

We do not like hungering do we? It is at this time of year, every year, that I am scrambling to daily pick the ripe raspberries, glean the Saskatoon berries, de-pit the scrumptious sour cherry, blanch the greens, cull the ripe cucumbers and on and on. Why? Because we do not want to hunger come this winter or spring. That, and we like knowing where our food comes from; it connects us to the land. Yet we hear in this Beatitude that those who hunger and thirst will be blessed. With such counsel I am seriously tempted to forgo all my foraging activities.

Granted, Matthew expands this Beatitude slightly from Luke's version which simply states "blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled" (Lk 6:21). I alluded to Matthew's expansion of Luke's list several weeks back, and here we have it again. This invites us into a consideration of the unique perspective found in Matthew's gospel.

It is very likely the churches for which Matthew wrote were relatively wealthy. In comparison to other gospels which make reference to small denomination copper coins, Matthew replaces these to references of gold and larger denomination coins (Mark 6:8 // Matt 10:9; Luke 19:11-27 // Matt 25:14-30). Stories are told of high finances (e.g. 18:23-35) and lavish dinner parties (22:1-14). "Matthew specifically adds to Mark the fact that Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Jesus, was both a disciple and a wealthy man (27:57)." And pertinent for a beatitude study, the "poor" and "hungry", cited in Luke's listing of the Beatitudes become the "poor in spirit" and those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:3,6 // Luke 6:20-21).<sup>1</sup> This insight is pertinent for our congregation because we are relatively wealthy, especially compared to most Christians in the world. The teaching Jesus offers in the Sermon on the Mount is for us! Matthew believes we wealthy folk, with the Spirit's aid, can live into the challenging material we find in chapter 5.

With a few exceptions, hunger for us is largely voluntary. Most of us are not choosing between buying produce and paying the rent. Most of us garden out of a place of privilege—if the carrots do not germinate (as happened to me) we simply buy our carrots from a farmer with better skill, seed, or luck. People of this congregation typically only hunger when we voluntarily do so: health awareness, medical procedures, and spiritual intent being the most likely reasons we find ourselves hungering. It was only a chapter ago, a few scant verses in fact, that Jesus himself voluntarily chose to hunger.

At his baptism Jesus sees the heavens opened, experiences the Spirit of God descend upon him, and hears a voice affirming his beloved status in the heart of God. Jesus is dearly loved by God. With such status conferred upon him, Jesus willingly enters the wilderness and fasts. He "is famished" the NRSV translates (4:2). The word used for his hungering, though, is no different than that which we find in Beatitude #4. Jesus hungered. What exactly was Jesus hungry for?; righteousness perhaps? This is an intriguing episode, particularly for we wealthy folk.

Fist, Jesus chose to hunger even though he had been acknowledged and honoured as the Son of God. People of privilege rarely subject themselves to such bodily deprivation. Secondly, I find it intriguing that Jesus links his physical hungering with a deeper spiritual hunger which we find in the Beatitudes—a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who attend to righteous hunger, Matthew affirms in both passages, will be satisfied (4:13, 5:5). Naturally, these are not the only two occasions hunger appears in Matthew's text.

In chapter 12 the disciples of Jesus are hungering on the Sabbath (perhaps a lame sermon in the local synagogue), and Jesus permits them to graze to satiate their hunger; the Pharisees do

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<sup>1</sup> Boring, 104-105.

not like it but Jesus states that the feeding of hungry souls is more important than Sabbath regulation (12:1-8). In chapter 21 Jesus again hungered, and a fig tree (a symbol of the Temple) was there, but no fruit was found to relieve his hunger—his hunger for righteousness are textual study would suggest (21:18). Temple ritual and sacrifices, we read through the narrative have left Jesus wanting; he hungers and thirsts for rightness, for righteousness. Then there are those epic verses in chapter 25 which detail the fate of the sheep and goats: if you have tended to the hungry and thirsty (note the parallel with our Beatitude of the day), you will do well; if you have neglected the hungry and thirsty, tough times await (Matt 25:31-46). In this parable of the sheep and goats we again here ringing of the righteousness bell sounding out in beatitude #4: those who have acted righteously go away into eternal life.

Righteousness. What makes for righteousness or a righteous person? In the prophetic tradition spiritual hunger and fasting are not merely about personal piety; they are social and systemic. Isaiah 58 speaks directly to this point. If we choose to hunger, what are we hungering for? If we thirst, what are we thirsting for? It is powerful to consider linking our physical actions with our spiritual intentions. With that statement, I offer Zach Janzen a chance to speak about his experience of fasting.

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This is pretty good timing for me for the beatitudes to come around as a sermon topic. For years now, I have looked into the thought of fasting just for the sake of fasting, try it out and see what happens. Back in March, I had decided to go for 10 days as a trial run into this whole thing. That first run went well, but then recently I decided to take it all a step further. I went 25 days with nothing but water and green tea to keep me going. As it stands, it really is not that hard. The hard part of it all is the first 3 or so days. In this time, there are a lot of things I had time to reflect on and see in a new light.

I set out on this goal of fasting for a couple reasons. Number 1, was for my own scientific curiosity in what my body would be able to do, and the following peace of mind that comes with that knowledge. Second is to find some understanding in what teachers of our past have gone through. Finally, I came to find a new appreciation for the word need.

All in all, fasting is nothing new, it is something not just in use for us. From my research, there are plenty of philosophers and scholars alike that have done this practice. We have Jesus, for example, who fasted for 40 days. Another well known example is that of Gandhi who in his life did 3 different sets of 3 week fasts, being in 1924, 1933 and 1943, among other shorter fasts. Beyond that, it is wide spread through multiple religions, with the easiest example still in use today being Ramadan. It is something that can be immensely rewarding.

There is a general rule of 3's of what the body can survive under duress: 3 minutes without air, 3 hours without shelter in harsh environments, 3 days without water, and 3 weeks without food. I will be focusing on this last part. Fasting has shaped my understanding of "needs" and "wants".

With my new-found experiential knowledge I know I can go extended times without food, day by day. I no longer NEED food. I will surely need it eventually, but I stop myself from saying "I'm pretty hungry right now, I need food". What I am more likely in NEED of at that point is just some water, but I want that extra flavour and satisfaction that comes from the food. It goes the same for material needs. There are rare times when we truly need something when we purchase it for a "want" of it. When it all comes down to it, that feeling of hunger might not be what you think it is. Now when we speak on the note of our spiritual hunger, that

can come from all sorts of things. Our spiritual hunger might come from large injustices in the world that cannot quite be met by us, whether it's because of our lack of drive to do so or our inability to actually change the situation at that time. It could also come from us just being in a spiritual rut or low point, trying to get that pick-me-up. We are hungering to feel or see that righteousness be apart of our lives once again. We yearn for it, or hunger for it. It is something that at the time, we feel we may not need, but we will eventually. If we are to seek out righteousness in our lives, like we seek out that quick bite to eat when we are feeling a little peckish, then there is so much more that we can always fill ourselves up on.

During this fast, I realized something when it came to cooking and baking. It was not something that I needed to do for the sake of consuming the finished product (or eating it mid way), but just the act of doing so because its something I love to do. I translated this love into cooking while fasting into cooking for others and sitting by as they ate. I also did this for a recent potluck, where I baked a dozen or so muffins and just sat in the company of others to enjoy conversation. It wasn't until later that I realized how much this must have happened in the past during times of famine or depression. I know without a doubt, I would have been one of those parents that skipped a meal to make sure their children had the extra meal to eat. It would have been points of sacrifice for others. Moving this, again, to the point of hungering for righteousness is to have that same level of love for another and striving to help each other obtain their need to be filled.

All in all, fasting is nothing new to this world, it is just something not in use for us. With all the time spent on food in our lives, you find yourself with a lot of free time without it. As Mennonites, we spend our fair share of time with food. We meet around food, celebrate with food, tell stories over food and mourn over food. By no means are we the only ones that do that, but it is something that is a proud part of our heritage.

I am reminded of Matthew 4:4 where Jesus answered "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" There is immense joy that comes to us all when food brings us together. Let us strive to have the spirit of righteousness to do the same in bringing us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us continue to make the time to be satiated by the Spirit.

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We are now to the discipleship part of the sermon: considerations of what it might mean for us to hunger and thirst for righteousness. As Zach mentioned, our branch of Christianity has not regularly practiced intentional hungering or thirsting, or at least I am not aware of these disciplines in the last 500 years. Still, fasting / hungering is part of the biblical tradition and the wisdom of other faith traditions. The biblical and extra-canonical sources I have read do not help me in knowing how to do this hungering thing well. So, I set out on an experiment.

I believe one of the best ways we learn is by doing. As part of Zach's longer fast I choose to go four days without eating; sort of. There were moments or two where I mindlessly plucked a rip Saskatoon from a tree along the river or snapped up a kale leaf into my mouth (AND GLORIOUS THEY WERE) only to realize a moment later—Oh, I am fasting. Daily I would meet with Zach to talk through the spiritual and physical responses I / we were having. Meeting with another person was important to gain support as well as normalize my experiences. When we hunger, it is good to do so in the company of others and others who know the landscape.

Fasting (voluntary hungering), however, is not for everyone. If you are a person who has medication which needs to be taken regularly with food, this kind of fast is not for you. If you are a person who has struggled with body image or been afflicted with eating disorders, this kind of fast is not for you. If you are a person in the midst of one of life's transitions (pregnancy, adolescences, the aged), this kind of fast may not be for you. The beauty of Matthew's gospel is that the hungering and thirsting here are not just physical hungering; it is hungering for righteousness. And this is something in which we all can participate.

For the sake of the environment, we could choose a fast from plastic. The production and disposal of plastics in our world has a seriously negative impact upon creation and creatures. We could use reusable cloth bags when shopping. We could buy bulk products using containers we have. We could bring our own mugs and glasses to the coffee and juice shops. And when we forget them, maybe we put aside our intended purchase. We think we need the product for which we have shopped, but do we? One of the questions I chose to ask myself during my fast was this: for what, Patrick, are you hungering? If it was not a righteous hunger I could let it go; food was actually not that important for me given the length of the fast. Is that for which we are shopping so important that we need to have it now?? As Zach noted, we have problems when our wants become our needs.

We could fast from a particular form of culinary consumption which has adverse affects on society or creation itself. We could, for example, fast from meat once a week. Patty declared this past Sunday that we would not have meat on Monday. Why she made this declaration I do not know, but the mandate went out. Fine, I thought. I have fasted from all edibles, a meatless Monday should be no problem. For lunch I had delicious new potatoes and onions; for supper I had broccoli cheese wraps; for snack I had Saskatoon berries and yoghurt. No problem. Some people avoid meat altogether, and I understand their fast. As much as I like my farmer's sausage maybe we could all do with a bit less meat. By way of another example I mention "Sober September" which is the parallel of "dry January"<sup>2</sup>. Based on the statistics, more than a few of us can benefit from a reduced intake of alcohol. The contribution of alcohol to social and domestic problems has been well documented. If we found ourselves fasting, and craving a drink, and then translated that into prayer, maybe the world might actually be slightly better.

To this point the examples I have offered are more personal. Historically, hungering and thirsting are not solitary endeavors. We are meant to do these things not alone, but rather in community. In this respect we might consider having a Nutana Park Mennonite Church Lenten fast group. Bring the fast of your choosing. Describe it to the group. Describe how it relates with hungering or thirsting for justice. We could share week by week how it is going. We could break fast together. Perhaps our individual fasts for righteousness might further enable this congregation to be a beacon of righteousness. Perhaps.

I began this sermon with the suggestion that we do not like hungering. It is true. And yet hungering teaches us important things. Imitating Jesus in his hunger we learn something of the difference between needs and wants. Imitating Jesus and other spiritual leaders we learn something of reliance upon the Divine as our strength wanes. Imitating Jesus we can allow our God crafted bodies to hit re-set. May we be protected from the hungers that break down society and communities. May we be blessed with a hunger for those things which bring hope, renewal, and justice. May we learn to link our physical world with our spiritual intentions. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.livestrong.com/article/13714773-sober-september-why-giving-up-alcohol-in-the-fall-is-a-thing/>