

Be-Attitudes: “Be Glad” **Matthew 5:10-11 July 25, 2010**

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It was one of those pastoral visits you never forget, even though it was over twenty years ago. I’ll call him John. He was a bright, energetic, winsome high school senior. He was active in our youth group – a leader. And after a lot of prayer, soul-searching and talking with trusted advisors, including, me, his pastor, John felt he was being called into the pastorate. He had shared that calling with our congregation, and all rejoiced, except his father. I had steered John toward my *alma mater*, Stetson University, which had a scholarship for ministerial students. But to say his father was not supportive is an understatement!

John’s family was pathologically dysfunctional. And his father was the major pathology. We now know that – after years of secrecy, intense therapy and a shattering of the children’s relationships with their parents. John’s father, an adult Sunday school teacher, was adamantly opposed to John going to college as a ministerial student. And John’s father was used to getting his way. So, at John’s encouragement, I went to visit his parents.

We sat in the living room, John, his parents and I, and had cordial chit chat until I raised the issue. “Why don’t you want John to go into the ministry?” I asked. “He’s too smart to be a pastor,” was the father’s response.

Now, you can imagine how that made me feel! But I’m not the one being persecuted in this story! John is. To have his father oppose, manipulate and bully him into submission to his will instead of the Heavenly Father’s will was an act of religious persecution. So John went to college, but not as a ministerial student. But he rebelled against his father by goofing off at college for four years, thus proving, I guess, that he wasn’t as smart as his father thought, or maybe that he was not too smart to be a pastor!

The happy ending to part of this story is that, ten years after college, John finally returned to his calling and enrolled in seminary. He is now a bright, successful, insightfully blogging Ph. D. student in patristics. That is a specialized and tough field of Church history and theology, thus proving that John is, indeed, smart enough to be a pastor!

I share that story to say that religious persecution doesn’t just happen in Saudi Arabia or India or Indonesia. It can even happen inside church-going families. Religious persecution is the clash between two irreconcilable value systems. John valued the spiritual life – a life of service, study, teaching and ministry. His father valued a much more “worldly” life – the life of control, monetary success, power and prestige. But John has been rewarded with things of the kingdom and great joy in his new vocation.

There is a lot more persecution taking place than we realize. Experts say there is more persecution of Christians in the world today than in any time in history. In Florida, we had a Spanish congregation with Cuban members who had been imprisoned by Castro simply because of their faith. The Russian congregation that meets in our Chapel has members who were sent to a Siberian gulag because of their faith. A Chinese young man who plays basketball in our gym every week was persecuted by the Chinese government because of his faith. Our ESL ministry has a number of Egyptians attending, many of whom are here as refugees from religious persecution.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake! Blessed are those who are reviled because they seek to follow Jesus and live by his Beatitudes. Isn’t it interesting that Jesus ends the Beatitudes on this note. It is a real reality check. In fact, this is what is called a “double Beatitude.” Some scholars treat these as two Beatitudes, but the second is more of a reiteration and a personalization of the first. The previous eight Beatitudes are in third person language, “Blessed are those.” But this double, this restatement of the eighth, moves in to the very personal, second person level, “Blessed are you.”

Jesus doesn’t want any followers to be misled. Be very clear: To follow Jesus can be a dangerous thing! That’s why he called his followers to take up a cross. To be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek – to hunger and thirst for the right things, to be merciful, to be pure in heart – even to make peace can be dangerous things! People can persecute you because of them. The Beatitudes are ultimately not a third person experience! They can get very personal!

We had Rev. John Lennon’s memorial service here this week. He, like Bob Piper, whose life we also celebrated, is one of the unsung, quiet heroes of the faith. He simply tried to follow Jesus, and went about doing good. Serving as a pastor in Amelia County and as the President of the PTA, he took a costly stand opposing the anti-desegregation movement. He didn’t try to lead a protest, he simply spoke up for righteousness’ sake, gently and with a twinkle in his eye. Some leaders in his church didn’t like it. And some members of the community didn’t either. One day Rev. Lennon was walking through the parking lot of the grocery store and a guy in a pickup truck tried to run him over.

See, it isn’t strange to end the Beatitudes – to follow the call to peacemaking – with this reality check. Following Jesus can be dangerous!

It is a sad indictment of religion that a lot of persecution is fomented by religious people upon each other. Christians have probably done as much persecuting of other Christians as non-Christians have. The guy in the pickup truck could have been one of John Lennon’s church members, or even the pastor of a sister congregation! My Scheraus ancestors were part of an early eighteenth century emigration of Lutherans who were forced off their land by the state church system. Every day I drive by an historical marker on Highway 6 about Baptist minister William Webber. He was the pastor of Dover Baptist Church near my home. In the latter eighteenth century, he was one of dozens of Baptist preachers and leaders who were persecuted by the Virginia state church.

Persecution happens very close to home, perhaps even in our house. A spouse or parent may belittle your faith. A boss may ask you to do things that contradict the teachings of Jesus. A friend may ridicule you for your convictions. A fellow

church member may slander. Another religion or denomination may call your beliefs foolish. Your stands for righteousness and justice may do more than get you dropped from some invitation lists. Martin Luther King had his house bombed and his life taken.

So what do you do in the face of persecution? What do you do when following Jesus brings pain very close to home? What do you do when the Beatitudes move from speaking in the third person and start causing you personal pain? Do you retaliate like an unbeliever? Do you sulk like a child? Do you lick your wounds like a dog? Do you just grin and bear it like a Stoic? Do you pretend to enjoy it like a masochist?

No! Jesus says we are to *rejoice and be glad!* In Luke 6's version of this Beatitude Jesus says we are to *leap for joy* (v. 23). We are to jump up and grab our heavenly reward! We are to live ahead of time into the future of God's joyful Kingdom! We are to celebrate that we are in the same class as the prophets – even Jesus himself – who were persecuted before us!

That is what the Apostles did. They were arrested and flogged by the same Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to death. And Acts 5 tells us: ⁴¹*As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.*

That is what Paul did, as he writes from prison in Colossians 1: ²⁴*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.*

That is what Peter calls us to do: ¹³*But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.* ¹⁴*If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed . . .* (1 Peter 4).

That is what eighty-six year old Polycarp did. He was a second generation Christian, a student of John and the leader of the church of Smyrna. When the Roman soldiers came to arrest him and burn him at the stake for refusing to burn incense to Caesar, he served them a meal and prayed blessings on them out loud while they feasted!

That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer did. This Lutheran pastor was vocal in his opposition to the Nazi regime and its idolatry that draped the pulpits of Germany with the swastika flag. His opposition to Hitler brought imprisonment, the threat of torture, danger to his family and finally death. He was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April, 1945, in the Flossenburg concentration camp, only a few days before it was liberated. But hear what he wrote in his famous book, The Cost of Discipleship: "Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace." (pp. 80, 81)

Several years ago, I had lunch with South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. For decades he has worked in the name of Christ for righteousness and justice. He battled apartheid and afterward led his nation's healing as the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He is a most impressive person, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. But the thing I was most impressed with was his joy. He is probably the most joyful person with the most beautiful smile I have ever met. He has seen as much of persecution as anyone I have ever met. But this tiny man exudes a gigantic force field of pure, unadulterated joy! It is Jesus joy, the blessing of those for whom not only persecution but the Christ have become very personal!

As I have said all the way through these eight, the Beatitudes are autobiographical. They are Jesus describing his character. They are the attributes of the changed life which comes with the exchange of our life for the Jesus life. And the more like Jesus we become, the more we should expect some pain in our life. The disciple is not above the Master. But the more of Jesus' pain that we experience, the more of Jesus' joy we will also experience!

So what do you do when the suffering of Christ comes home and becomes your suffering? What do you do when even in your own household the earthly parent's will tries to trump the Heavenly Father's will? What do you do when the pain of following Christ moves from the theoretical to the personal?

You joyfully claim the promise of this double, culminating Beatitude: ¹⁰*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹²*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*