

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News for Those Who Thirst for Justice and Righteousness
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October 11, 2020

Jeremiah 22:1-5; Matthew 5:6

In February this church sent me to Kenya to meet with our mission partners and learn about their lives, and the mission projects we were working on together. While I was there a friend of mine sent a video to me of one of their pastors who just happened to also be in Kenya at the same time. He had made a short video about a “God moment” he had in the county.

In the video, he explains that his morning reading from scripture was God telling the Israelites not to worry about where their food would come from and that God would provide manna for them to eat. As he read the passage he sensed God asking him to trust that God would provide food for him that day. So he decided to not worry about buying food, he would wait for God to provide.

As his day progresses he gets hungrier and hungrier until he is slumped over on a bench hungry and exhausted. As he sits there he recounts that someone came up to him, and offered him a bag of chips. God had provided!

Now I understand what this person’s intentions were but the white privilege of the video hit me very hard especially because at the time I was living in the same context he was doing this “food experiment” in.

The first issue is the audacity that he would think this one day would teach him about depending on God for food. Instead of testing God, he could have found someone to visit in Kenya that could tell their story about what it was like to trust that God would provide food for them.

The second issue, actually the minute he said he was going to try to go hungry in Kenya, I laughed out loud because I have never been fed so much food in my life. Kenyans take hospitality so seriously. If you are white and in Kenya it is obvious you are a visitor and thus in need of hospitality. Every single place we went to we were given at least a bottle of water and a piece of fruit. Most places had prepared a full celebratory meal for us of meat and veggies and fruit and rice and dessert. When I say every place, I mean every place! If we were in one house then went next door to the next one they would offer us more water and more food. And we always ate it because we did not want to show favorites, and the fruit is the best in the world there. The idea that a Kenyan would let a visitor be anything except bursting full is ridiculous. For two and a half weeks I was constantly full and was getting sores in my mouth from all the beautiful pineapple they kept gifting to me. I have never been more taken care of when it comes to thirst and hunger.

These two impulses, thirst and hunger, are wired inside of us and every living thing. They are early warning signs that the intricate creation that is our bodies need something. Plants thirst and we can see them slump over and shrivel as they conserve the water that is left in them. Plants reach for the sun to gain access to their food source. We know animals are more dangerous when they are hungry, and even well-fed lions can be docile.

When God’s creation has pangs of hunger and thirst, those become the most important urges to have satisfied. Studies have shown that kids who go the whole weekend with little to no food do not perform as well in school on Monday as they do on Wednesday after two days of school meals. This is because when our bodies hunger and thirst all other non-essential functions begin to shut down to conserve energy. We go into survival mode. Our ability to think weakens and our capacity for handling stress diminishes. This is such a phenomenon in our culture we even have created a new word, hangry when your hunger makes it harder to choose kindness and anger takes over.

Hunger and thirst are pains that come from inside of us, telling us we need something to survive. The things we hunger and thirst for are so vital to our survival that everything else can wait so we can focus on meeting the need and living another day.

We don't start out knowing how to express our needs or how to get food and water for ourselves. Babies have no clue how to find and prepare food and water nor do they truly understand the pains they are feeling. When a baby is hungry or thirsty they scream and throw tantrums until those who are tasked to take care of them come to help.

Children can ask for food and water a little better but they do not fully understand the cause of their hunger and thirst. They suddenly become very hungry or very thirsty. They often need someone else who is more mature to take the lead and notice how they are acting and ask "do you need a snack?" This outside input teaches kids how to notice what their body is telling them. As they grow up they become better at knowing what it feels like to be hungry and thirsty and can begin to meet those needs for themselves.

This understanding improves into adulthood where we are so in tune with the feeling of hunger and thirst they can sense the slightest signal that there is an imbalance. We can feel our mouths getting dry and seek out water before we get into a danger zone. When our heads get light or tiredness sets in, we consider whether some food could help fix the problem.

Now just about 100% of us have the privilege of food in our homes and clean water in our taps. So when we are hungry or thirsty it is simply a matter of hours before that need is met. But there are many in the world that for them those early signals of hunger and thirst mean a deadly clock has started ticking. They understand this scripture better than we ever will, but even we can appreciate what Jesus is telling us about righteousness.

Righteousness is one of those words we need to understand as Christians because it is all over scripture. It is used over 407 times in the Bible, so we don't want to skim past it. The process of learning what a word means can take a few different paths. One way is by following the progression of that word backward through time to its origin. In reverse, we see how the word evolved, and all the different meanings it has collected and carried back into our time. Another important thing to consider is how people used the word at the moment it was written, or how the person who spoke it would have understood the meaning.

For example, the greeting "hi" is so ubiquitous in our language today we say it without even thinking about what it means. But, when I was in Minnesota a few years ago, I got in trouble using "hi" in the way we do here in Michigan. Here "hi" is less of an official greeting and more of an acknowledgment of someone. We say hi to strangers as we pass by simply to be polite. In Minnesota however, it means "I would like to have a full conversation with you." They are so nice there, at least the people I met, they were thrilled to stop what they were doing and talk simply with the initiation of "hi." When all I meant was I am not a rude person and will acknowledge I see you. Words can mean very different things in different parts of the world.

"Hi" also has an origin we can trace. "Hi" is derived from the longer word "hello" which is only 150 years old. In the late 1800's it was exclusively used when one was surprised or trying to get someone's attention. It gained popularity when telephones were invented as the appropriate way to greet someone on the phone. Which was, at the time, a surprising interaction. "Hello" grew out of the word "hail" which held a meaning of wishing wholeness or health on the person because Hail (h a i l) was derived from the word Hale (h a l e) which is also the root for the word "health." SO we can see how words evolve and relate to one another to add deeper meaning when we take the time to understand them.

When it comes to the word righteousness, Jesus uses the Greek word dikaios (dik'-ah-yos) which would have been understood to refer to someone being correct or by implication innocent. If someone was dikaios, they were a righteous person to the point that if someone said they were guilty, everyone who knew them would know that was a lie because at their core they always acted and spoke correctly. But Jesus' understanding of

righteousness was fuller than simply being a good person. He knew the history of this word, especially the way God had used the word in scripture.

The word *dikaiois* is a word that describes a person who does *dike* (dee-kay) which is right or just or self-evident. *Dike* was a term used by the justice system of the time to mean the correct verdict. Whether the court declared someone guilty or innocent people would say it was *dike*, the right, or self-evident verdict. It also could be applied to the sentence that was given. The sentence of life in prison could be *dike*, the right sentence for the crime. When *dike* is translated into English we use the word *justice* most often. The right, self-evident, and correct verdict and sentence.

But we can go deeper, *dike* comes from a Hebrew word *tsedeq* (tz-eh-dik). *Tsedeq* in English is translated as righteousness or *Justice*. The contextual usage of this word in scripture will help us understand what this word meant to the second temple Jewish community, aka what it meant to Jesus.

In Levitical law, it is used to denote fairness. When selling goods you have fair scales, *tsedeq* scales. When you negotiate with a neighbor you are supposed to be *tsedeq*, fair. In Deuteronomy, it is a legal term for a judge making *tsedeq* decisions, just verdicts, and sentences. We can see the link to the Greek evolution here. Job constantly asks God what is right and just, *tsedeq*, and calls God out for things he sees as not *tsedeq*. Psalms exclusively use the word to describe God, God is the one who is truly and always *tsedeq*. The prophets call God's people back to their original purpose to be *tsedeq* people. Since God is perfectly *tsedeq* and humanity is made in God's image and tasked with enacting God's will in this world the people are supposed to be righteous, to do justice, to be *tsedeq*.

People who put aside their own bias and passions and want to seek first that which is right and fair and correct in God's eyes. *Tsedeq* is our God-given purpose.

That is how Jesus would have understood righteousness. It is not just about being good innocent people, it is a purpose given to us by God and our responsibility to make it happen. It is such a part of who we are created to be we yearn for it the way we yearn for food and water. It is just as essential to our survival. All other functions fade away as we search for righteousness. For correct verdict and sentence, for fair transactions.

Just like with hunger and thirst, we have to learn how to notice our pains for righteousness and learn how to get that need met.

When we are just starting, our pain for righteousness will cause us to scream and throw tantrums like babies needing food and water. At first, we have no clue how to get righteousness. We just know we need it. We rely on others, those who have the power to get what we need, to offer us righteousness. We have seen people in our world in this stage of development. They know something is not righteous; they can feel it from within. Something is not fair or correct according to God, so they riot and loot and cause destruction. These are the tantrums of people feeling a new yearning from within them and not yet able to satisfy the need. Every moment their need for righteousness is not met by those who are supposed to be taking care of them, their screams get louder.

Eventually, we get to a stage where we can feel our yearning for righteousness, and instead of tantrums, we can express what we need to those who can help us. Riots become protests. Screams become phone calls to those in power. But we are still immature and only take action when we are very hungry. We don't always anticipate the need for a snack. When something unjust happens, our pain quickly intensifies and we are again seeking a way to satisfy our inward yearning.

Eventually, we are mature enough to feel the small pains before the overwhelming hunger. We notice microaggressions when people say things like "you people." We notice the tone in jokes. We can wonder why an industry hires mostly men, or why a disease is killing more of one community than another. The hunger and

thirst for righteousness is so fine-tuned the slightest pain can call us into action. We organize for our community to experience righteousness. We say something when witnessing unrighteousness. We run for office and take on leadership roles in the systems that need to operate with more righteousness.

We are all somewhere in this development of understanding our God-given yearning for righteousness. This beatitude gives us the encouragement we need to continue developing and fine-tuning our sense of righteousness and our ability to meet the need because those who hunger and thirst will be satisfied. Those who yearn for righteousness as they yearn for food and water will be satisfied. They will be nourished to the point of being full. Be assured, God is making a world where righteousness is handed out like water and fruit in Kenya. It will be given at every stop we make. Every person we meet will offer us more righteousness. We will be satisfied.

It hurts now, I know. But there is wonderful news for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.