

Hungry for the Right Food

Matthew 5:1-12

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

Americans should be the most satisfied people who have ever walked the earth. There are no people in the history of this universe who have ever enjoyed such affluence. Our choices are seemingly unlimited. Last week, Christina and I spent the better part of the morning thinking about what we wanted for lunch – mind you not, like so much of the world of where and if we would have lunch – but what we wanted. We enjoy a vast range of choices in almost every area of our life and yet, Mick Jagger's lyrics still resonate: "I can't get no, satisfaction ... I try and I try and I try and I try, I can't get no ..."

We do try and many of us are connoisseurs in the satisfaction of hunger and thirst; we even have professionals whose job it is to satisfy us – maitre d' ... bartenders ... specialty gourmet shops ... and my favorite Central Market. I can spend hours in that place. All that is required is nothing more than a credit card – and everything in the store is in reach.

Our demand for more has turned even spirituality into a market place – books on spirituality range from the orthodox, ones like Richard Foster's classic, Celebration of Discipline to Wicca for Beginners. This past week, we were reminded again of the deaths of 3 people in Arizona who died trying to reach a higher level of spirituality by participating in an ancient Native American ritual – The Sweat Lodge.

We channel surf for gurus in an attempt to bring meaning to our lives. We shop preachers and praise bands infected by a consumer mentality. Why is hollowness, hopelessness, and anxiety so rampant. Why are anti-depression drugs sold at a rate of 1000 times what they were just 10 years ago (other than the fact that they are the commercials that punctuate the intervals between TV gurus). Why the malaise, the national sense that we are missing something. We bounce from relationship to relationship like a rubber ball in a handball court. We go from restaurant to restaurant for diversion to diversion substituting one addiction for another and still happiness, contentment and peace seem – well unattainable.

We have been set up. We are reared to expect satisfaction in all areas of life – physical, emotional, spiritual and yet on Madison Avenue, advertising professionals are scheming up increasingly clever ways to

create a sense of dissatisfaction. They are paid hundreds of millions of dollars to make you unhappy and assure you that your happiness can only be found in their product – from hair care to prostrate health. We have a freedom of choice that is unparalleled. Combine the dissatisfaction caused by our belief that each passing generation is entitled to more - sooner, we are led to believe that our freedom to choose with more choices will lead to a higher level of satisfaction.

Yet, even apart from the teaching of Jesus, we have studies that indicate the converse is true – we are not more satisfied with each passing generation ... but less. Barry Schwartz who wrote, The Paradox of Choice Why More is Less, learned this lesson from his own shopping experience. He needed to replace his blue jeans.

When he went to the store he was overwhelmed by the array. He wanted a pair of size 32 X 28 jeans – color blue. The sales person flooded him with choices: “Yes, we have 32 X 28 in blue. Would you like slim fit? Easy fit? Relaxed? Stonewashed? Acid Washed? Distressed? Zipper fly? Buttoned Fly?

Schwartz said, “I was stunned. A moment or two later I sputtered out something like, ‘I just want regular jeans. You know the kind that used to be the only kind.’ It turned out she didn’t know ... the trouble was that with all these options available to me now, I was no longer sure that ‘regular’ jeans were what I wanted.”¹

So Schwartz began talking with the salesperson to learn about the various options. He tried one pair after pair and spent a lot of time doing so, finally a decision, hear what he said:

Whereas as very little was riding on my decision, I was now convinced that one of these options had to be right for me, and I was determined to figure it out. But I couldn’t. Finally I chose the easy fit, because “relaxed fit” implied I was getting soft in the middle and needed to cover it up ... by creating all these options the store had also created a problem that need to be solved. Now it was a complex decision in which I was forced to invest time, energy, and no small amount of self-doubt, anxiety, and dread.

Studies corroborate Schwartz’s suspicion: endlessly expanded choices do not bring the perfect life, but merely tease and disappoints, leading

¹ Howell, 55

to anxiety and depression. People are shopping more and enjoying it less! Reports indicate that 93% of teenage girls say that shopping is their favorite activity. Yet teenagers are suffering an epidemic of boredom and depression. A sad fact is that the 3rd leading cause of deaths among teens is suicide.

Two weeks ago, my cell phone died. It's death brought about a conundrum – at first I didn't know whether to be happy or sad – but the conundrum was which phone to buy? Now most of you know that other than a bookstore, I consider shopping to be my least favorite activity – I put it right up there with curling as an Olympic sport. But the choices – oh my; I looked at the wall ... saw all those phones – finally I told the sells clerk this – I want the cheapest phone I can buy and I want to be able to answer and make calls. She still tried to sell me an Iphone and the \$10,000 per month service plan!

The illusion that we are being given is that with so many choices we can arrange the "just right life." James Howell in his work on the Beatitudes argues that we are blind to see how unbridled freedom of choice destroys relationships. To be a friend, to be married, to join a church all imply that we loose autonomy and our choices are thus diminished. If I take on the responsibilities of marriage or friendship or joining an organization I automatically limit my choices and sacrifice freedom. Schwartz, lamenting the overload of the thousands of little choices we must make that previous generations did not have to deal with, notices that we are under unwitting pressure to create an identity rather than accept a given identity.

It is little wonder that the church faces a massive obstacle when we promote our message that every human being has a given identity as a child made in the image of a loving God. That our cherished freedom of choice is not much more that a chaotic exercise in sinfulness, that if we are to do anything with the hungering and thirsting we all experience, it should be to go and find some righteousness, which alone can satisfy. We feel empty because we are full of the wrong stuff.

The time gap between us and Jesus is unfathomably wide. The people crowding around Jesus had few choices. Hunger and thirst for them were not metaphors, but the reality of the daily grind. Eking out an existence, trying to put food on the table, battling the elements, enduring exhausting work everyday of the week only to feel the harsh hand of the tax collector taking half of what was not nearly enough. Jesus listeners were literally hungry and thirsty.

These people gathered around our Lord longing for the fulfillment of the messianic expectation. Every one listening to Jesus believed that when the messiah came ... joy would abound – crops and cattle, harmony and peace. It was said that when the messiah came:

There would be 10,000 vineyards on 10,000 hills. Each vineyard would have 10,000 vines, and each vine 10,000 branches. Each branch would have 10,000 clusters of grapes and each cluster would have 10,000 grapes – prosperity unimaginable. The righteous indeed were hungry for the day that God would vindicate the elect and God's people reign on the earth.

Jesus spoke to people who knew what the word righteousness meant. These were Old Testament people. The Law and the Prophets lifted up righteousness as the goal of human existence. Freedom of choice – poohey! Righteousness towards God and neighbor, that's the goal. The coming messiah would lift up God's people and crush their evil oppressors.

To Old Testament people righteousness is a life lived in conformity to God's will, adhering to God's law, a life of prayerful holiness. Their rightness meant that their heads and hearts were dominated by God's vision for life down here. When Jesus prayed, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" he meant for righteousness to reign right now. Righteousness is not limited to the spiritual realm it takes concrete shape as a life lived loving God and loving neighbor.

Paul's understood the word to mean that the life and death of Jesus Christ transforms the word to become something God gives not something we do. God gives us righteousness as a gift to be share with all whom we meet; and for Paul Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they are those who first and foremost desire a relationship with Jesus – Jesus the teacher, Jesus the pioneer, Jesus the one headed for the cross and resurrection. The changed life of righteousness grows out of that, or it does not grow at all. Hunger growls in our bellies and thirst parches our throats and they can only be satisfied by Jesus. We hunger and thirst not for food and drink but for Jesus himself.

One of my favorite authors is Pat Conroy. In his novel, The Lords of Discipline young Will McLean laments "his lack of a romantic life with words that may reflect our anxiety about God:"²

I once read in a book that traced the natural history of blue whales that the great creatures often had to travel thousands of miles through the dark waters of the Pacific to find a mate. They conduct their search with the fever and furious attention of beast aware of the imminence of extinction. As whaling fleets deplete their numbers, scientist conjecture that there were whales who would exhaust themselves in fruitless wandering and never connect with any mate at all. When I read about those solitary leviathans, I feared I had stumbled on an allegory of my own life, that I would spend my life unable to make a connection, unable to find someone attracted by the beauty and urgency of my song.

We crave intimacy, a deep relationship especially with God. Without it we are incomplete. The words of the Psalmist resonate deep within the bowels of our being – *"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O. God"* (Ps. 42:1).

Notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say, blessed are those who are righteous. What he said is, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. If you think you possess it you are probably self-righteous. God fashioned the hollowness inside us that only he can fill. Jesus us wants us to keep wanting. Wonder into the lives of the spiritual giants of the church – Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross – and you will see that they never claimed to be full filled, but beggars at God's banquet. They hungered and thirsted for righteousness.

We who find ourselves climbing the ladder of the Beatitudes need the poverty, mourning and meekness that drives our hunger for God. We will not settle for a premature sense of fullness, never demanding that God fill our cup until we want no more. Augustine said, "I want to want God."

If we acknowledge ourselves as thirsting, we shall acknowledge ourselves as drinking also. For he that thirsteth in this world, in the world to come shall be satisfied according to the Lord's saying, blessed are that that hunger and thirst

² Howell, 59

for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Therefore in this world we ought not to love fullness."³

So those who hunger and thirst may well embrace a habit that only superficially runs contrary to the goal of those who hunger for God – the spiritual discipline of fasting. When we fast we actually heighten our hunger, not to put on the cloak of spiritual vanity, but to intensify our hunger for our Lord, Jesus Christ. It also places us in solidarity with the physically hungry in this world. I invite you to fast with me on Ash Wednesday. I am not going to eat solid food that day until we come together at this table and celebrate the Lords' Supper. If you are able, join me.

And today when you come to this table, come with a joyful heart; come hungry, come rejoicing that your are in a relationship with the living Lord, it is true, the more he feeds you the more you hunger for him. Amen.

³ The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics , 235