



Tanya has two brothers, one of whom retired from the Air Force in July of 2015. As I was on sabbatical at the time, we traveled to his retirement ceremony, and as we enjoyed the program I thought about his story of survival training many years before. He was dropped in the wilderness with almost no supplies beyond a fishing hook, some fishing line, a knife, and a live rabbit. Among the instructions he received was to see how long he could go before he ate the rabbit. I don't think it took very long. In fact, I remember him telling me that it's not long before one is hungry enough to root around in the ground looking for bugs to eat. Most of us would probably protest that we would never eat bugs, regardless of how hungry we become, but I think we would all be surprised at just how quickly we would eat just about anything once real hunger set in.

We are, certainly, blessed that we have never experienced true hunger. Real hunger comes after several days of no food. That kind of hunger drives a person in a way that, thankfully, we do not know. Sure, we say all the time that we are *starving*, but it's more of an expression than a reality. The truth is, we know neither real hunger nor real thirst. When we are hungry, we open the refrigerator or pantry and get something to eat. When we are thirsty we open the refrigerator or turn on the tap and get a drink.

The power of hunger was one well known to many of those in the audience when Jesus offered the Beatitudes. In the time of Jesus, most people lived on the edge of very real hunger. The financial uncertainty that was a part of everyday life for so many led to food insecurity and many questions about where they would find their next meal. It was not possible to keep much food in one's home, because there was no way to safely store it or money to purchase more than perhaps a day's worth. And imagine, in that part of the world, where much of the landscape is barren, that you are traveling and the wind begins to blow sand and dirt and you have to cover your face because you are walking or riding an animal. There is no way to keep the sand and dirt out of your nose and mouth; imagine then, how much you would long for a drink of water. Those who listened to

Jesus know real hunger and real thirst. Jesus certainly knew hunger as well. After his baptism, when he went into the wilderness, he went forty days without food. It was then that he was tempted to turn the stones into bread (*1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*) *5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"* *7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"* *8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"* *11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him (Matthew 4:1-11).*

This morning we continue our study of the Beatitudes, and as we do we come to the fourth beatitude, in verse 6 – *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* Once again the Beatitudes touch a very deep nerve in the lives of Jesus' listeners. His audience was made up of those who were indeed poor in spirit, those who had much to mourn, those who were meek, and those who understood real hunger. Just as Jesus used the first three parables to speak to his listener's lives, using them as a jumping off point to speak about deeper issues, he uses hunger in such a way as well. As difficult as physical hunger can be, and as much as that hunger can drive us, Jesus reminds us there is another kind of hunger as well, and it is spiritual hunger, of which Jesus often spoke.

As we have been doing each week, and will continue to do throughout this series, we will read the passage that contains the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:1-12 –

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,

2 and he began to teach them. He said:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In this beatitude, Jesus asks us to remember this very important truth –

We are spiritual beings.

As I read, I often clip interesting articles for future reference. Here’s one from a few years ago that is a fascinating and revealing statistic – according to *Psychology Today* magazine, in the year 2000 there were **fifty** books published on the topic of happiness. Fifty. That seems like a lot to me, but only eight years later, in 2008, the number was higher. I want you to guess how many books on happiness were published in 2008. How many do you think? Another fifty? One hundred? Two hundred? In 2008, only eight years later, there were **four thousand** books on the topic of happiness published. (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200812/the-pursuit-happiness>).

You heard that right – four thousand! I’m not sure if anyone was made happy by all those books other than the publishers, but isn’t that an amazing number! What do you think that says about our society that in only eight years there would be such an exploding market for books to help people find happiness? And the question is, did those books help anyone find happiness?

I think that statistic says that there is a great spiritual hunger that exists in our society and it is a hunger that often goes unaddressed. There is, I believe, a great number of people who feel as though something is missing from their life. In spite of our affluence, in spite of our multitude of activities, in spite of the many entertainment options, and in spite of our ability to travel, there seems to be a great deal of spiritual lethargy and ennui. There is a sense that there must be something more than simply pursuing entertainment, sensory stimulation, work, and responsibilities.

In our time-starved, activity-obsessed, entertainment-saturated society, the needs of our spiritual selves are very often ignored. And here is the tragedy of this spiritual starvation – when we are physically hungry we will spare no expense or effort to make sure our physical hunger is filled, but much of the time we don’t even realize we are spiritually hungry. Physical hunger manifests itself in very obvious ways – our stomachs growl and the emptiness makes us physically weak and it is impossible to miss the fact that we are hungry. *I am starving*, we will often say, even though we are a long way from being truly hungry, let alone starving. In fact, most of the time we don’t really experience true hunger because we are so surrounded with food and it is so readily available. But think about this for a moment – when was the last time any of us said *I’m starving spiritually!*

We must never forget that we are more than physical beings; we are spiritual beings. God created us to be more than flesh and blood; we are spirit and soul as well. That's what Jesus said when he was tempted to turn the stones into bread in the wilderness – *man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4). And he said that after forty days of fasting. Forty days! I'm not sure I could make forty hours of fasting. Some years ago I tried fasting on a regular basis. I thought it would be a good spiritual discipline. The first thing I learned about fasting was this – it should be called something else, because it does not go fast. Maybe *slowing* would be a better word.

But spiritual hunger is different, because we don't always realize that we are spiritually hungry. What are the signs of spiritual hunger? The physical signs are easy, but what about those of spiritual hunger? We might recognize that something is missing, but we can't quite put our finger on it. Interestingly, even someone as adamantly opposed to religious faith as the author Sam Harris recognizes we are spiritual beings, and he was taken a good deal of criticism from his fellow atheists for his emphasis on the importance of spirituality in a book he wrote about cultivating spirituality. Isn't that rather fascinating?

In this verse Jesus speaks of something even deeper than the drive for life's most basic needs – food and water – and that is our spiritual hunger and thirst. Some people may not recognize or accept the truth, but we are spiritual beings and there is a deep, spiritual longing within us. Built into the language of this beatitude is the idea that we are much more than just our next bite of food or drink of water; we are, we must not forget, people with a longing for something that will once and for all bring a sense satisfaction. Living in a consumer-driven, stuff oriented society it is easy to seek to fill that hunger and thirst with stuff. *Buy this, buy that, get this, get that*, but where does it get us? Does it ever give us a sense of satisfaction? No, but that doesn't mean we turn elsewhere; often it means we simply go out and buy more stuff. Jesus is telling us in the beatitudes that we must tend to our souls and not simply chase after the things in life that do not build us up spiritually or nourish our souls.

Feed Your Soul.

In the early 80's, when I was attending seminary, I shared an apartment with two other students. We were trying to get by as simply as we could, mostly because we had to, as money was very scarce. At that time – which was the '81 – '82 academic year – I tried to get by on no more than \$15 a week for food. Even in 1981-1982 that was not much money for food. I can remember one day when the three of us sat around what passed for our dining room table staring at our dinner, which was a frozen pizza from Kroger that costs 79-cents. Do you know how big a 79-cent frozen pizza is? Not big enough to feed three hungry young men, I can tell you that! To this day, I don't like to eat certain foods because of their association with a time when I had very little. I don't understand, for instance, how anyone can go out to a restaurant and order bean soup. When we had bean

soup it meant there was nothing else left to eat, so the last thing I will ever order in a restaurant is a bowl of bean soup, I can assure you! Our apartment reflected our humble circumstances. We didn't have curtains on the few windows; we had sheets or towels or whatever we could find to cover the windows. We did have some bookshelves, which were made of concrete blocks and a few boards we had scavenged from somewhere. Our dining room table was one of the those big wooden spools used for cable and the chairs were the folding cloth chairs that you would put in your trunk and take on a picnic. And there were no bed frames; just mattresses on the floor. We had only one decent piece of furniture in that apartment, as seemed fitting at the time for three guys in their early 20's. We had a big, giant, absolutely killer-sounding stereo system in the corner. We couldn't afford curtains, or a dining room table, or chairs, or a couch, but we could really crank up the Lynyrd Skynyrd and Led Zeppelin on that nice, fancy stereo!

We had next to nothing, but I remember that stage of life very fondly. My memories are of a time when I had very little free time and didn't get much sleep, but it was a happy time. The humble circumstances didn't seem to dampen our spirits at all. I'm certainly not minimizing the fact that many people live in very humble and difficult circumstances, but the point is this – happiness, joy, and contentment all come from a much deeper source than our life circumstances.

As we read the Scriptures there are great examples of how circumstances do not affect people's happiness. Paul, in a Roman prison writes in Philippians 4:11-12, *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* Luke tells us in Acts 16:25 that Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned and while in prison they were *singing hymns to God.*

Again, I'm not minimizing the struggle of anyone living in humble or difficult circumstances, but what I am saying is that genuine happiness is not circumstantial. It is not based on what we have or don't have. To go back to the reference of the many books published on happiness, allow me to make this observation – have you ever noticed how rarely the Bible uses the word happiness? It varies according to the translation but the word is not used very often. Some translations don't use the word *happiness* at all, while others use it only a few times. The word *happy* appears anywhere from a dozen to two dozen times in the Bible, depending on your translation. That's not very many times, is it?

But the idea of happiness permeates most every page of the Scriptures. There are five Hebrew words and two Greek words that can be translated as *happy* in the Bible, but they don't have the same meaning as what we usually think of as happy. The best way to translate those words are as *blessed*. Happiness, according to the Scriptures, is a byproduct of living a blessed life, and a blessed life is one in which we feed our souls.

I heard a young man pray a very interesting prayer some years ago. He was in the 5th grade and volunteered to pray at a gathering and said this – *Lord, help us not to see you*

as nothing more than a big vending machine, ready to give us whatever we want. I don't know where he got that but he was demonstrating wisdom beyond many of us much older!

When we learn to feed our souls we will find that a byproduct will be a greater sense of happiness and satisfaction about life. We will find that our longing – our spiritual hunger and thirst – will be filled. Interestingly, one of the words that can be translated as *happy* is a word that is often translated as *blessed*, and it is the word used in the Beatitudes. What I will do is read the Beatitudes once again, but this time I will read them with the word *happy* instead of *blessed*. As we read those words, remember that it is the way that Jesus confirms that hunger and thirst for righteousness and happiness are all tied together, and as we live for righteousness we will indeed be filled – with happiness.

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

Happy are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Happy are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Happy are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

When we care for our souls, when we feed our souls as well as we feed our bodies, we will live a truly blessed – and happy – life.