

November 23, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

The Beatitudes: "Blessed by Trouble"

Matthew 5:10-16; 2 Corinthians 11:21-23

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This morning we come to the end of our series of sermons in which we have been looking together at Jesus' teaching in what we call the Beatitudes: eight statements about happiness which form the beginning of a longer body of teaching called the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount occupies Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's account of Jesus' life and ministry, and at the beginning of it, in chapter 5, Jesus makes these eight statements about where happiness is to be found.

To be sure these are very strange statements. The kind of happiness that Jesus is speaking about is not the normal kind of happiness that we hear about in the world around us, but is the kind of "rock solid happiness" that Jesus describes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.7:24-29) when he speaks about a life which is like a house that is built on rock: when the storms come – and they will, when the floods rise – and they will, when the rain falls – and it will, your house, your life, says Jesus, will still be standing, IF you listen to and follow my teaching, and find my kind of happiness! This is the kind of life I want for you.

So Jesus speaks about happiness both at the end of the Sermon on the Mount and at the beginning with these strange words:

- Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Poor enough in spirit to know our utter dependence upon God at all times.
- Happy are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Not only mourning because of the normal losses that we experience in life but mourning because of our sin. Sadness because of our sin and because of the evil in our world. We will find God's comfort when we mourn and grieve like that.
- Happy are the meek who don't have to force their way in life, because they know that God the Father Almighty is on their side: God will lead us on the path we need to follow. So we do not need to push our way through life, forcing our agenda on others to find happiness. Happy are the meek for they will inherit the Earth, that is, inherit far more than we could ever get by pushing our own way in life.
- Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: those who know that life is filled with all kinds of appetites that are out of control, out of alignment, but who say "I've got to get this primary appetite right to hunger and thirst for being rightly related to God and rightly related to others."
- Happy are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

- Happy are the pure in heart for they will see God. Let God see into you, through you, dig into the depth of your being – and you will begin to see God more clearly.
- Happy are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.

And then today's beatitude which is amongst the strangest of all. Jesus ends his Beatitudes with this one:

- *Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.* [Isn't this more paradoxical than all of the others combined?] . . . *for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.* And then Jesus repeats and expands on it. *Happy are you when people revile and abuse you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad.*

And if you've had any doubt that "happy" is a good translation of the Greek word *makarios*, and you prefer the traditional translation "blessed," then Jesus here points out that it's not just a sense of blessedness he's interested in, but it really is our happiness!

- "Rejoice!!" [he says, even in the face of trouble. Be JOYFUL!] Rejoice and BE GLAD! For your reward is great in Heaven . . . for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The word "persecute" here doesn't just mean "physical oppression," though it certainly includes that. But it also means (in the more general meaning of the word) "*being hunted and hounded, being harassed or pushed or pursued or ignored so that you're excluded from a certain group of people.*" That's what persecution involves. It's not just horrific all-out persecution by one person or group on others, but includes those simple but painful situations in life in which we may not be hurt physically but we are certainly excluded socially – told that we are not part of the right crowd; told to get packing, to get out!

- "Rejoice and be glad," says Jesus, "for your reward is great in heaven, for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The prophets to whom Jesus is referring here are the prophets of ancient Israel, going back hundreds of years before the time of Jesus.

Elijah: If you turn to the pages of Jesus' Bible, our Old Testament Scripture, and go back 8-900 years or so, you come to stories about the great prophet Elijah who stood up for and spoke for what was right and just in the midst of the oppression of the King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. When Elijah told them that they were wrong and unjust and idolatrous in what they were doing, they literally "pursued him" so that he had to flee for his life! He was literally "persecuted" in the sense of being pursued, fleeing from others for speaking up for what is right.

Jeremiah: Or you move on to the prophet Jeremiah some 600 years or so before the birth of Jesus, accused of being faithless for telling his people that they ought not to be in an alliance with the nation of Egypt. And then accused for telling his people that resistance against the enemy was useless, that they were going to be carried off into exile in Babylon, and once they were in Babylon they

had to make their peace with those awful godless people and work with them. “*Seek the welfare of that city to which I send you*” said God through Jeremiah (29:5-7). But, said the people, “The city is godless!” To which Jeremiah responds: “Seek its welfare anyway. Play your part in that society.” He was accused of being weak in faith at that moment, thrown in a pit from which he couldn’t get out by him.

Daniel: Or then there is the prophet called Daniel, whose story many of us learn as children. Daniel is persecuted, thrown into a lion’s den, simply for praying to God when the king’s command was that you could pray to nobody but the king himself. But Daniel knew that the king wasn’t God, and prayed to God – and suffered for it.

The Church: Or maybe you remember the stories of persecution long after the prophets, now moving into the time of Jesus and soon after the time of Jesus, in the early days of the Christian church. The Christian era, following Jesus’ resurrection, began with a short period of peace; and then, suddenly the persecution began (see Acts 7ff), and some of that persecution was led by a man whose Jewish name was Saul and whose Greek name was Paul.

Paul thought that the whole idea that Jesus was divine was blasphemous, and that those who believed this should be put to death. And so he pursued Christians to death – until he met Jesus himself, raised from the dead; met him in a blinding flash that left him temporarily blind. And in that moment his life was transformed: he became a follower of the one whom he had persecuted – and in following Jesus he himself began to be persecuted by others, this man who became the greatest evangelist of the early church. This is how he describes his persecution in the 11th Chapter of 2 Corinthians:

“I’ve had countless floggings and have often been near death. Five times I have received from my own people the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked for a night and a day I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys in danger from rivers, from bandits, from my own people, from Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, in the sea, from false brothers and sisters in toil and hardship through many a sleepless night hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.”

This was his experience. Perhaps we should put that as an ad in the Washington Post? “Come to National Presbyterian Church, find Christ, and this is what you will get!” Well this is what Paul got as the evangelist above all others in the early days of the church for his decision to follow Jesus Christ.

Or maybe you’ve heard the description of the persecution that Christians faced in the city of Rome in the middle of the 1st Century (so we’re now about 30 years after the time of Jesus in the mid-60s). The Roman Emperor Nero sets the

city of Rome on fire and wants to blame the Christians, and Tacitus, a Roman writer writing at the end of the 1st Century describes the situation like this (Now, keep in mind that Tacitus is not a Christian. He doesn't have a reason to defend Christianity or Christians in what he's writing, but is just reporting what he knows – and, almost inadvertently refers to Jesus, in one of the earliest references that we have to Jesus outside the Bible). He says:

No human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear [that Nero had somehow ordered the fire]. Therefore to abolish that rumor, Nero falsely accused and executed by using the most exquisite punishments those people called Christians who were infamous for their abominations. The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the Procurator Pontius Pilot during the reign of Tiberius [this reference to Pontius Pilate matches exactly what we have in the pages of our gospels]. They seized those who admitted their faith and then using the information they provided, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city but for hatred of the human race. And perishing, they were made into sports. They were killed by dogs by having the hides of beasts attached to them or they were nailed to crosses or they were set aflame and when the daylight passed away they were used as night time lamps.”

It's all pretty gruesome stuff and we may want to say “Well that was way back then and that was in a place far away,” and we dismiss such events, as if similar things cannot and do not happen in our day and age. But the trouble, of course, is that they do happen; they happen in every day and age in some way, shape or form.

Go back just 30 or 35 years or so to the 1980s and we find in this particular example in the book by Fernando Bermudez a book called *Death and Resurrection in Guatemala*. This is a remarkable story about a village in northern Guatemala not that long ago. Fernando Bermudez writes this,

“One day the army appeared in a small village in this northern part of Guatemala. The captain who came read the names of five beloved villagers. Each of them was catechists in the church. [*DR like our Sunday School teachers!. Sunday School teachers and pastors beware. This is what happened to them*]. They demanded the relatives of these five men execute them. The Army would return to see that the executions had been carried out the next day. They promised to destroy the entire village and the surrounding ones if this demand was not fulfilled. As soon as the army left the village the people formed themselves into groups and discussed the situation. Their response was unanimous. We will not do it. We will not allow this to happen. But when the five catechists who were to be killed took the floor, they stated firmly, ‘*Brothers and sisters go ahead and carry out this order. It is better for us to die than for thousands to die.*’ The people began to weep. The members of the five families were absolutely speechless.

It was about 4:00 in the morning when the march to the cemetery began. The whole population of the villages took part: men, women and children. The five condemned persons headed the great procession. All walked in silence except for the silence being broken by those people who were weeping gently.

They came to the cemetery. The graves were dug and the people formed a large circle. The five catechists took their place in the center. One of them prayed. All the people prayed with them. One said “*We’re going to die but do not worry. We are going to be with God. It’s all right. Go ahead and kill us. If we are not killed our children, our wives, our relatives and the whole population of these villages will die. Go ahead.*” And others said that the only favor we need is for you to take care of our children. The moment of execution arrived and took place. The witnesses who recounted these events said “*We remember them with holy reverence, because it is thanks to them that we are alive today.*”

So that was only 30 years ago. And unfortunately we all know that we can bring the situation right up to date. Think about those Christians in the Middle East today; or think about Christians in China today. Some of you may have read *The Economist* magazine a few weeks ago.

The November 1st edition speaks about China, and about Christianity in China, and most of it is remarkably positive. Christianity is growing in China by leaps and bounds and *The Economist* estimates (though estimates are sometimes hard to find) that the number of Christians in China is approaching 100 million, and none of these Christians are nominal (just names on a church roster)! These people are “in” the whole way with their faith, or they would not risk it at all. Which means their numbers are approaching the number of active Christians in our own nation – soon China will have more Christians in its bounds than any other nation on Earth. *The Economist* points out that at the present moment persecution of the church is much less now than any other time in the last 60 or 70 years. So things are relatively good in China for those who are Christians; and, indeed, in some places the government seems to regard Christians as admirable citizens, playing their part in Chinese society. There are some in power who would want to protect them strongly for this commitment to society.

But, says *The Economist*, there are still some places where officials really do persecute Christians for being followers of Jesus Christ. So the article says this about the town of Wenzhou, a coastal city in China.

Sometimes Wenzhou is called China’s Jerusalem. Most cities of its size with about nine million people have no more than a dozen or so visibly Christian building. [DR: There may be many more Christians worshipping in houses, but usually no more than a dozen or so visibly Christian buildings] In Wenzhou, however, hundreds of crosses decorated the church roofs [so there were hundreds visible places of worship]. This year, however, more than 230 [crosses] have been classed as “illegal structures” and removed. Videos posted on the internet show crowds of parishioners trying to form a human shield around their churches. Dozens have been injured. Other films show weeping believers defiantly singing hymns as huge red crosses are hoisted off the buildings. In April one of Wenzhou’s largest churches was completely demolished.

Or we turn to the Middle East: we're all well aware of the atrocities being committed by ISIS (or ISIL) against all kinds of people, including (it's important to note) their own fellow Muslims. Back in July, though, you may remember the situation that took place with Christians in the city of Mosul where the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said this: that the Christians in Mosul had four options in the following two to three days: (1) to flee, (2) to convert to Islam, (3) to pay a religious tax or (4) to die. And that's it. And you know there isn't a second chance. This is it, is it, and you pack your bags as quickly as you can and you get out of there. Your life is at stake.

And it's to people like that – facing real danger, hounded for their faith, threatened for their faith, suffering for their faith and sometimes at risk of losing their lives for their faith – that Jesus speaks. He knows who he is speaking to, and he says *“You are in good company! Others have been on this road before you! You are surrounded in the past and in the present, in all kinds of ways by others who have been on this road before you.”* And he not only says that, but he adds that *“God does not forget you in your trouble. God does not forget you. Your reward,”* says Jesus, *“will be great in Heaven.”* That, implies Jesus, there's more to come. If we think that this life is all that there is then we are sadly mistaken. This life is Act I. And Act II is to come. And between now and then, if we face trouble, when we face trouble, God will be our defender. God will be the judge of all that is wrong and evil in the world. And God will lead us to another time when all will be well. Our eternal future will be in God's hands. Jesus will have the final word.

It was this faith, this exact faith that enabled those Guatemalans to give up their lives. They knew that there was more to come, and they believed that with all their hearts, and so they were able to be courageous faithful followers of Christ in the present.

And it was this hope, too, that sustained our Lord Jesus Christ when he suffered and when he died. We speak often about his death on the cross, forgetting that he died as somebody who was persecuted for his faith. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is not just speaking about others, but about himself: he himself was persecuted. The cross we have in our church, the cross on which our Savior died, is a symbol of persecution. And the early Christians who followed Jesus, when they were facing trouble, were reminded to look to Jesus and to his own attitude to facing trouble – not just to his words, but to his behavior – so that they would persevere through whatever difficulties they faced.

The greatest passage in the Bible on the subject of finding strength by looking to Jesus himself in time of trouble, comes in the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 12, where the writer is encouraging Christians going through a tough time by saying:

“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” [This admonition surely harks back to Jesus' words: Rejoice! Be Glad! That is, don't allow your hands to droop or your knees to become weak, but RUN! Maintain your life and energy!] *Run with perseverance the race that is set before you. Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of the faith who for the joy that was set before him* [DR: remember that as Jesus died, the suffering was real. Oh, it was real. But he knew that Good Friday would be followed by Easter, and he held this hope that even death, his death, was in the hands of Almighty God] *who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the*

throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

In other words you can go through almost anything if you know that this is not all that there is. If you know that there is more to come; if you know there is a second act, if you know that there is light at the end of the tunnel; if you know that God will vindicate you when it's all so unfair and so unjust, and when power is being abused because you honor the name of Jesus Christ. You can go through almost anything if you know that there's more to come – and you can go through almost anything if you know that you're not alone. If you know there are people behind you, and people ahead of you, and people beside you, somebody right beside you who will hold your hand. This is what Jesus says.

Though I have to say that in speaking about this I feel a little guilty. I feel a little cheap. Speaking about others suffering, great suffering, when I have experienced so little suffering in my life; and next to no persecution – no persecution certainly on the level of physical violence. Never experienced that in my life and precious little on the level of verbal abuse or exclusion from one group or another.

I well remember when I first came to this country 40 years ago I had a Jewish friend from Brooklyn who spoke about growing up in the 50s and the 60s and traveling with his family out of New York City to other places, not knowing whether his family would be welcomed in a restaurant or a hotel. Of course for my African-American friends in the present, as well as the past, this has been a part of the reality of life – this sense of exclusion, being pushed out, not quite being included.

But I've known so little of that in my life, though I have to say in every church I've served there have been some people who have responded to something that I have said by not exactly liking me very much for saying what I've said.

In fact what I've found is that sometimes there are some people who may say "I don't like it because you said this." And in others "I don't like it because you didn't say that" . . . and often it's the same sermon that they're talking about! And there are some who have taken this all very seriously and said "That's it!" – and no longer speak to me. This has happened in the churches that I have served. Indeed, in my first church there was an incident that took place in the first few months after I was ordained that I can never forget. It's about the closest thing to persecution that I have experienced. I was in a church of some 50 members, my first church was very small and at the first annual congregational meeting half my congregation walked out on me. Half the congregation.

Now I have to tell you I never told this to the search committee when they called me here to National; I decided I just wouldn't share that piece of information at that time. In fact every congregational meeting since then has been a breeze compared to that.

But they walked out. And the reason had to do with baptism because I dared to say that when a child is baptized in the church it is not just an emotional and

sentimental moment though it is, it is a wonderful moment. It is a family moment. But it is a covenant moment when we make very serious promises, that God will hold us to, not just as parents but as a congregation. We are saying we are accountable to the God who humbles himself to be accountable to us and to our children. It's a two way street. And so I would not baptize, was not willing to baptize children of those not willing to make that kind of commitment. And about 25 people at that meeting just walked out, and some of them never spoke to me again in the next few years that I was there.

But that's the closest thing to persecution I've ever known; and even then, I've always asked myself this question: *did they walk out because what I did was righteous and right and Godly and true – or did they walk out because of the way I did it? Was I not righteous, but merely self-righteous? Were they offended by the gospel itself, or were they offended because I in some way was in fact offensive?*

Carolyn Henderson writing on www.Beliefnet.com picks up this very point. She says:

Too many times people strongly dislike Christians not because of the message of our Master, but because of the attitude we project when we seek to convey that message. We come across as harsh and unfeeling and self-righteous and unforgiving and inflexible and small minded and defensive.

[Two Reasons Why the World Hates Christians: Are we drawing others to Christ or pushing them away?

www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Two-Reasons-Why-The-World-Hates-Christians.aspx?p=1#6bru2PjvxLzR2x3S.99]

Too many times people strongly dislike Christians not because of the message of our Master but because of the attitude we project when we seek to convey that message! We make people feel small through our own self-righteousness instead of helping them feel large and important because something really important is being said that challenges *but yet values* the life of the one to whom we're speaking.

And that's always a danger: that we don't clothe the gospel in the right way. The apostle Paul who at times seems to be a blunderbuss with the gospel says that clothing the gospel correctly, wrapping it in the right package is important. He says to the Ephesians (4:15) that we are to "speak the truth in love." [The original Greek says quite simply we are to be "truthing in love"]. Those two things are to be side-by-side, never one without the other: truth and love. The two of them side-by-side. So the packaging (love) matters. But so too, back to the main point, so too does the content (truth) in the world, this world in which millions put their life and their welfare at risk when they choose to follow Jesus Christ.

The question should never be far from us as to whether the lack of persecution we face in this country as a whole is because we are just blessed by God or whether it's because we do not take our faith as seriously as we ought. We have been called to love the Lord our God with all our

heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength. And when that happens sad truth is some people don't like it.

Let me close by giving you an example of this by thinking about whistle blowing. I'd like to go back 14 years or so back to the early part of the 2000s and to all kinds of crises that struck our nation in 2001 and 2002, and to an article written in *Time Magazine* which lauds, which praises three particularly courageous women, who were named by *Time* as "2002 Persons of the Year". I don't know if they are Christians or not but they were in fact persecuted, hounded for righteousness' sake. This is what *Time* writes in December of 2002.

"Sharon Watkins is the Enron Vice President who wrote a letter to chairman Kenneth Lay in the summer of 2001 warning him that the company's methods of accounting were improper.

Colleen Rowley is the FBI staff attorney who caused a sensation with a memo to FBI Director Robert Mueller about how the Bureau brushed off pleas from her Minneapolis field office that Zacarias Moussaoui was a man who must be investigated as a 9-11 conspirator.

Cynthia Cooper is the person who exploded the WorldCom bubble when she informed its board that the company had covered up 3.8 billion dollars in losses through phony bookkeeping.

Their lives may not have been at stake but Watkins, Rowley and Cooper put pretty much everything else on the line. Their jobs, their health, their privacy, their sanity. They risked all of them to speak this badly needed word about trouble inside crucial institutions.

But who are these women? *Time* describes them like this:

All three are married and serve as the chief bread winners in their families. Cooper and Rowley have husbands who are full-time stay-at-home dads. For each of them the decision to confront the higher-ups meant jeopardizing a pay check which their families truly depended on. None of them were looking to hog the limelight. All initially tried to keep their criticisms in house to speak the truth to power [DR: They all followed the chain of command] and not to the media. They became public figures only because their memos were leaked later.

None of them wanted to be interviewed for this article. [DR: And then this statement] ***These women were people who did right just by doing their jobs rightly.***

They did right and they faced trouble just by doing their jobs rightly. And that's what "righteousness" is. Jesus speaks of being "persecuted for righteousness sake" – that's what righteousness is: it's just doing our jobs rightly; it's being rightly related to the institutions we serve; rightly related to one another; rightly related to God made known in Jesus Christ – *even when keeping those relationships right may be costly.* Or Jesus puts it this way: he calls us to be salt in the earth, and light in the world. People may prefer the darkness; they may not prefer the

taste of life that Christ wants to bring. But this is how we have been called to live through Jesus Christ.

And the question that remains for us I think is this: *Whether or not when the time comes* – and Jesus implies that the time will surely come at some time in our life: “If they hated me,” he says, “they will hate you” (John 15:18; Matthew 10:22); and the apostle Paul says (2 Tim.3:12) that “all who wish to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will meet persecution.” That is, they will be harried and criticized, and worse –

The question for us is this: *Whether or not when the time comes*

1. Will we be faithful enough to stand up for what is right whatever the consequences?
2. And will we know that when that happens we are in good company? That others who have been faithful to God have been there before us; indeed in heaven they are cheering us on?
3. And will we believe that God who holds our lives in the palm of his hand will not forget us, but will lead us faithfully through those troubled waters into his eternal home forever.

This is what Jesus says. *Blessed or happy (Go ahead! Rejoice and be glad!) when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake, when you are hounded or harried or harassed or excluded or shunned or ignored or laughed at for what is right – because you're not alone: the prophets and many others have gone through this before you, and God will not forget you. Great is your reward in Heaven.*

Let us pray. Lord most high we are humbled to be part of a family in which people have suffered for their faith in you. We seek your blessing upon those who suffer even in this moment and ask that you would strengthen us to serve you faithfully whether we are passing through dark valleys or in placed of great joy. Help us to trust you through Jesus Christ your son our Lord. Amen

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