

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS’ SAKE...”

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Matthew 5:10, Romans 8:31-39

(11-01-20) All Saints

As we continue in our series on the Beatitudes, let's do a quick reset of the context. Remember that the Sermon on the Mount took place, in Matthew's gospel account, near the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. It was his proclamation of what his ministry would be about, what the kingdom of heaven was all about. I've said this before, but the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' throne speech, his inaugural address. It spells out the values and vision of the kingdom and invites his listeners to a way of life that would follow that vision.

Again, to repeat what I have said before, there would be no need for Jesus to give his Sermon on the Mount, to lay out the vision of the Beatitudes, if everything was just fine and dandy. Nobody gives a speech or casts a vision that is exactly the same as the existing reality, what would be the point? Jesus casts a vision for the world, for God's creation, based on radically different values and priorities than the ones that defined his society and the ones that still define ours today. The Beatitudes offer a vision of blessedness that would be very difficult to understand through the eyes of our accepted culture. Jesus spells out a very different understanding of what it means to be blessed in the kingdom of heaven. If we're being honest, those of us who would seriously listen to Jesus will find the vision Jesus casts difficult to follow and a struggle to implement in our lives. **To live in the way of Jesus and of his kingdom is not easy. Jesus said, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** Let me ask you a question. **What would you be willing to be persecuted for?** I suppose that might depend on what's meant by the word persecution. Well, if we consider that word in the context of Jesus' teachings, even within the Beatitudes, we find that to be persecuted meant to have people revile you, insult you, abuse you, disparage you. It meant that people would say all kinds of evil things, false things, hurtful things against you. It meant that you could be treated in the same way that the prophets were treated, often imprisoned, certainly exiled, sometimes even put to death. Well, if you put it that way, you might be thinking, I'm not sure that I would want to be persecuted for almost any cause. Why would I want to be imprisoned, exiled or even put to death? What could be worth that?

Sometimes persecution is about a situation that no one is looking for, that no one seeks. People and groups of people have been persecuted throughout the ages for all manner of things. Sometimes that persecution is related to conflict, a war. Enemies are persecuted, the conquered are persecuted. But at other times people are persecuted even though they pose no threat to those who persecute them. In the Holocaust millions of Jews were persecuted, put to death though they posed no threat to the Nazi regime. Slavery was the persecution of generations of people who posed no military, economic or social threat to those who enslaved

them. Sometimes we don't have to seek persecution; it comes to us just because of who we happen to be. But other times people willingly endure persecution for the sake of a greater good or goal. Think of some of the great movements in history. Often those who pursued a vision for something different paid a great price. In our recent history think of people like Nelson Mandela, who fought against apartheid in South Africa. He spent 27 years, the majority of his adult life, behind bars in prison. Or think of Martin Luther King Jr. in the U.S. whose struggle for civil rights cost him his very life. Or what about whistle blowers like Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden who released classified information about the U.S. government and military. You don't have to agree with what they did or like them as people, but no one can argue that they haven't suffered persecution for what they believe is a greater cause. In Canada there's the case of former RCMP Cpl. Catherine Galliford who filed a detailed 115 page internal complaint which led to an investigation into sexual assault and harassment within the RCMP. After 16 years of service, Galliford said that she reached her breaking point. "If I had a dime for every time one of my bosses asked me to sit on his knee, I'd be on a yacht in the Bahamas right now," said Galliford. Whether you believe her or not, whether you like her or not, you can't dispute that she made a conscious decision which led to intense persecution for what she believed was a righteous cause.

What about us? What are we willing to be persecuted for? Before you get too stuck in trying to come up with an answer to that question, let me offer a suggestion. If we hear the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount and in the Beatitudes and if we take them to heart, if we are willing to follow the way of Jesus and are wanting to be guided by his vision of the kingdom of heaven, we don't have to come up with a specific answer to the question of what we would be willing to be persecuted for, **the persecution will find us if we try to live authentically as followers of Jesus in the world.** Persecution today for most of us living here in Canada is nothing like it would have been for those who followed Jesus in his time or for those in the early church. Jesus and his followers were persecuted, martyred. Christians in the Roman Empire were martyred for their refusal to confess that Caesar was lord **because for them only Jesus could be Lord, and no other.**

It is true that in our world today that over 75% of the world's population live in areas with severe religious restrictions, many of those people being Christians. To be a public follower of Jesus in some parts of the world today is to invite danger and persecution, including the real possibility of death. According to the World Watch List in 2018 the top five countries in which it is dangerous to follow Jesus are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Pakistan. Social exclusion, physical abuse, imprisonment, and for women, rape, sexual harassment and forced marriage are examples of persecution that Christians face in countries that are largely hostile to Christianity. **It's different for us.** Again, we here in Canada live in one of the most tolerant societies on earth. No one will persecute you in the ways that our sisters and brothers in some other countries have experienced just because you are a Christian. But to be

clear, while we may not face physical abuse, imprisonment, sexual assault, harassment or worse because of our faith, **for those who do follow the way of Jesus, there is persecution. It's more nuanced, but it's there, nevertheless.** Now I want to make a distinction between those who believe that their Christian faith compels them to take a stance on issues in ways that are deliberately confrontational, that invite persecution or retaliation, who believe that you **have** to suffer if your faith is authentic and those whose faith lives don't seek confrontation but who by the very nature of what it is to follow Jesus and the values of his kingdom put them at odds with the dominant narrative of our culture and thus invite the scorn and ridicule of others. In the vast majority of situations I don't believe that our faith needs to seek out confrontation and that those who feel that they must are misguided and misunderstand the values of Jesus' kingdom. **The truth is that if we will just live our lives guided by the teachings of Jesus, by the vision Jesus casts in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, persecution will find us without us having to do much of anything at all.**

Again, the persecution most of us face is more nuanced. Think about the Beatitudes we've spoken about so far. Imagine living as faithfully as we can as those who acknowledge our poverty of spirit, as those who mourn, who grieve the way the world is and what it values, as those who are meek, who practice self-emptying, who will let go of what we think we are entitled to. Think about what it means to live with a hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, who practice mercy and who are pure in heart, who see others as Jesus sees them. **Do you know what happens when we believe that living this way is blessed, when we seek to embed these kinds of values in our lives? It puts us at a disadvantage in our world.** Our world values self-confidence, blustery narcissism, strength and power, our world is built on believing that you have to get what you deserve or you're missing out, that mercy is for the weak and that you have to look out for yourself because no one else will. To believe otherwise, to act otherwise, puts us at a disadvantage. To pursue God's justice and righteousness, to hunger and thirst after these things, to practice kenosis, self-emptying, invites veiled contempt, if not outright scorn.

You can't live that way, we're told. Idealism won't get you far in a world of real consequences. You've got to be part of the team, don't rock the boat, don't swim against the tide. But beyond the bemusement of those who see our faith and our values as being foolish and outdated, **there can also be a real resentment and people can even take offense to the way we live out our faith.** If our faith, if our seeking to live for the sake of righteousness, for the sake of those things Jesus calls blessed challenges the values that others hold, calls in to question the systems that they have chosen to live their lives by, if others feel that by not fitting in, not being part of the team, by not going with the flow that we expose some inner struggles that they may be experiencing but not willing to admit, **we won't be seen only as foolish but as problems, as threats.** Are we willing to be considered a pain in the butt because we prick the conscience of others? Are we willing to be uncomfortable at times

because we make others uncomfortable by the values we hold and the decisions we make? Not because we condemn or confront them **but by virtue of our virtues? Does it cost us anything to live as Christians, as followers of Jesus, as those who not only hear the words of Jesus but try to live them, to take them into our hearts and embody them in our choices and actions?** In seeking to follow the righteousness of Jesus, do we face persecution? Have we known the uncomfortable judgment of others, have we known what it is to compete with what seems to be one hand tied behind our backs because we won't sell out our principles, our values? Does our commitment to what seem to be unpopular causes and undesirable people ever make people wish that we'd just go away or at least do what we do in a way that no one notices? If not, if the living out of our faith, if our values put us in perfect harmony with the rest of the world, if we fit in just fine and the systems of this world work just dandy for us, if we've never really known any kind of persecution for our Christian faith, **don't we have to ask ourselves the question, what exactly is the point of my faith?** Is my Christian faith just a feel good add on to the other resources for positive thinking in my life? Is it just a means of self-improvement or practicing mindfulness in our complex world?

Remember, Jesus didn't give the Sermon on the Mount because everything was great as it was. He didn't speak the Beatitudes to encourage people to keep believing what they believed, or to maximize their potential or sense of self-worth. **Jesus preached repentance, a turn of heart, a change of direction.** He preached about a kingdom of heaven that was near, that is unfolding in our midst even as we gather this day, his life pointed to a different reality, a set of values that would undermine the systems of the world, a vision for something radically different from the world we think is the most real thing we can know.

We are either okay with the world as it is and see Jesus as just another idealist, just another wise teacher whose wisdom can be absorbed into the broader wisdom of the world, or we are on the side of the one who said that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who finished the Sermon on the Mount by saying that those who hear his words and don't act on them are like the foolish man who built his house on the sand, which came crashing down when the storms came.

Today is All Saints Sunday and when we remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us, we believe that they've gone to God, not that they are just decomposing in the ground, turning into worm food. **We are making a confession, we are participating in the inversion of the kingdom of the world which believes that all we can see, hold, control, or buy is all that there is.** The Lutheran preacher and teacher David Lose writes, "When we commend those we have loved to God's care, we proclaim that God's kingdom is not some distant thing or place but rather exists now, exerts its influence on us now, transforms our reality now. All Saints, along with all Christian funerals, is a repetition and rehearsal of the Easter promise that there is something more, something that transcends our immediate experience, and this proclamation is rooted in the confidence that God's love and life are more

powerful and enduring than the hate, disappointment, and death that seems at times to surround us.”

As the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church at Rome, If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this year of COVID-19, when so many have been affected by the pandemic, when so many lives have been lost around the world and even close to us, it’s our hope in the world that Jesus promises and preaches about that keeps us from futility and despair. There is something more and the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus’ casting of that vision, to which he invites us to follow.

Our faith is lived out, not as a means of self-improvement, but as a witness to a vision of the world that would turn what the world values upside down. **We follow Jesus and his vision for the kingdom because we believe with Jesus that the world as it is isn’t okay and that our hope in the midst of this world is the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.** There is a cost to such a belief, there must be. The world is heavily invested in the way things are because it works for those in power, those with authority, those for whom blessedness means something very different from what Jesus preaches. If we would truly embody the way of Jesus, the world will see us as foolish and we will know persecution. But in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs, ours, is the kingdom of heaven.**

Thanks be to God, Amen!