

October 11, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

A Thirst for Joy

Matthew 5:6 and 6:25-33

Pastor Tom Anderson

I direct my words this morning to our newest members and especially to those who will be newly baptized this morning. Congratulations, salutations, felicitations and welcome to a remarkable journey through life with Christ! Our prayers are with you and as your fellow travelers we promise to love, encourage, teach and support you in your faith.

It is appropriate that we should consider Jesus' words "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled." I can think of no better description of the Christian life than this: it is an abiding and driving hunger for God and his righteousness. Having the right desire for the right food is the key to your spiritual health and prosperity.

In 1995 park rangers at the Grand Canyon National Park had to destroy two dozen mule deer because they had become addicted to junk food left by tourists and campers. Once they get a taste of the sugar and salt, the deer develop an extreme addiction and will go to any lengths to eat only junk food. The result is the animals ignore the food they need, leaving them in poor health and on the edge of starvation. Because of junk food cravings, the deer lose their natural ability to digest vegetation. One park ranger called the junk food "the crack cocaine of the deer world."

Scripture warns us of the dangers of developing a craving for the things of this world. Such a diet keeps us from hungering for the things of God. Jesus said the secret to happiness is to hunger and thirst for the right thing: righteousness.

What is it that satisfies the human soul? Is it fame? Success? Power? Sex? Many people have great quantities of all these things and yet they are depressed, angry, and afraid. The great psychologist William James once observed, "The most important thing in life is to live your life for something more important than your life." You will never be happy if you live for yourself. You will never know joy if you seek to satisfy your own wrong desires. Jesus said that only one human desire will be satisfied and that is the desire for righteousness. Do you hunger and thirst to be righteous?

Many Christians desire the right thing but their desire is too weak. The 19th century evangelist Dwight Moody complained that some Christians have just enough religion to make them miserable. They are equally unhappy at a wild party and uncomfortable at a prayer meeting. Hunger and thirst are the most intense desires we can have. They are connected to our survival instincts. Jesus did not say “desire righteousness” “wish for righteousness” or “prefer righteousness”; instead he says “hunger and thirst” for it. Make it a matter of survival—a driving and intense desire to live and be righteous.

What is righteousness? It means being in the right with God and your neighbor. The Bible speaks of three types of righteousness:

There is legal righteousness. This is whoever practices and teaches the commandments of God given in the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 5:19) Legal righteousness means that I am in a state of outward compliance to all of God’s laws and commandments. All my debts to society are paid up to date. I am not knowingly doing anything that is illegal or immoral. The Pharisees in Jesus’ day prided themselves in their blameless obedience to even the minute details of the law. But they missed the most important work of God which is to believe in the Messiah, the Christ, the one God sent into the world. No one can be righteous unless they believe in Jesus Christ. It is by faith that we become truly righteous in the legal sense.

There is moral righteousness. This is inner righteousness that goes beyond merely keeping rules. Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees you will certainly not enter the Kingdom.” (Matthew 5:20) Moral righteousness has to do with our hearts, our minds and our motivations. You can be legally righteous by not committing murder, but you can be morally bankrupt because you despise and hate others from your heart. You can be legally righteous by not stealing anything but morally bankrupt because you are greedy for or stingy with money. The problem with ethics as it is taught in American universities today is the approach is all about being in compliance with law. But real ethics is not about compliance with law; it is about who we are. It is about our fundamental character and values. Many Christians ask their pastors how much they can get away with and still be considered a good Christian. This is a disastrous and wrong-headed view of ethics and righteousness. The better approach is to ask how closely my heart and character match with my Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally there is social righteousness. This is what The Holy Spirit was talking about when he inspired the prophet Amos to proclaim, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24) It is mercy for the poor and oppressed all around us. It is food for the hungry, civil rights for the oppressed, freedom and opportunity for all people and good stewardship of the environment and all the gifts God has given us. Righteousness in the Bible is not just a private, individual concern but it takes us out into the world to address the suffering, violence and injustice of the entire human family.

You hold in your hand this morning a rubber band. It is a brand new, never-been-used rubber band right out of the bag and into your hands. We spared no expense but to give you the very best today! As it sits there it looks pristine and perfect—like a truly righteous rubber band should, right? Wrong! Stretch it out; now it is perfect. Only when it is stretched is the true power of this rubber band unleashed. Only when it is stretched out does this rubber band truly fulfill the purpose for which it was made. And only when it fulfills its purpose is it truly perfect and righteous.

Likewise, God has a dream for your life. Righteousness is not a list of “Do Nots”. Righteousness is the positive, faithful, active and life-giving pursuit of God’s dream for your life. Repentance is when you clean the slate of your soul and let God write his dream for you there. Then you pursue it like a hungry man pursues something to eat or and thirsty woman seeks out water in the desert.

God is not asking you to be perfect—just to be willing and he will do the rest. Just take the first step and the Holy Spirit will show you the next. Many here today are not ready for all that Jesus has for them. You have been saying it to yourself for years, “I’m not ready yet, maybe another time.” Say it with me now, “Yes, Lord!” Yes to the dream God has for me. I want to be righteous. I want to do the right thing. And the right thing is to pursue God’s dream for me with all that I am and all that I have.

Thanks be to God, who both gives and satisfies a thirst for the joy of Jesus Christ.