

St. Andrew's UMC
November 2nd, 2008
Matthew 5:1-12

“Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness”

I received a letter this week that was addressed to a predecessor who served this congregation many, many years ago. The data base of these non-profits could be outdated as much as 20 years.

The letter brought back memories. I moved to California in mid `90's, and I was smitten with its coastal beauty. One day we decided to visit Monterey Aquarium and its surroundings. We drove down Freeway 101, sharing the little paper cup of diet soda that came with the kid's meal for our boy, who was not yet 2 years old. Back then, we did not drink soda that much, and that little cup of soda was enough for a family of three. All that changed, when we lived in the Central Valley region later.

Freeway 101 turns into Route 156, and on one side of the road, there was a vast field of strawberries. Strawberry was in season, and many workers were harvesting strawberries. I was thinking, that job would break my back, and ruin my knees, to stay bent down or squatted down all day like that. I felt privileged and guilty at the same time, for I was on the way to play a tourist in a scenic town, while they were breaking their backs so that I could buy strawberries at the grocery store and eat them with a large squirt of whipped cream.

A couple years later, I was appointed to a church in Central Valley . I heard from the old timers in the church that it used to be the largest church in town. Then one day, Cesar Chavez happened. The pastor at the time started to preach about the farm labor movement as the integral part of the social justice, and spoke out to support Cesar Chavez. That angered many farmer members who grew oranges and grapes, who were the majority of the major contributors. Many of them left the church, and joined the neighboring Mennonite church. Now the Mennonites became the largest church in town.

But not everyone left the church, and some returned after the liberal pastor moved on. Ever since Cesar Chavez, however, the church

was never the same, never gained back its strength, and remains a small church, perhaps for a long, foreseeable time.

Yes, the letter I received was from a ministry that advocates the causes of the farm workers. The content of the letter painted intimately detailed pictures of what it is like to work on the field under the scorching sun in California .

When we go to a grocery store, we look at the display of all kinds of fresh, succulent vegetables, all stacked in an orderly manner, glistening under the lights, moisture dripping from its exterior. We pick the choicest head of lettuce, the plumpest bunch of grapes, and most sumptuous-looking oranges. We demand highest quality of food for ourselves and our children, and we deserve the quality for which we pay.

But we rarely think about the labor condition of those who picked these vegetables and fruits. For most people, such a perspective is a foreign one, and for some, it may be even offensive.

In one of the Annual Conferences in Sacramento in late 90's, a Conference resolution was on the floor to be discussed in one of the sections to which I was assigned. A man from the East Coast presented the case. He was against the use of the pesticides, because it was not good for the environment, or for the farm workers, or for the consumers who ingest the product. He added that that is why he only eats organically grown lettuce for his salad. That reminded me of what was happening back in Korea then.

Organically grown vegetables and fruits became a huge fad, and every one was clamoring for such vegetables and fruits, for the obvious healthful benefits. That fad coincided with the real estate craze. The nation saw the sudden influx of new money into the suburban areas and countrysides, and many people became millionaires overnight.

What happened was that those new-money city folks made exclusive contracts with the small farmers (most of the Korean farmers own small patches of land), so that they would be the only one to be supplied with the entirety of the organically grown products. The rich

ate the choicest, while the rest got by with the inferior grade and the rejects.

I knew how expensive the organically grown vegetables were back then, even in the U.S. The man who was presenting the case was a well-to-do who said that he eats only the organically grown salad for his healthy meal. To me, his presentation sounded hollow. I understood its good intention, but he sounded more like a liberal yuppie, ranting an idle good will. I thought it would have been more reasonable to seek tighter regulations on the use of pesticides, and on the protection of the farm workers—which happened to be one of the issues for which Cesar Chavez had already been working hard in the late 80's.

I knew such a resolution would anger the whole bunch of farming members of the United Methodist Church . You just cannot suddenly turn your farm into a pesticide-free enterprise, and expect it to grow quality products that will sell at the grocery stand, and at the same time, turn a profit. Would you gladly buy the brown vegetables and fruits with bug damages, but grown with no pesticides? How much would you be willing to pay, if the vegetables and fruits were all grown in the vinyl house, in order to keep them from the bug and weather damages?

How about those families of low income? What vegetables will they end up eating? They will end up consuming what the affluent would not touch: those brown and damaged vegetables that failed to meet the standard.

And what about the farm workers? Would they be better off, because the United Methodist Church boycotted the pesticide-laced products, and the farm laid off its workers?

What are the questions that Christians should raise, when they are committed to the social justice and social righteousness?

Each Sunday, we see the display of the coffee in the rear of the sanctuary. These coffees are the products of those farms that have committed to the principles of the fair labor and trade. There is a reason why such coffees are found in our church. We may not be

able to change the whole world, but we could practice and support what we believe is righteous in a small way. We are envisioning a certain model of doing business that is profitable, and at the same time, beneficial to all who are involved in the chain of production and consumption. I prefer to name it “the kingdom model” for a business, as in the kingdom of Heaven .

Jesus proclaimed: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”** And further he proclaimed: **“blessed are those who are falsely persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.”**

He mentioned twice in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount the word, “righteousness.” I cannot take this as anything other than the emphasis on the importance of righteousness in the religious person’s life. But there is one thing we need to make sure. Isn’t a righteous person usually praised for his or her moral rectitude? Why, then, would Jesus even mention the phrase, “persecution for the sake of righteousness”? Who would want to punish someone for being righteous? Would you?

Well, Jesus is talking about the righteousness that really matters to one’s livelihood. Jesus meant the righteousness that brings adverse consequences to those who pursue it. The kind of righteousness that brings praises is not the kind of righteousness Jesus was talking about in the Gospel. Jesus was talking about the kind of righteousness that brings the retribution, if advocated or practiced. According to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven cannot be inherited without having to pay the price of righteousness.

So the question for the Christians is this: Is the kingdom of heaven really worth the price of persecution? In other words, is hungering and thirsting for righteousness worth the troubles in this world?

When Christians commit to a righteous cause, they need to be prepared for the backlash. Is advocating for the farm workers a righteous thing to do? If the answer is yes, then, do Christians understand what is waiting for them? Is pursuing righteousness worth risking one’s own popularity, profit, or life? Or, even the Sunday attendance and the membership of the church, for example?

Most church communities and leaders would not take that risk for anything. They would rather choose to support the righteous causes that are non-controversial, praise-worthy, and without backlashes. They are happy to maintain the status quo, even to grow on it, and to see only the side that is popular.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness see the side that is unseen and forgotten by the society. Those people who hunger and thirst for righteousness choose to stand on that unpopular side.

They speak for those people who are like the fruits and vegetables which the grocers rejected. Their causes won't be prominently displayed on the well-lit grocery stand, because they won't sell. They are rejected, because the customers don't want them, and won't come to the store, if that is what they find.

As long as those people remain out of sight, unmentioned, and forgotten, everyone is a happy customer, business does well, and there won't be any controversy or loss of membership in the church. We know from the Bible, however, God takes particular interest in those who remain out of sight, forgotten, and oppressed.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is not on the list of popular activities, because they usually cut into the profit margin of certain powerful individuals and businesses. Those who stand to profit from the lack of righteousness would never go out of their way to promote it. It is rather those who directly suffer from the *lack* of righteousness who hunger and thirst for it.

Our God is on the side of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They shall be satisfied, they shall claim the ownership of the kingdom of Heaven, and they shall be the saints in the great cloud of witnesses.