

Series: Discovering the Heart of Christ

Today: Searching for Righteousness

Text: Matthew 5:6,10

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, March 23, 2008 (Easter Sunday)

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Before we begin the message this morning, I want to add my personal greetings to our members and our visitors alike. Easter Sunday always has the feel of a reunion for me. Families get together here in church for the first time in a long time. Friends join them. We get to see folks we haven't seen for a while, and we love it. We want you to know that if you are visiting with us, you are not only welcome here; we want to be of service if we can. If there is ever anything we can do to help you feel like you are more a part of our community of faith, just let us know. Our contact information is on the inside of the front cover of our bulletin.

If you found it hard to get into the Easter spirit this year, you were not alone. It did come awfully early. My barber, Jack Segro, sent me two stories so as not to break his string of getting mentioned in my Easter Sermon.

First, he wanted me to know that the next time Easter will be this early (March 23) will be the year 2228 (220 years from now). The last time it was this early was 1913 (so if you're 95 or older, you are the only ones that were around for that!). The earliest Easter can be is March 22nd, and the next time it will be will be on March 22nd will be in the year 2285 (277 years from now). The last time it was on March 22 was 1818. So, no one alive today has or will ever see Easter any earlier than it is this year!

After sharing all this information, Jack closed his email by saying, *“This may be the event of your lifetime, but I am skipping this one and sticking around for the one on March 22 in the year 2285.”*

Then, just to be sure I had my Easter opener, he also shared a joke. It is a story about the day that the pastor gave up fishing. It is about a pastor who was an avid fisherman, and one Easter he ran into a dilemma. The beginning of trout season coincided with Easter Sunday. However, since his Easter service wasn't until 11:00 a.m., he figured if he was fishing by sunrise, he could fish for a couple of hours and still get back to the church on time.

So he got up early, put on his long johns, dressed quietly, grabbed the dog, slipped quietly into the garage to hook the boat up to the truck, and proceeded to back out into a torrential downpour. There was snow mixed with the rain, and the wind was blowing 50 mph. He pulled back into the garage, turned on the radio, and discovered that the weather would be bad throughout the day.

So he went back into the house, quietly undressed, and slipped back into bed. There he cuddled up to his wife's back, and whispered, *'The weather out there is terrible!'* His loving wife of twenty years replied, *'I know. Can you believe my stupid husband is out fishing?'*

That is enough of my barber (Jack Segro of Segro's Hairport corner of Queen and Lemon). Let's turn to our scripture this morning. It comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verse 6. *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*

If you have not been with us during Lent, we have been focusing on the theme: *Discovering the Heart of Christ*. It comes from the vision statement which this church adopted about a year ago: *Discovering the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City*. For Lent this year we decided to focus on the things which Jesus said were at the heart of his ministry, and for that we turned to the very first sermon he preached after he had been baptized by John in the river Jordan. You will recall that when he came up out of the water, he went into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, and when he returned from his fasting, he went up on a mountain and he delivered what we know as *The Sermon on the Mount*. In that sermon were the Beatitudes, and as I reminded our congregation last week, those eight verses in the Gospel of Matthew set forth the things which Jesus felt would bring a sense of well-being into the lives of His disciples.

In this series we have learned that each of the beatitudes begins with the word *'blessed'* which can be more closely translated from the Greek as happy. If you want to go a little deeper, since Jesus spoke Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew, if you go to the Hebrew word for blessed, we discovered it means, "Being on the right path." Jesus said those who followed him would be happy when they knew they were totally dependent on God—when they were poor in spirit; when they were grieving the things which kept them separate from God—when they mourn; when they had a right sized opinion of themselves—when they are meek; when we seek mercy instead of judgment—being merciful; and our hearts have been changed from the inside out and we find ourselves looking, thinking and acting as we believe God would look, think and act—when we are pure in heart; and when we seek peace instead of conflict—when we are peacemakers.

Today we finish our series by searching for what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Probably the closest any of us have come to being really hungry or thirsty is when we have had to fast for a 12 hour period before a medical test—nothing to eat or drink—and then have the test postponed until later in the day. For most people in the United States, hunger means being inconvenienced by not eating for 24 hours. However, the people to whom Jesus spoke knew a different kind of hunger. The working person in Palestine made only about 5 cents a day. Even if you make allowances for the differences in purchasing power, I think you can see that food was not in great quantity on the table of the working person. They were never far from real hunger, and many knew the threat of starvation.

I remember vividly our first trip to Kenya in 1999. I had never been exposed to that level of poverty before, and I was shocked by what I saw. One day, as we visited in the homes of the congregation, I remember visiting a single mother with her three children. Her husband had died of aids. There was this darling little boy who was carrying around a ball of corn meal mush which is called “ugali,” and the elder who was walking with me said, *“That is probably all that he will eat today.”* When I asked about the mother, the elder said, *“She has given her portion to her children. She will probably go hungry today.”* When we talk about being hungry, you and I don’t know that level of hunger. We are inconvenienced, but we are not starving.

Thirst was even more of an issue. There were no spigots to turn where fresh water was plentiful. The wells were few and far between in this desert environment. If a

trip was planned, there was always the possibility of a sandstorm and some real danger that a person could die of thirst before they could be rescued.

Again, Kiambaa is my teacher here. There is no running water in the village, and children have to travel as much as two miles to bring home fresh drinking and bathing water. If you are lucky when you visit there, one of the women will let you touch her forehead where you will feel a permanent indentation from the strap she used to carry a 10 gallon supply of water day in and day out without complaint. We simply do not know what it means to do without water as they do in Kiambaa.

When Jesus spoke of hungering and thirsting, these were life and death issues for the people to whom he was addressing. They knew hunger, and they knew thirst at a personal life and death struggle. He says that we will know we are on the right path; or we will find happiness when we seek after righteousness as if it were a life and death issue. Jesus tells his disciples that if they pursue this thing called righteousness, they will find a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives which will bring them fulfillment the likes of which they had never experienced before.

The question remains: What is righteousness? The answer comes at two levels: a right relationship with God and a right relationship with the world.

A Right Relationship with God

In the time of Jesus the prevailing standard of righteousness had become rather superficial. Religious life was measured by the number of times you were in church, the size of your contribution, and your adherence to certain rules, precepts and traditions. A person's right relationship with God was all measured by appearances. Someone could engage in a variety of questionable behaviors six days a week, and as long as he was in

the synagogue on the Sabbath, paid his tithe, and observed the Ten Commandments, he was considered a righteous man. To be well-thought-of was more highly prized than being rich.

The resurrection of Jesus changed all that. Righteousness isn't about looking good on the outside. It is understanding that we have been restored into a right relationship with God through God's power, not our own. There is nothing we could have done to restore the broken relationship with God going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. If there was to be a relationship, it had to be through the unilateral and unconditional action of God. It is a gift, and the only thing we can do with a gift is to respond to it with gratitude.

Now don't get me wrong. I have nothing against regular church attendance. I surely don't want to discourage anyone's generosity, and I would not for a moment suggest that you should forget about the Ten Commandments. I just want you to know that as important as these things may be, they will not earn you a place in heaven.

Dr. Oliver Sacks tells the story about a man named Virgil, who had been blind from early childhood. When he was 50, Virgil underwent surgery and was given the gift of sight. But as he and Dr. Sacks found out, having the physical capacity for sight is not the same as seeing. Virgil's first experiences with sight were confusing. He was able to make out colors and movements, but arranging them into a coherent picture was more difficult. Over time he learned to identify various objects, but his habits and his behaviors were still those of a blind man. Dr. Sacks asserts, "*One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person. It is the interim, the limbo that is so terrible.*" [Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (Vintage, 1996)]

The same is true for the Christian. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our relationship with God has been restored. However, learning how to live in that new relationship is not easy. It requires us to change from within; to accept that we don't have to prove ourselves to be loved by God; to realize that life is meant to be lived out of gratitude and not out of obligation. We are led to relax and enjoy the presence of God rather than constantly work for God's approval.

A Right Relationship with the World

The Greek word for righteousness is about more than just an individual relationship. The word which Matthew uses implies that what God has done for the individual, God has also done for the rest of the world. God's love is inclusive, not exclusive. God is constantly reaching out to draw more people into a life changing relationship, and God is calling us to do the same.

The words in the original Greek mean we are blessed when we want everyone in the world to be introduced to a right relationship with God. So when we see a world where poverty and injustice are the norm, we are called by God to do everything in our power to address these issues so that there is room at the table for all people, and when we are willing to do whatever it takes to welcome the prodigals home and remind them of God's gracious love for all of humankind.

William Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and now a United Methodist Bishop in Alabama, tells the story of his friend, Clayton's fourth birthday. Because four years old is a special age, his mother told him he could have whatever kind of birthday party he wanted. Clayton said, *"I want a party where everyone there will be kings and queens."*

His mother started to work, creating a score of gold paper crowns, royal blue crepe paper robes with gold lining, and scepters made from coat hangers and cardboard. Then the afternoon of the party came.

As the guests arrived, they were all delighted to receive royal crowns, and robes, and scepters. Everyone at the party was either a king or a queen. And everyone had a good time at the party. They had a majestic procession up to the end of the block and back with everyone looking and acting as if they really were a king or a queen. They all looked the part, and they behaved accordingly in a most regal manner.

That night, when the guests had all gone home, when the cake and ice cream had been put away, and Clayton was being tucked in his bed by his mother, he said, *“I wish everyone in the whole world could be a king or a queen—not just on my birthday, but everyday. That everyone would know what it meant to live like that.”*

The good news for Clayton and for us is this: 2000 years ago when the disciples had lost all hope, God was still at work in the borrowed tomb where the body of Jesus lay. God raised him from the dead so that we might achieve a right relationship with him. We who were nobodies became somebodies, and if we really believed that the power of God is strong enough to restore us to a right relationship with God and challenge us to live in a right relationship with others, can you imagine how that might change your life and the life of the world in which we live?