

“To Thirst for Righteousness”

Matthew 5:1-12

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January 29, 2017

South Glastonbury
Connecticut

When I’m driving from here to Middlesex, New Jersey to see granddaughter, Nella, I want to know I am on the right highway. Don’t want to end up in Hoboken. When I am hiking on the Appalachian Trail, I want to know I am following the right blazes. Don’t want to end up in Omaha. When I am on a spiritual journey, I want to know I am on the right path. Don’t want to end up in a place of utter confusion. To thirst for righteousness is to have a craving for a path that leads to being in a right relationship with God, with the planet, and with the neighbor. Relationships can get messy. When I am doing the daily crossword puzzle, my eye usually wonders over to the Ask Ann column where we get to read just how messy relationships can become.

To be in a right relationship with God, with the planet, and with one’s neighbors begins with the thirsting. As one stranded on a desert island thirsts for water, as one stranded in the dormitory thirsts for a date to the prom; it is in the thirsting for a right relationship that the spiritual journey begins.

To pursue a right relationship with God is to set aside time for prayer. Martin Luther is said to have awoken one morning, realized how totally packed his day was with matters of supreme importance, from morning until late at night, and said to himself, “I can’t possibly pray for less than two hours.” For Martin Luther, prayer wasn’t a luxury; it was a necessity. We often say that relationships are sustained by good communication. Realtors say, “Location, location, location.” Family counselors say, “Communication, communication, communication.”

To pray is to be in communication with God. We talk; we listen. We talk some more. We listen some more. To pray is to build a right relationship with our Creator. In the same way I thirst for my first cup of coffee each morning, I thirst for time each day to talk to God; to listen to God.

In seminary, one of our most popular professors was Dr. Gerald Cragg. Students would have to wait in line outside his office door to catch a few minutes with him. Knowing this, he posted a three word phrase on the outside of his office door: WHY NOT PRAY? The hallway outside his office became more like a prayer chapel than an academic hallway. To this day, I am grateful to Dr. Cragg for suggesting we pray whenever we catch a few minutes now and then. So, I used to pray at stop lights, but I've given that up for the sake of safety! But you might catch me at prayer as I wait for the coffee to perk, as I wait for my turn in the barber chair, or as I wait for the next church meeting to begin. To pray is to work on a right relationship with God.

I hope everyone here thirsts for a right relationship with the planet. After two years of graduate school in Boston, we moved to rural South Dakota. I kept realizing the differences between the two locations. In Boston, I could easily move through a week without ever stepping off the pavement, without ever touching the earth. In South Dakota, I had to go way out of my way to even locate a stretch of pavement! My feet were on the ground all the time! And that was a kind of awakening for me. Walking upon the earth makes one instantly aware of its fragile nature. You start seeing things you hadn't noticed before: intricate spider webs and moss and lichen and milk weed pods and Queen Ann's Lace and little rivulets and deer tracks. Eco systems present themselves. Air and water become your pals. With feet touching the earth, one develops a thirst for a right relationship with the planet.

A right relationship with the planet is complicated. I walk through Cotton Hollow picking up beer cans and whisky bottles, but then I go home and take a 15 minute shower! I plant an oak tree in the front yard to hold the soil, but then decline an offer to carpool into Hartford. I love to fly a kite on a warm, windy day, but then leave the truck idling for no particular reason.

Psalm 24 reminds me that ‘the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.’ Thus, I am a guest upon the earth, a sojourner on the planet. My parents taught me well how to be a responsible guest: to offer to help with the dishes, to help with the cooking, to help with setting the table, to contribute to the well-being of the home where we were guests. I find I need to apply those lessons to being a guest on planet Earth. This is God’s land. We may have a deed to the property at 70 Homestead Drive, but in a deeper sense, the land belongs to God. I am a guest upon it. And I tell you I thirst to be in a right relationship with it. To consider ourselves as guests upon God’s earth is to take a giant step toward being in a right relationship with the planet.

“Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness; they will be satisfied.” To thirst for righteousness is to thirst for a right relationship with our neighbors: the folks down the lane, the folks west of the River, the folks who speak a different language, the folks whose clothing doesn’t come from Macys.

Many of us have been deeply troubled by the news of attacks on synagogues and mosques in Connecticut and across the nation. Anti-Semitism and Islam phobia seem to be on the increase here and there. Synagogues have been vandalized with swastikas and Muslims report being bullied in grocery stores. Yet, these are our neighbors. They live in our neighborhoods. They teach in our schools. They heal in our hospitals. They score goals for our soccer teams.

To thirst for a right relationship with all our neighbors requires taking some initiative. It means inviting conversation. It means partnering on social justice issues. It means recognizing and celebrating the presence of God in the other.

Three years ago, I was volunteering at a Habitat for Humanity site on South Marshall Street in Hartford. The building supervisor saw right away that I was a liability. He assigned me to a table where I was to straighten bent nails by tapping them with a small hammer. Evidently, I wasn't the only liability on the site that day. Soon, another man was straightening nails with me. We got to chatting. He and his wife have four kids. We have four kids. They love dining out at Sister's Restaurant for Jamaican food. We love the jerk chicken that's served there. He plays tennis. And you know I do, too! One hundred and fifty straightened nails later, we considered ourselves friends. We had forged a right relationship with each other. He happens to be a Muslim. I happen to be a Christian. We are neighbors.

“Blessed are those who thirst for righteousness, they will be satisfied.” There is, indeed, a deep satisfaction that comes when we pursue our thirst for right relationships with God, with the planet, and with our neighbors. It is this thirst for righteousness that leaves me living in the greatest of hope. Amen.