



From the Pulpit: March 3, 2024

Third Sunday in Lent—New Member Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 5:1–6

God’s Odd Benedictions, IV: The Hungry

During Lent this season we are preaching a sermon series called *God’s Odd Benedictions*, about Jesus’ Beatitudes. I’m going to suggest that Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one example of the kind of person Jesus is talking about in today’s Beatitude. Looking ahead in worship our closing hymn is written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote it as a Christmas gift poem to his twenty-year-old fiancé at the time of December 1944, his last Christmas. He was executed in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp in April of 1945.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, Jesus launches the most famous sermon in history with eight pithy bullet points which for 1,500 years the Church has called The Beatitudes because each of them begins with the Latin word *beati*, which means “Happy,” or “Blessed.”

This is the Church of the Beatitudes on the Sea of Galilee. What shape is it? Right, octagonal. Why? Right, because there are eight beatitudes.

“It’s not enough to be righteous. You have to be desperate for it.”

The Church calls them The Beatitudes, but I call them *God’s Odd Benedictions* because they are so paradoxical and unexpected and counterintuitive.

“Happy are the poor,” says Jesus. “Happy are the sad.” “Happy are the meek.” Really, Jesus? The poor, the sad, and the meek sure don’t **look** happy or blessed. Today we come to the fourth bullet point: “Happy are those

who hunger and thirst after righteousness,” says Jesus, “for they will be filled.” They will be sated. They will have enough.

This is the most sensible and least odd of *God’s Odd Benedictions*. We get this one. Of course Jesus would love the righteous. Of course God would bless them. But that’s not exactly what Jesus says. He doesn’t say, “Blessed are the righteous.” He says, “Blessed are those who **hunger and thirst** after righteousness. It’s not enough to **be** righteous. You have to be **desperate** for it. You have to **ache** for it. Without righteousness, these kinds of folk have a visceral and existential, almost carnal, emptiness in the pit of their stomach.

Hunger is a yawning emptiness in the gut and thirst an urgent scraping at the back of the throat, a wasting away of the vitalities that sustain the organism. Nothing else can be sought until bread and water are had.

And for some of God's precious children, righteousness, or justice, is that kind of commodity—bread, water, oxygen is to us, and without it, we die. The Psalmist cries out: "O God, you are my God. My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and barren land where no water is" (63:1)

The kind of folk Jesus is talking about in this only slightly odd benediction are the kind of folk who almost physically ache as ruthless, malevolent despots who murder thousands with impunity in Ukraine and Gaza: 30,000 dead in Gaza; 30,000 in Gaza just gone, almost the exact same number as dead Ukrainian soldiers.

The tens of thousands of bereft but brave Russians who came to mourn Alexei Navalny in Moscow on Friday, shouting "Peace for Ukraine, freedom for Russia." There were busloads of police, literally busloads of police, crawling all over that neighborhood.¹ Unbelievable. It's a hunger and a thirst, prison be damned.

They are hungry, they are thirsty, they are empty, they are unfilled, when they watch what's happening on the southern border and pause to consider, with both gratitude and dismay, that they happily inhabit a land most of the world is desperate to live in, and they don't know what to do about it.

¹Valerie Hopkins, "Crowds Flood Moscow Streets over Navalny," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2024.

But those who hunger and thirst after righteousness do what they can to serve those who need help. Yesterday we visited Altgeld Gardens on Chicago's far south side, as far south as you can go and still be in Chicago—130th Street—for the first harvest of the Bowen vertical garden. Senator Durbin was there; the Lieutenant Governor was there; Sarah and George and Elizabeth were there; Margot and Mark and Steve Bowen were there.

"But those who hunger and thirst after righteousness do what they can to serve those who need help."

Four acres worth of lettuce from a 500-square-foot container, a near miracle of twenty-first-century technology—a lonely green oasis in a sprawling food desert. 675 Kenilworth Union families gave that million-dollar gift. You did that. You did that because you hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Emmett Till turned 14 in 1955. He was born and raised in Chi-

cago, but in August of 1955 he was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta when they say, he flirted with a 21-year-old white woman. His companions dispute that rumor but Emmett Till was lynched for the alleged indiscretion.

Emmett's mother famously left his casket open so the whole world would see what hate can do. They say that open casket finally turned the tide on America's obliviousness to its race problem. After that many Americans found Mississippi guilty as charged. 1955: the same year Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery.

Timothy Tyson teaches history at both the University of North Carolina and at Duke University. In 2017 he wrote a book called *The Blood of Emmett Till*. He says that Emmett's death turned many Americans against "the Eisenhower administration's languid gaze down the green fairways of indifference."² I love the country club image he uses: a long, languid gaze down the green fairways of indifference. In 1955 the green fairways of indifference became unacceptable.

Jimmy Carter tells about something else that happened in 1955, same year as Rosa Parks, same year as Emmett Till. Friends of his came to visit on behalf of the White Citizens Council of Plains, Georgia, a more benign version of the Ku Klux Klan. They told Mr. Carter that he was the only businessman in Plains who had failed to pay his dues in 1955, and that if he failed to hand over the \$5.00, it might have serious repercussions on his peanut farming business. Mr. Carter took a five-dollar bill from his wallet, and told his friends, "I'll flush this money down the toilet before I give it to you."³ Jimmy Carter hungered and thirsted after righteousness: Habitat for Humanity, peace in Palestine. No wonder he only lasted one term in the White House. We didn't deserve him. He was too good for us.

Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Two days later—two days—on February 1, 1933, Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer broadcast a speech on the radio in which he rebuked the German people for this enormous,

historic mistake. He told them that a *Führer* can easily become a *Verführer*; a leader can quickly become a misleader. Dr. Bonhoeffer's broadcast was unplugged midsentence.

Two days into Hitler's regime. With remarkably prescient vision, he was the first to predict the catastrophic holocaust that was being engineered even as he spoke. Almost all his Lutheran ministerial colleagues were swearing oaths of allegiance to Hitler, malice incarnate; Dietrich was horrified.

Now why did he have to say that? Why couldn't he just keep his big mouth shut? Look how Teutonic he looks; in the dictionary under "Aryan," there's a photo of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

His father was a prominent psychiatrist in Berlin; his family was renowned and beloved in the city. He lived on a sprawling estate crawling with maids and nannies and butlers and chauffeurs. He could have fit right in. He had an M.Div., a Ph.D., a pulpit, and a school.

But you know why he couldn't stay silent; his hunger for righteousness, his thirst for justice, compelled him to speak out with a brazenness that cost him his life. From his first sermon to his last, he preached his strict and rigorous truth: "Only those who speak out for the Jews have the right to sing Gregorian Chant."

I don't know if I could speak truth to power like Alexei Navalny or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but I can do my best to reach up towards their towering stature.

[Jimmy Carter]
"We didn't
deserve him.
He was too
good for us."

²Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), p. 192.

³Quoted by Bill J. Leonard, "The Private and Public Worlds of Jimmy Carter," *The Christian Century*, March 19–26, 1997, p. 297.

—The Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

We approach you God, with all that we are. Act in me as I draw myself to you. You are Light from Light, true God from true God, searcher of heart, who dwells in hidden places.

In you we place our trust. In you we are comforted. In you we bear up our lives. In you, our soul breathes. Where can we go from your spirit? Even if we take to the wings of dawn and go to the far side of the sea, there your presence guides us there, we cannot deny the traces of your divine love within us.

With you we can breathe, and your prayer is suddenly within us.

For this we are grateful, that you are nearer to me than I am to myself, that your breath of life moves in and out and through. Be, God. Be with us.

We pray for your profound and incomprehensible holy mystery to transcend the uncertainty of our lives.

For a friend in the hospital. For a neighbor after surgery. For a daughter, grieving. For a parent, making decisions that feel too hard to hold. For the one who understands what is ahead, and is too tired to fear. For the one who battles silently, struggling to be comforted. For the one who feels hopeless after long season of lament.

For the one who has become indifferent, even in the face of being fully and abundantly alive.

Be present, God.
Be with us.

In all this, in every ripple, every bite, fight, scramble and stillness.

Incline your spirit to us in the mystery, the wandering, the seeking, the exploring, the longing for contemplation.

Abide with us. Hold all that we hand over to you, the fragile, the tender, the vulnerable. For that is where our love dwells.

Hold our feeble bodies, our aching pain, our resilient yet susceptible frame.

For that is the holy place where our dreams are born. Holy one who arrives in pillars of a cloud and shines in brilliant darkness, we ask that you are in the places battling fear, where grim equipment shortages meet impossible ailments, for Israel and Palestine, for Russia and Ukraine, for Myanmar where a new friend has family trying to find a way, for doctors forced to make decisions at the center of scarcity where too much hurt arrives, Lord hear our prayer.

Comfort those who struggle. Restore those who are lost. Renew hope where there has been none. Let your holy vocation of empathy and co-suffering and lamentation rise up within us so that we might join in the spirit of courage, power and love breathing life into the dust of conflict.

Be present, O God. Rise up.

As you knit us together in your spirit, may we be one with all who join together at this table, and with all your children at every corner of your table.

May we share this abundant cup with all those who thirst for your justice. May we share this abundant bread with all those who hunger for your righteousness. May we be united in hope, in vision, in purpose, in ministry.

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, and upon these gifts of bread and cup, that the bread we break and the cup we share may reshape our common bonds, remember our common grace, and strengthen us for what is to come.

Through Christ, in Christ, incarnate, indwelling, resurrected, ever-near who taught us to pray: Our Father... Amen.

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