

For the past three weeks we have been studying the beatitudes of Jesus from Matthew 5:1-12. We have already studied blessed are those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek. As we continue the third week in our “Beatitude Sermon Series” our topic for today is “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines persecution as “the act or practice of persecuting especially those who differ in origin, religion, or social outlook.”ⁱ

I believe that most of us cannot say that we have experienced persecution. Maxie Dunnam explains it this way: “persecution is a powerful and holy word that probably should be reserved for those who truly experience pain and suffering...we may experience injustice or discrimination, but the reality is that presently in the United States there are no formal liabilities connected with being Christian...”ⁱⁱ And yet, there are people all over the world who fear for their lives every day because it is illegal to practice faith in Jesus Christ in their country.

According to the “World Mission Digest” in the “twentieth century close to one hundred million people were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ Persecution is not just a phenomenon of the past, it is something that happens every day in the world. The root of persecution is hatred and fear. As we heard one of our new members take his membership vows last Sunday, he was asked the question: “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sins...Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”^{iv}

Leading up to professing our faith in Jesus Christ we renounce the forces of evil in our world and repent of our sins. We recognize that there are forces of evil in the world in which hatred takes root and persecution occurs. Persecution has always been part of our story as people of God.

The Israelites, prophets, and early Christians all dealt with persecution.^v The prophet Jeremiah was even persecuted by a priest as he was prophesying about who God was (Jeremiah 20). Jesus knew that when he called people to follow Him, that they would experience suffering and persecution, and I think this is why he shared this beatitude with his disciples. Jesus was saying although His disciples may experience persecution and suffering, that no one could take the promise of everlasting life away from them.

Romans 10:9 tells us “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Even during persecution in any Christian’s life, they are offered salvation through their faith in Jesus Christ. This is Jesus’ good news for our lives today. That no matter what anyone says or does to us, they cannot take away our hope in Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke about persecution because he knew what it felt like to be persecuted. In our Scripture for today from Luke 4, we see that Jesus was almost thrown over a cliff in his hometown by people that knew him because of his faith. Jesus even experienced the ultimate sign of persecution, when Jesus was crucified on the cross because other people did not believe that he was the Son of God. Christ knew persecution and so did the Apostle Paul.

Paul was in and out of prison and had a difficult life all due to his love of God and faith in Jesus Christ. Even though he experienced extreme persecution he took the time to encourage other Christians. In Romans 8:35-39 Paul says, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...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.”

The apostle Paul took great comfort in knowing where he was going after this life and through our faith in Christ we can as well. The Apostle Paul gave his life so that others would hear the good news of Jesus Christ. So how can we take the example of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul and be bold in our faith, even when it is risky?

We are called to speak out against all types of persecution! Although, we may not experience the same kind of persecution as people in other countries, we can be on the lookout for the things we named as forces of evil as we made the covenant with God and the congregation when we joined the church. We can be on the lookout for injustice and oppression.

You may or may not have heard about a young man who vandalized Culpeper UMC in June of 2017 and wrote the following words on the church doors: “God is dead,” he also wrote the symbol “666.” I saw these words as I pulled up to the church preparing for another day of summer Vacation Bible School.

Our church staff and volunteers were already trying to clean up the vandalism, but the feeling of hurt in my heart could not be cleaned up. Persecution...here was someone who hated God and who hated Christians enough to deface the house of God.

At first, we did not know who the perpetrator was, and I do remember this was the first time in my life that I felt hated for my faith. You see this individual took the time to walk slowly around the church with his turquoise spray paint and write messages of hate.

To make matters worse, about 300 children were about to arrive for vacation Bible School. It was obvious to them that something happened. So, we used the vandalism as a teaching tool. We told the children that not everyone agrees with our faith, but we are called to love them anyway. In Roman 12 the Apostle Paul told us to “Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them.” We later found out the guilty party was a young adult known by many members of our church. He later sent a letter of apology and shared that he was so fueled by hate from having such a difficult childhood, that he felt like God abandoned him. During his time in jail, forgiveness was offered to him from our congregation. Hatred had moved this young man to persecution.

On that day I remember thinking how easy it would have been to respond in anger, but that is not who God calls us to be. We are in the business of sharing God's love, not in the business of fueling anger or hatred against other people. As 1st Corinthians 13 says, “If I do not have love...I have nothing...We must strive to love all our neighbors, even those who may not love us.

As we practice our faith, we have the responsibility to embody the love and grace of God. We have the responsibility to stand up for those who are experiencing persecution, especially other Christians. **The good news about the God we serve is that God can turn persecution into redemption.**

Jesus Christ was persecuted, and yet He took on the sins of the whole world so that we could be free and through our faith we could experience everlasting life. What the Devil wants to use for evil, God can use for good.

The young man who vandalized Culpeper UMC experienced redemption through the way the church responded to him in love. I even experienced this phenomenon in my own life.

After serving on the Board of Ordained Ministry for the past six years, this year I was asked to serve on the Theology Committee with the very same chair who continued me those seven years ago. You see I went to these very same interviews in January of 2012. I was ready. I was overprepared. I thought that all my interviews went very well. Then I received the call that although I had passed two committees with flying colors, they were going to continue me another year because I had failed the theology committee.

When I asked why, my team leader shared that although I had not shared anything heretical during the interview, the team thought that my answers were too short in the oral interview and because of this the team thought that they could not hear my theological voice and were not comfortable passing me. In my effort to not talk too much which is my very nature, I did not talk enough.

So, I was continued for another year in the process. Although this may not seem like a big deal to some, in my world, this was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I had failed, I had publicly failed. I was devastated. I felt a great injustice had occurred.

I wallowed for a while with this grief, then I realized that I needed to spend more time and energy on passing than becoming stuck in the past. The next year, I went back to the interview committee, I presented my action report, and I shared theologically in detail with more examples from my ministry setting, how God had called me to practice this crazy thing called ministry. Then in 2013, I was ordained.

What I found in that year of growth, and it is hard for me to admit this even today, is that being continued had a lot more to do with work I needed to do, and a lot less with the Board that had continued me. What I had experienced was perceived injustice.

After processing my continuation and now serving on this very same team and committee, I have realized that in my surrender of this grief, God has redeemed me so that I can help others who may have the same experience know that God is with them and this is not the end of their story.

I share this story because it was the one time in my life, I thought a great injustice had been done and I will never forget that feeling I had in the moment. It in no way compares to the countless Christians each day who risk their lives to share the good news of Christ, but this experience along with the vandalism at Culpeper

UMC are the only experiences I have had that help me begin to understand what Christians in other countries go through every day.

Today we celebrate that even if we experience persecution that God is with us. God is our refuge who through our faith makes it possible for us to enter into the kingdom of heaven. May we honor Christians everyone who risk their lives to share the good news. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persecution>

ⁱⁱ Maxie & Kimberly Dunnam. “The Workbook on the Beatitudes.” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN, 2004. P. 188.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maxie & Kimberly Dunnam. “The Workbook on the Beatitudes.” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN, 2004. P. 188.

^{iv} The United Methodist Hymnal. The United Methodist Publishing House. Nashville, TN. 1989. P. 34

^v “The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible.” Vol. IV. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2009. P. 449.

Additional Resources

Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 180.