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The Beatitudes – “Blessed Are the Persecuted”

Intro to Worship

Early on in Jesus' ministry, Matthew records for us one of his most profound sermons – the Sermon on the Mount – which does what most of Jesus' teachings do... turns the world on its head and challenges us to look at faith and life with new eyes. We have spent the past 7 weeks exploring the Beatitudes, learning from Jesus and looking around at the surprising blessings that abound in our lives, and in our communities. As we wrap up our series, we hear Jesus' words about the blessings that can be found even in the most challenging of times – when we are persecuted for righteousness. As we enter into worship this morning, I invite you to reflect on ways you have experienced challenge or rejection because of your faith convictions. As our minds turn to the struggle, I invite you to join together to sing the hymn which has journeyed with us through this series – Blessed are They, hymn #2155.

2 Corinthians 4:8-12 (NIV)

⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then 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. “Blessed are

the merciful, for they will receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

For the most part, our lives are pretty comfortable. True, many of us struggle to make ends meet, and worry about the political battles that rage on around us, but for the most part, our lives are pretty safe, pretty comfortable. Being persecuted for our faith is not something that we worry about on a daily basis. For most of us, being a Christian has had no physical, social, or career risk. In fact, rather than it setting us apart as odd or dangerous, it's made us one of the majority. While the percentage of people in the US who label themselves as none's, with no religious affiliation, is on the rise, Christianity is still the norm of our nation's mainstream religion.

Jesus' closing words of the Beatitudes, focusing on the suffering and persecution that will come as a result of living righteous lives, seems almost foreign to us. Ironically, we often consider ourselves blessed to live in a country where we can practice our faith without fear of persecution. As modern Christians in the west, we need to remember that Jesus in the gospel of Matthew was speaking to a very specific set of people in a very specific time. When practicing this relatively new faith, the Way, following Jesus, being a Christian was a danger to life in many ways. Many of Jesus' first disciples were persecuted and died because they would not quit preaching and teaching in Jesus' name. For decades, Christ followers were executed in often pretty brutal ways, in attempt to discourage others from picking up this way of life that people in power found threatening. This faith, which focused on loving neighbors as yourself, which was not afraid to speak truth to power, even when their lives depended on it, was something that oppressors didn't want hear, much less allow to be spread.

In the US, at least at the moment and in theory, we have the privilege of religious freedom, so practicing our faith as Christians publicly does not put our lives at risk. This certainly doesn't mean that Christian persecution doesn't still happen. In other parts of the world today Christian minorities face harassment, restricted freedoms, imprisonment, and even death. There's a website called "Open Doors" that keeps a watch list of countries where Christian persecution is still happening throughout the world. Of course, people of other traditions, other than Christianity, face persecution too, in the US and world-wide. Persecution occurs when those in the minority speak a counter-philosophy to those in power. They don't follow the status quo, they challenge the established order, and so they are pushed down, oppressed, silenced. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" – Jesus calls blessed those who stand firm in their faith convictions and live out their righteousness, even when it is unpopular, and even dangerous.

Standing up to the status quo is not for the faint of heart! We know that those who speak loudly and consistently for justice, calling for faithfulness in God's eyes, are often in danger. We remember those like MLK who was killed because he spoke truth to entrenched powers of racial prejudice and inequality. We remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was put to death for enacting a plan to overthrow Hitler as the 2nd World War came to a close. We remember Archbishop Oscar Romero who was executed by death squad in the very cathedral he served because he championed the poor and oppressed in El Salvador. These, and many more faithful saints, were so committed to their convictions that they were willing to risk their lives for righteousness sake.

We need to remember as people of faith, that the Christian movement began as a voice that called for something radically different, something holy. An entirely different way of life, a new way of thinking, a change in a set of values, a higher standard of righteousness. It should be hard to ignore, this faith that has the power to move mountains. As Christians, we are called to put ourselves in the middle of the mess of the world, and demand that we be better as persons, as a society, as humanity. Because if the faithful won't stand up and speak out against oppression and injustice, then who will?

In his book *The Sermon on the Mount*, E.T. Thompson tells the story of Dr. Turner, the pastor of the American Church in Berlin during WW II. Dr. Turner visited Pastor Heinrich Niemoeller, the aging father of Martin Niemoeller, who defied Hitler and spent seven years in a Nazi concentration camp. In this book, he relayed the now familiar words of Pastor Niemoeller:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out-- Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the homosexuals, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a homosexual.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out-- Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out-- Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.

Martin Niemoeller didn't walk away from the convictions of his faith as he defied Hitler, and as a result, he faced persecution. But according to Martin's father, though persecution is a terrible thing, sacrificing your convictions of faith for survival is far worse. This thought challenges me to look back at my life, at the choices I've made and assess whether I've always held true to MY faith convictions, or whether I've folded under pressure, and gone with the status quo, rather than making waves. ??? I think that's a question Jesus is calling us all to reflect on today.

As we bring this series on the Beatitudes to a close, we are being challenged to ask ourselves, how our faith is lived out? We live in a world where every day there are headlines of hatred, bigotry and prejudice assailing us. There is no lack of opportunity for doing justice, seeking righteousness, and loving mercy. Do we find ourselves slipping into the world's

understanding of blessings, and measuring our lives and our worth by that, rather than the values of God's kingdom? Or are we seeking to live into the blessings that Jesus talks about – the blessings that go with living out a spirit of meekness, of mercy, of hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and purity of heart? Are we people that rejoice in the blessings of challenging and changing our community? Who call out racial injustice, and lift up those in poverty, welcoming all no matter who they love?

The beatitudes should leave us with this burning question... As a community, who is God calling us to be? It's not blessed in the eyes of the world, but blessed because we are set apart, holy, and consecrated. May the blessings of God be ours for the sake of our church, our community, the world, and the continued building of the Kingdom of God. Amen.