

## Persecuted!

Sermon Text Matthew 5:1-12

Ps. 40:1-10; 1 Peter 3:8-17

Hearing the Beatitudes is like listening to an old teletype machine; the kind you see in a movie from the 1940 & 50's – tat, tat, tat, tat, tat, ... blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger & thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers ... tat, tat, tat, fast, short burst of sounds and no time to pause to think and meditate, they seem to buzz by. Some might even think happy are those who forget them because the Beatitudes challenge firmly held notions. Some chose to ignore them because Jesus seems to say that blessed are they who, well to be honest they are not much like us. So we let them buzz by choosing to ignore them. But, I hope not, I pray not. I hope you are convicted and changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, not because you are bad, but because Jesus has so much more in store for you and for us as the body of Christ in this place.

Tat, tat, tat, they come at us – and then this one today. I don't know what it is, why it happens like that to me, but suddenly, I hearing the tat, tat, tat and then it's like a driver on a bus – suddenly, without warning, the driver pulls the emergency break while pressing on the gas peddle. It doesn't come to a full stop, but it certainly slows down. Maybe that's what Jesus intended, he gives us these rapid fire beatitudes, usually ten words or less, and then – this paragraph of a beatitude; slowing us down causing us to pause.

The first seven rapid fire beatitudes are not only short, they also offer comfort and hope. Yeah, things are tough now but there is hope in the near term and assurance of victory in the long. Things will get better. But now this one – where's the hope? Suddenly, Jesus shifts from giving us hard and hopeful although controversial beatitudes to giving us one that should at least cause us to pause. While pausing and thinking we begin to understand that this man Jesus is not just a man with radically different views, but he is down right dangerous and hanging out with him puts our life at risk.

And he's getting very personal. The first seven are all about – you guys. You guys who are poor in spirit, you guys who are the peacemakers, you guys; but today it's – you. Jesus looks his disciples straight in the eye, *mano y mano*, and says "Blessed are *you*." Well I

can handle that. A little first person blessing is just fine with me. Thank you very much Jesus let's just leave it at that. Blessed am I!

But he doesn't leave it at that he continues, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you." Now the bus comes to a full stop. He's got my attention. I was hoping to have a conversation along the lines of a high school senior – "Jesus, I've been praying. You know the senior class is voting for the high school superlatives – most likely to succeed, best looking, most popular, class clown. And Jesus the scuttlebutt is that I am a shoe in for 'most popular.'" That's the conversation we want to have with Jesus but he has gone and thrown that conversation under the bus.

Not only that, He does not say, "*If* you are reviled and persecuted," he says, "*When*." What mother is going to let her sweet child join that high school club – not my boy; but it gets worse! The persecution is in the perfect passive tense of the verb, so not only will it happen it's a done deal and the persecution is both verbal and physical. I don't know about you but, I'm lookin' for another bus. This Jesus guy is just too dangerous, a radical. He certainly isn't going to win a high school superlative contest unless they have one for most like to die – and soon.

Just a short 25 – 30 years later when the gospel of Matthew was being recorded, the followers of Jesus realized how prophetic this Beatitude was. Verbal abuse was flying. There are prayers written for synagogue worship around this time condemning the followers of that itinerate, discredited, crucified rabbi, Jesus. The verbal abuse was accompanied by physical – John the Baptist, beheaded. The first deacon, Stephen, stoned; James the brother of John, killed by the sword on the orders of Herod Agrippa. Paul and Silas arriving in Philippi to preach at a tent meeting – thrown into jail for disturbing the peace. Thrown into a cell where it was darker than a swap at midnight. They were beaten with rods and shackled together making it impossible to rest. Jesus' beatitude told them to "rejoice and be glad." Paul and Silas obedient servants sang hymns in their cell – they rejoiced and were glad.

Jesus and probably most of the crowd gathered to hear him, were used to hearing stories of persecution. Later in Matthew when Jesus "climbed to the crest of the Mount of Olives with its panoramic view of the city he lamented, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!'" (Matthew 23:37).<sup>1</sup> So many

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<sup>1</sup> Howell, 85

martyred prophets to remember; Zachariah killed by King Joash. Isaiah sawed in two with a wooden saw by the henchmen of King Manasseh. Uriah executed by King Jehoiakim. The weeping prophet Jeremiah ridiculed and imprisoned and according to legend, stoned to death in Egypt. Jesus from his vantage point could look east across the Kidron Valley and see the tombs of the prophets particularly Zechariah's tomb. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ...

It's early in his sermon and I imagine that the crowd is already starting to wonder, what sort of man is this, 10 lines into his 3 chapter sermon and he is already talking about being persecuted. I bet the chair of the finance committee of Jesus' church was beginning to get a bit nervous. "Jesus" he might have said, "Tone it down a bit, pledge Sunday is coming up and folks aren't real excited about being persecuted. Can't you go back to the blessing part and leave it there?" Truth has a way of clashing with the status quo, with the vested interest; with the patterns of sinful behavior that even suck in religious people.

But Jesus was not interested in the status quo. Christianity was a religious and cultural revolution and none embraced it more than the great apostle Paul. When he went into Thessalonica the people charged him with sedition and with causing riots. Hear these words from Acts, "These (people) who have turned the world upside down have come here too and ... they are acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7). Caesar tolerated no rivals. Nero in fact used Christians as scapegoats for the fires that engulfed Rome. He had them tarred and put on top of poles to be burned as human torches to light the Appian Way.

Christians' radical faith and elevated ethical standards even in the face of ostracism and death put them at odds with the cultural and religious establishment, even family and friends. They were labeled as unpatriotic, easy targets because of their peaceful and unarmed ways. Hundreds died at the hands of the state.

Ironically it was persecution that fueled the growth of the church. Tertullian wrote that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."<sup>2</sup> This is the way it has always been when Christians are serious about following Christ. Mind you there has always existed a bland, watered down version of Christianity – it has fitted in, gotten along. But I can never, ever get the image of Willy Loman out of my

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<sup>2</sup> Apology, 125

mind when I think of those types of safe – get along churches. Willie was the main character in *The Death of a Salesman* and his advice to his son Biff was, “To get along you have to go along.” In other words, stand for nothing just fit in. What kind of advice is that for a church in a world that is fallen? A church in a city like San Antonio where 25% of the children face hunger and food insecurity every day of their lives, children! Should the church of Jesus Christ just go along? No, no, a thousand times no!

I have often quoted Bonhoeffer and particularly from his book the Cost of Discipleship. I encourage you to read it or like I, re-read it, which I did for this sermon series. It is Bonhoeffer's writing on the *Sermon on the Mount*. He compares cheap grace and costly grace with these words

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field: for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price, it is the rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which cause him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus at which the disciple leaves his net and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it cost a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son.

If Jesus' faithful commitment cost him his life, why should following him be comfortable, convenient, pain free? Why would we expect to find ourselves in sync with a world that stands opposed to God and the teachings of Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount*? As we absorb this beatitude before us today, we should pause, take a deep breath and reflect on the truth of Jesus Christ. If we choose to follow Jesus, we will suffer, guaranteed. Jesus said, *when* you are persecuted not *if*.

My suffering is that I fail. I hate failure but that is my cross. Most of the people that I speak with about Jesus don't pay attention. Much of what I do is seen as a waste of time by most of the people in the world today. Praying early in the morning, ridiculous. Reading Scripture as the Word of God, absurd. Real men are out there moving and shaking, I spend my time with young children and old women talking and

listening, reading and praying. I am not making stuff, I am not adding to the gross national product, in fact, just the opposite I take away from the GNP. The fact is that unlike my predecessors of 50 years ago, being a Christian minister is not seen as much of an honorable profession.

In my home town of Wilmington, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians recorded that no "civic decisions of serious consequence were finalized until the blessings of the minister of the First Presbyterian Church were received." Oh today, I may be invited to say a prayer at the city council meeting, but that is more of a curtseys than asking that I really bring anything to the table. So my persecution is not so much physical harm or verbal abuse, people do pay polite respect, no my persecution is that of being tolerated but ignored in the affairs of commerce and state.

But at a deeper level, when I get by the barrier of my ego, I don't care. I don't care because my view is not myopic or near sighted. I have a world view that is shaped by 4,000 years of history, from the time when Abram was called out of Ur until today as I stand before you proclaiming the Word of God for us in this time and this place. The reality is that the church is the most dangerous when it is most ignored.

In India today, hundreds of thousands of people are joining the Church of Jesus Christ because for the first time in their lives they have been given their dignity. Christian missionaries are treating them as people made in the image of God. Introducing them to a savior who came to take away the shame and sacrifice of being born into a system that pigeon holes a person because of parentage; who by his death and resurrection broke their yoke of bondage.

I don't care, because today, I stand as a minister in a denomination that rushed into Haiti after that disaster with money and expertise, given by people just like us in the *One Great Hour of Sharing* campaign. We didn't look at the skin color or station we looked at a situation that cries for our help and we ask only what Jesus would have us do.

I don't care, because I am a part of a denomination that went into Africa over a hundred years ago and witnesses to the least and the lost and today stands with sister and brothers in the faith as equals on a continent where the gospel has exposed the myths and opening up the truth found in Jesus Christ. The seeds planted have exploded into a

church that has grown to the point that the west is no longer the center of the Christian world it is Africa and Asia - the Southern hemisphere.

I don't care because we stand against the modern plague – HIV/AIDS and love orphaned children that would otherwise be without hope – both parents lost to that pernicious disease. I don't care because I don't have to care what the world thinks, only what Christ thinks and with our long view of history, I know that victory over sin and death is certain.

Those of us who hold the long view of history are confident, because we know that we may never see the results of our labor, we may never taste the fruits but we are confident that the Holy Spirit who proceeds us, who prepared the way and laid the foundation is with us will honor our work, because Jesus work is the work of the real world.

On the wall of Shishu Bhavan, children's home in Calcutta operated by the Sisters of Charity, the order founded by Mother Teresa, are these words. They capture the heart and essence of the Beatitudes:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.  
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.  
Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.  
Succeed anyway.

The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.  
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.  
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.  
Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.  
Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.<sup>3</sup> Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Mother Teresa, [A Simple Path](#), 185.