether we'll have enough to drink. But food and drink for our souls- that issue is as sharp for us as it's ever been for any people.

What will satisfy us? Where can we find lasting fulfillment? What will meet the yearning deep inside us for the true meaning of our lives?

The old Rolling Stones' song, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" still shouts out the threat we all can feel. We want our souls to be well fed, but with what? We try and we try and we try, but where can we find genuine nourishment?

Will it be by stuffing our bodies with more and more food and drink than we can ever really need? Will it be by stuffing our houses and offices and garages and storage spaces with more and more furnishings and gadgets and vehicles and tools than we can ever really use? Will it be by stuffing our social life and work days with more and more contacts and acquaintances and networks than we can ever possibly have real connection to? Will it be by stuffing our intimate life with one person after another after another because the previous one and the one before that and the one before that failed to deliver what we need? Will it be by stuffing our heads with the white noise of endless busyness or pop cultural buzz or drug or alcohol swoon because those at least can block out for awhile our soul's hunger for the real deal?

All those possibilities are easily available in our society, and, sadly, they're all popular. Health gurus tell us we are what we eat. If the food and drink we put into our bodies is too much of the wrong thing, we get physically sick. If the food and drink we stuff into our souls is the spiritual equivalent of a junk diet, we get soul sick, too. The aforementioned spiritual diets popular in our day are all the equivalent of spiritual junk food. Soul sickness from indulgence in any of them is a potent threat.

Thankfully, Jesus continues with his beatitudes for us, letting us know where genuine nourishment for our souls can be found. In Matthew 5, verse 6, he gives us beatitude number four- "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Beatitudes one, two, and three lead us directly to it.

Before we can hunger and thirst for righteousness we have to know we need it. We have to know that we're "poor in spirit" and longing for something we don't yet have. Out of that need, we mourn the fact that it's not yet fulfilled. We mourn that this whole broken creation still cries out in need for it. Out of that poverty and mourning, we gather our energies and abilities in true meekness. We await direction for them from the One who knows how they're meant to be used. They're meant to be used for *righteousness*, Jesus says, and when they are, our souls are well-fed.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is itself blessed. We might usually feel far from God, but find ourselves wanting to be closer. We might pray only now and then or not at all, but find ourselves wanting to turn to God more. We might mess up our lives badly or groan under the weight of the world's hurt, yet find ourselves yearning to make things right. If so, our desire itself is blessed.

We don't have to have our act completely together. We don't have to have our life with God all wrapped up and topped with a tidy bow. The key difference is not between those who've found

God and those who haven't. The big difference is between those who seek God and those who don't.

Later in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promises, "Those who seek *will* find." He says those who seek first God's kingdom and its righteousness *will* receive everything else they need as well. "Blessed are those who *hunger* and *thirst* for righteousness, for they will be filled." Jesus says the yearning itself brings us closer to God.

The way we celebrate Holy Communion recognizes that fact. We physically come forward to receive Christ's bread and cup. We do that to symbolize with our movement our *desire* for God's presence as it's offered here. But at this table, we don't gorge ourselves. We don't eat from the bread or drink from the cup until we're stuffed or bloated.

Instead, we take only a piece of the bread. We only dip into or sip from the cup. We don't gulp from it. We take only a taste of the elements of this Supper because we know we need to keep on wanting, we need to keep on *hungering* and *thirsting* for God. We need to continue wanting God more, because if we ever feel we already have all of God that we need in this life, then we know *not* that we've become filled with God's righteousness, but rather that we've become *self-righteous*.

That temptation is one I'm afraid we in the church and other religious communities have fallen into too often. Maybe that's why we don't hear the word "righteousness" used much any more. Maybe because of the way it's usually been used, it now conjures up only images of people who are smugly religious, snootily self-satisfied, and all too ready to denounce others' wrongs while remaining blind to their own. If that in fact is what has happened, it's brutally ironic, since self-righteousness of that kind is exactly what Jesus condemned harshly.

He calls us to yearn for *true* righteousness. That righteousness is nothing less than everything finally being the way God intends for it to be. True righteousness is all of God's creatures at last living in free, perfect, and loving harmony with God and each other. This all-embracing communion is what God has wanted for us from the very beginning. It's what the full coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven will mean. The near coming of that kingdom which Jesus proclaims at the heart of his message blesses those who hunger and thirst for it. Hungering and thirsting for it, what do we then *do*?

We do the same thing we do with any hunger or thirst we have. If our stomach rumbles and our throat is dry, we make sure we eat food and take drink. When our heart is hungry and our soul is parched, we make sure to eat the food and take the drink of God's kingdom and its righteousness.

We do that through those deeds which draw us further into the loving communion with God and each other that God wants for us. There's no secret about what those deeds are. One of the main purposes of the church is to keep them steadily before us and to strengthen us in doing them.

I'm talking again about the basic practices of our faith- for example, Sabbath rest, spiritual friendship, prayer, self-examination, confession, and meditation on God's word- all of which serve to center us in God. Centered in God, we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit works to grow in us the fruits of love and all its virtues. We remember them again- joy, gratitude, wisdom, justice, generosity, kindness, compassion, courage, truthfulness, peace, righteous anger, forgiveness, forbearance, gentleness, humor, patience, encouragement, perseverance, faithfulness, and self-control. With these spiritual fruits, we're able to engage more and more in the loving service that leads us deeper and deeper into the loving communion with God and each other that is *our* truest desire.

There's no use in being vague about that, either. What kinds of loving service are we talking about? Here again are some of the most basic that our faith teaches- feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned and welcoming strangers, seeing in the lowliest of our fellow human beings the face of Jesus Christ.

There's doing justice, loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, and blessing those who curse us. There's caring for the earth and our bodies, receiving them as wondrous gifts given into our care by God's own hand. There's faithfully offering daily acts of care, kindness,

and forbearance to those with whom we live most closely- our families, our friends, our colleagues, our sisters and brothers in the family of faith. There's conscientiously performing good, honest, and honorable work.

There's praying for everyone in need, praying for God's Kingdom to come among us all on earth as it is in heaven. There's boldly proclaiming Christ's gospel and inviting others to join with us in the life of Christ's body, the church. There's giving to the church and to other worthy institutions the gifts of our time, talent, and money.

There's service in all of our relationships by refraining from gossip, slander, and pettiness. There's serving through our integrity, by keeping our promises and commitments, by letting our yes be yes and our no be no. There's serving through offering words of generous praise and thanks to others, by confessing and making restitution to those whom we have done wrong, and by readily forgiving those who've done wrong to us.

There's listening well and affirming the dignity of others through simple acts of courtesy. There's graciously receiving service that others give to us. There's serving in times of conflict and tension by not letting the sun go down on our anger. There's serving by speaking difficult truths to each other in love and by provoking each other to greater deeds of loving service.

Those deeds feed our souls well. Through them we enter more deeply into the Kingdom and its righteousness and know more and more of the blessing Jesus promises.

It really is a matter of what we choose. As long as we live, we will feed our souls something, but what? Because of the freedom God gives the choices we make about our spiritual diet are crucial. As C. S. Lewis once put it, "Every time (we) make a choice (we) are turning that central part of us, the part that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking (our) life as a whole, with all (our) innumerable choices, we are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature that is in harmony with God or else into one that is (at) . . . war with God."

Choosing for the kingdom and its righteousness moves us into harmony with God. It brings us into the blessing of a soul well-fed. Choosing otherwise puts us at odds with God and stuffs our souls with junk food. On a bad diet, we end up soul sick. The choice is ours.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*, for they will be filled. Amen.