

*42:1-9)Matthew 5:6*

There is a story about the ancient philosopher Plato. Two young men approached him in the street in Athens, and pleaded with him to become his students. Plato queried them about why, and they said they wanted to learn from him “truth.” “*Truth,*” he replied, “*and how much do you want to know the truth?*” They just sort of blinked at him. At that moment, they were walking past a water trough for horses. Plato grabbed both of the young men by the back of their necks and plunged their heads into the water. He held them down for a few seconds, their arms and legs flailing. Then he let go. Up they came, coughing, choking, and trying to get their breath. Finally one of them blurted out, “*Why did you do that?*” Plato said to them, “*When you want to know the truth as much as you want to breathe, I’ll take you as my students.*”

So we hear this beatitude and we assume what it means. Of them all, it has such a religious sound to it. Let me suggest we have it wrong. The key to understanding it lies in the word, “righteousness.” Just as the word meek in the previous beatitude is something we have to rightly understand as meaning “humble, gentle, or controlled” (and not at all weak), the word righteousness here doesn’t quite say clearly to us what it means. Because we’ve learned a Christianity that is so individualistic and self-focused, we think Jesus speaks of yearning or “hungering, thirsting” for personal righteousness--as a virtue which the individual Christian possesses. But that kind of understanding means our own self-righteousness in relation to God. That is not what Jesus is talking about. Here Jesus calls “blessed” those who long not their own righteousness but God’s righteousness, something outside of themselves. And they yearn for it as their life

depended on it, like their next breath depended on it. But what is God's righteousness mean here?

C. S. Lewis describes what began when Jesus came into the world: *"Enemy-occupied territory--that is what the world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed in disguise [as a human being], and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage."*--(*Mere Christianity*, p. 51). Christian Faith declares that Jesus came into the world to win back the rule wrested from God by human and supra-human rebellion and disobedience. How did God do this? God did this by sending Jesus as a righteous counter-revolutionary subversive to wage war against the unrighteous occupiers. With that counter-revolutionary subversive comes his invading kingdom justice for the world, and that is the righteousness Jesus is talking about here.

So, when Jesus says, *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied,"* he declares that God will fulfill the hope of those who long for God's invading kingdom-righteousness/justice, the vindication of right, and of those who participate in that kingdom righteousness in Jesus. Jesus is that counter-revolutionary subversive. So, if we see that, ask yourself: Do I yearn for that righteousness? Is that where my operating hope lies? For hope of the world is God's righteous kingdom and its full blessed effects for the whole world. In Jesus, God promises to satisfy that hope, that yearning, to the fullest.

Maybe you think I am just being colorful or imaginative in saying it this way. But neither C. S. Lewis nor I am kidding. Most importantly, neither was Jesus. When Jesus gives this beatitude with its hope of God's righteousness, he has mind Isaiah 61, which rejoices three times that God is bringing his righteousness to and for the world:

*“The Lord God will cause righteousness...to spring up before all the nations,” (vs.11).*

Or as in Isaiah 42 (1-6): *“Behold my servant...I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations...He will not fail until he has established justice in the earth.”*

It may be that only those who have really experienced injustice, discrimination, or exclusion from a community of which they want to be a part, or should rightfully--justly--be a part--can fully experience what Jesus is speaking to here. But when you read the gospels and see who flocked to him--the poor, the sick, the excluded for religious or social reasons, tax collectors (seen as traitors to their own people) and “sinners” (that is, prostitutes and anyone else who was morally inferior in the eyes of the social-religious powers that be)--then you can begin to feel something of what this beatitude is speaking to. Jesus’ form of justice that focuses on deliverance from legitimate need, material or spiritual. In other words, this righteousness people are yearning for is restorative justice. Those who *“hunger and thirst for righteousness”* are those who yearn for, pray for, act for God’s restorative justice--the restorative justice of the counter-revolutionary subversive campaign of Jesus Christ for the world. For Jesus really was a counter-revolutionary to us and to the world, and was so regarded by some in his time. Rightfully so.

You see, in the time of Jesus, the hills above the Sea of Galilee were often hang-outs for Jewish militants--those Jewish revolutionaries who fought against the Romans. They hoped that with victory, they would establish God’s Kingdom by force. That’s how they saw it, the Romans out and God’s just kingdom in. Their enemies would be condemned and God would vindicate them as his righteous, victorious warriors.

Up in the Galilean hills were caves, and in the generation before Jesus, some of those Jewish militants had been smoked out, brought down, and then executed by King Herod the Great.

Now also among those hills, there was and is what is called--the Mount of the Beatitudes, the traditional site where Jesus preached the very words we are considering. Now why did Jesus go up there to instruct his followers? And, for that matter, why did they follow him up into the hills? What was it about his message that made them lay aside fishnets, tools, and other occupations and set off after him? What kind of a movement did they think Jesus was leading? What were they getting involved in?

I'm afraid that to hear the Sermon on the Mount as we're used to hearing it, you'd think it basically consisted of Jesus just telling people to be nice to each other! There are certainly powerful elements of compassion and kindness expressed to be sure, which went far beyond being nice. But if just being nice--even really, really nice!--is all it's about, do you really need to farewell your livelihood and family, and go hauling up into the mountains to learn that? Would that kind of teaching really have called those men away from what they were doing? And again, to hear this teaching as we often have, the popular image--the Sunday school image, I'm sorry to say--you'd think the only thing Jesus was talking about was how to go to heaven when they die. And, if you read this Jesus-agenda sermon closely, there is virtually nothing of that in it at all!

So what is it about? Well, what we tamely name the Sermon on the Mount looked in actuality more like a political rally. Jesus' "*Kingdom of God*" talk was not merely religious talk. It was very much political talk. It's about rearranging the world and its power, our world as-we-know-it and its power players. Jesus came across very

much like someone drumming up support for a new movement, a cause, yes, even a revolution. He called those listening--and the disciples--to quite simply become a new way--a revolutionary way, a counter-subversive way of being God's People in and for the world. When he spoke, he drew upon the ancient Jewish traditions and ideas--to be the children of Abraham, the called people of God by whom and through whom God was going to bless and right the world. As Israel had been called "*the light of the world,*" "*the salt of the earth,*" and the "*city set on a hill,*" so Jesus addressed his listeners. He was saying, "*Follow me, and we can make it hap-pen! Follow me, and you will be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and the city on a hill that can't be hidden, the city, the people, who are there for the benefit of the whole world.*"

You see, Jesus was really doing something new. He was clearly unsatisfied with his own people and how they were trying to be the light, the salt, and the city. Clearly with him, it was going to be different than what they expected. His way Jesus was going to be very different from any other Jewish movement of that time or any time. The way Jesus was going to do it--and have his followers do it--was not going to be the way of the militant revolutionaries. It wasn't going to be the way of the self-righteous Pharisees. It wasn't going to be the reasonable and expected way of even the average religious person--then or now. But when Jesus starts to give his agenda--his policy speech--he starts by blessing that is by pronouncing God's blessing--on whose side God is! And to the ears of his hearers, then and now, he declares blessed all the "wrong people"--the poor, the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. That should strange even to us. How can you possibly have a revolution, radical change and restoration, over injustice and oppression in this

as-it-is world, if those are the favored ones to lead it?

Yet, that is exactly what Jesus is saying--that when the real revolution--God's Revolution--arrives, it won't be what is expected. It will be shocking to some, disappointing to others, just plain crazy to any reasonable person. In fact, it will appear too many of his own people as traitorous. It's not a nice, benign Sunday school message that got Jesus--and many of his followers then and now--killed. Maybe Jesus' mother had taught him some of the words she herself sang about his coming: "*God has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent empty away,*" (Lk 1: 53). Yes, Jesus' message is a radical message, still, a dangerous message. If you don't get that, you really don't get it!

But it is an exciting, while deeply subversive, and revolutionary message. It's the kind of message that makes one pray fervently, "*God, make me like Joe!*" It's a kind of message that gives strength and courage to throw your arm around someone very different from yourself--at least in some ways--and say, "*I need for people to know who I am.*" And not for one's own sake itself, but for righteousness' sake. It's the kind of message that just doesn't leave one to mourn over the problems around us, but has the drive and creativity to change the conditions that make for the world's unrighteousness. It's a kind of message that not only prays, "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven,*" but bears witness by faith and works to the well-being of all. Martin Luther commented that no true Christian can love one's neighbors and then turn aside from their sufferings.

But there's often a sticking point for many Christians in this regard. The Rev'd William Sloane Coffin--a Presbyterian minister's son and himself a minister--observed

that public good does not necessarily follow from private virtue. A persons' moral character in and of itself is insufficient to serve the cause of justice. He noted it takes great courage to challenge the status quo and speak truth to power. Real Christian virtue is bound to the pursuit of righteousness--the well-being and life-enhancement of all persons. It's committed to a God'-given dignity to all people and so addresses itself to the causes of all forms of unrighteousness and injustice in our midst. Without this quality, our religion fails and falls under the judgment of God. Our calling to participate in God's righteousness for the world--for which we should "hunger and thirst"--involves both acts of private charity and social justice.

A story illustrates the differences: Once there was a town built just beyond the bend of a large river. Once day some of the children from the town were playing beside the river when they noticed three floating in the water. They ran for help and the townsfolk quickly pulled the bodies out of the water. One person was dead, so they buried that one. One was alive, but very sick, so they go that person to a doctor. The third turn out to be a healthy child, who they placed with a family that care for the child and took the child to school.

From that day forward, a number of bodies came floating down the river, and every day, the good people of the town would pull them out, and tend to them as just described. This went on for years. The townsfolk came to expect a number of bodies each week and they developed more effective ways of retrieving and tending to them. Some even gave up their regular jobs to devote themselves fulltime to the work. How-ever, during all those years and despite the generosity and ingenuity the townsfolk came to exercise, no one ever thought to go up the river, beyond the bend that hid from

their site what was further upstream, and find out why all those bodies kept floating down the river.

Herein is the difference between private charity and social justice, between doing acts of mercy and confronting systems of injustice or wrong--be it social, economic, or cultural. Private charity responds to the needs of those suffering hunger, poverty, homelessness or injury, but social justice tries to get at the reasons why there are those who hunger, are poor, homeless, and suffer injustice. While charity is about giving a hungry person some bread, social justice is about trying to change the system so that no one has excess bread, while some have none. Charity is about helping victims of war, while social justice is about peacemaking and eliminating the conditions that lead to war. God's Kingdom justice for the world--righteousness--you see, be it social, racial, gender, economic--is at the core of the kingdom of God.

Because the kingdom of God challenges and will ultimately replace the kingdoms of this world of which we are a part--kingdoms that deprive people of justice as it ought to be. Social inertia--"the way it's always been"--as well as the "powers that be" often work to stifle the efforts of Christ's kingdom when Christ's people are doing as their master. And so we must ask ourselves, do we settle for the status quo or will we seek to live the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus? Those who love the kingdom will both seek and pursue righteousness/justice in all its dimensions. Those who yearn, who long for the presence of God's righteousness, will demonstrate that they belong to the God who promises it, until that Day arrives, when as John says in Revelation, the saints will *"hunger no more, neither shall they thirst anymore,"* (7:16-17).

As C. S. Lewis said, *"Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed*



*in disguise [as a human being], and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”* Jesus calls us to demonstrate to the world we are part of that great campaign of God for the world. The apostle Paul says, “*For our sake, God made [Christ] to be sin...so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,*” (2 Cor 5:21), that we--the Church--become God’s agents for justice of God to the world. Without “*the hunger and thirst for righteousness,*” the church is not the church. For Jesus envisions the church to be an outpost for God’s kingdom on earth until his complete kingdom comes. Till then, we live by his sure word: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*” How hungry, how thirsty are we? Are you? Amen.