

“Blessed are the Persecuted”
by Rev. David J. Wood
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First Congregational Church
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Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets
who were before you.**

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He received a clear message from his parents when he was young boy starting out in school: don’t get into trouble. Whenever he faced insults or threats, just let it go...don’t get into trouble.

It was 1955, when he was 15 years old and in the 10th Grade that he remembers first hearing about Rosa Parks. He remembers listening to Martin Luther King on the radio.

“I knew I had to find a way to get in the way and I got into trouble, GOOD TROUBLE, necessary trouble.” Later in his life Congressman John Lewis reflected back on his earliest years: “ what Dr. King was saying in his speeches was in keeping with the teaching of Jesus. So I readily accepted . . . the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence.”

He continued, “my civil disobedience came from my faith. Like Jesus, I was laying down my life for others.”

In an interview, John Lewis was asked “when you were beaten down on the Edmund Pettis Bridge on Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965, how did you get up?”

He answered, “Faith.... I had faith in God that He would pull me through. Through all my beatings, imprisonments, and my work in Congress it is faith that saves me, faith that moves me forward. Faith! It is always faith.”

‘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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Longer...extended, more loaded...feels like a culmination of what has gone before, a summing up...notice the shift from the 3rd person to the 2nd person:

From blessed are THOSE  
to blessed are YOU...direct, personal....something has shifted.

Notice, too, that it is the only Beatitude that comes with a command: REJOICE and be glad!!! puts you in honorable company: the company of heaven and the company of all those who gone before you who have suffered persecution for righteousness.

We’re a long way from the promise to protect Christians from persecution by bringing the “Merry” back into Christmas! On that note, beware of any leader who promises to protect Christians from persecution. Not even God does that.

If there is one theme that runs through the Bible, it is that doing the right thing often gets one into trouble: the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, all the apostles...martyrs of the early church...the list goes on...

To be on the right side of history often puts one on the wrong side of the moment....And yet, without those who are willing to get into good trouble, all would be lost...without those willing to stand courageously in the face of opposition to the point of personal sacrifice, this world would be in big trouble.

We know that this world does not turn on its own power toward justice and mercy, love and compassion. And it makes sense that we would find ourselves at odds with the status quo....

Dom Helder Camara...served as an Arch Bishop of Brazil from 1964 to 1985. He died in 1999 at the age of 90. Under the guidance of Camara, the Catholic Church in Brazil became an outspoken critic of the military dictatorship, and a powerful movement for social change. Informally, he became known as the "bishop of the slums" He did social and political work for the poor and for human rights and democracy during the military regime.

He is quoted as having said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

This beatitude makes abundantly clear: between the persecutors and the persecuted, there is no question in whose company Christians are to be found...in this moment of our national life, there are countless people being fired or quitting because they refuse to lie...taking a stand for what is right at great cost to themselves and their families. This past week, I heard a story reported on the New York Times' podcast, *The Daily*. It was about the parents of a trans-child, how they had to leave their beloved community in Tennessee and move to Connecticut in order to get the care they need for their teenage daughter.

We are in a troubling time...good trouble is not hard to find.

On this final Sunday in our series on the Beatitudes...I want to have us step back and look at the Beatitudes as a whole...which is why I had Mimi read all of them. They go a long way to answering the question of what it means to be a Christian...

How would you answer that question if someone put it to you? Theologian Sam Wells suggests there are at least three common responses...see if any of them resonate with you....

FIRST: One answer says, "God comes to visit us when we're at the end of our rope...when we have nothing and no one to turn to."

It's a good answer. It speaks of the compassion of God.

It is to find oneself among the poor in spirit; the meek; those who mourn...

SECOND: To be a Christian means one is dedicated to living a good, upright, ethical life...a life of HOLINESS...And so a second answer says, "God wants us to be holy, and being a Christian means letting the Holy Spirit craft us in ways of righteousness and paths of purity."

It too is a good answer.

It is to be among those who hunger & thirst for what is right; who long for purity of heart; who are merciful towards their neighbors...

A THIRD answer says, to be a Christian is to be one who "stands up for justice, advocates for the disadvantaged, one who turns words into actions even when, perhaps especially when it puts one in places of danger." Faith propels us into courageous deeds.

Also a good answer...Picks up on hungering and thirsting for righteousness; on being a peacemaker; and on not fearing persecution or hostility, or betrayal...on act courageously in face of evil, slander and hate...

No doubt you recognize yourself in one of these...or, more likely, you find yourself with some degree of affinity with all three...If so, you're in good company...namely, you are keeping company with Jesus...

Let me explain further....drawing again on Sam Wells...

It turns out the beatitudes anticipate the story of Jesus...specifically, his experience leading up to and including his suffering and death on the cross...

He's *poor in spirit*

when he's taken on the sin of the whole world...Cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

He *mourns* to the point of tears —  
as he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

He's *meek*

when he's falsely accused and yet never says a mumblin 'word.

He *thirsts* on the cross.

He's *merciful*

when he says "Father, forgive them..."

He's *pure in heart* when he says

"Not my will but your will."

He's a *peacemaker*

when, as Peter prepares to defend him from being arrested — Jesus takes the sword from his hand.

He's *persecuted and reviled* and slandered and mocked..

by the priests, scribes, soldiers, Roman Officials, and bystanders and he is crucified.

The beatitudes school us into the Jesus 'autobiography...call us to follow in his footsteps...to keep company with him. To be a Christian is to live the beatitudes...but not just the first half...not just the way of the cross...we are, like Jesus, no less a people of the Resurrection...

Being a Christian is about making a connection between some aspect of our existence here and now...a disposition, a way of being toward others...and it is a way of life that makes a connection to a fulfillment that is yet to come...it is to be connected, any given moment, to a fullness, a completion, a perfection that is yet to be: of heaven, of comfort, of mercy, of the presence and nearness of God...we may get glimpses of that fullness, flashes of brilliance, a taste of wonder...but the message is clear: There is always more in the mix of our days than we can know...we are always living in a moment in time but every moment has a larger horizon of significance because God is in every moment...

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way:

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.*

*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.*

Through these beatitudes, Jesus invites us into a counter cultural way of life that leads to life....and by God's grace we might become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.  
Amen.