

March 24, 2013 PALM SUNDAY

The National Presbyterian Church

## Blessed Through Trouble

John 12:12-26; Hebrews 12:1-13; 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

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A couple of questions – the first is this: *Do you want to be happy? Do you want to be happy?* I hope your answer is “Yes.” I know a few dour Scots who don’t appear as if they ever want to be happy, but I hope your answer is “Yes!”

But here’s another question which may be a little harder to answer: *Do you think God is interested in your happiness? Do you think that God is really interested in your happiness?* I mean sometimes we think of God as so great, so austere, so mighty, so preoccupied with the universe that God would not be interested in such a thing as this; coming down to our level and being interested in our happiness. It seems such a light kind of a word, ‘happy,’ that God it seems unlikely that Almighty God should be interested in the happiness of your life and mine. And yet what I know is this as I read the pages of scripture – the God of the scripture is at very much interested in your happiness and mine.

Happiness in the Old Testament: If you turn to the Old Testament to the book of Psalms you’ll find that on sixteen occasions at least the psalmist says that God is interested in our happiness and lays out for the readers the path that leads to happiness and it’s there in the first psalm, in Psalm Number 1, and in the first word of the Psalm, which sets the agenda for everything to come: “Happy are those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked . . . but who meditate on God’s Law day and night.” Happiness is what the psalm is about, and what God’s interest is about.

Happiness in the New Testament: And you see this as you move on to the New Testament and think of the teaching of Jesus. Though sometimes it’s obscured because of the words that are used. For example, if you come to the gospel that we read earlier today, John’s Gospel, you’ll find Jesus speaking not about ‘happiness’ but about ‘joy,’ which seems just a little more firm than happy or happy-clappy. Jesus speaks about it in the 15th Chapter of John’s gospel (v.11) he says, “I want my joy to be in you,” speaking to his followers. He wants his joy to be in us which means that he is joyful, and he has a joy that overflows from him into our lives. And then he says that he wants “your joy to be complete.” This is what he wants for us.

And then you move away from John's gospel and you come to the gospel according to Matthew. In some translations you won't find the word happy there but it's only a matter of translation. It's there in one of the more famous passages in Matthew's gospel; in the 5th Chapter, in a whole segment that we call 'the Beatitudes,' which we normally think of as a stream of statements on 'blessedness'. Now 'blessedness' is a holy word, a somber word, the word we might want to use in a formal situation. But in fact if you go back to the Greek the word is *makarios*. And *makarios* is the simple, common, everyday word in the ancient Greek world for 'happiness'; just happiness. And indeed when the Old Testament was translated (a short time before Jesus lived) into Greek (in what we call the Septuagint Version), for those psalms which speak about happiness, the word used in translation was *makarios*. And Jesus is picking up on that happiness in the psalms, and saying that this is what he wants for those who follow him.

Having said that, though, the happiness of which Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes, well it is probably just a little different from what we would have in mind. Perhaps you remember some of the Beatitudes – let me go through them again. Normally the statements are 'blessed are this...,' or 'blessed are those...' But let me put in the word 'happy' for 'blessed'. Jesus says:

- happy are the poor in spirit;
- happy are those who mourn;
- happy are the meek;
- happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;
- happy are the merciful;
- happy are the pure in heart;
- happy are the peacemakers.

And then perhaps the strangest one of all –

- happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Happy those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake? You're kidding? All of this is surely counter-intuitive, these statements of blessedness or happiness: counter-intuitive because we don't think, generally speaking, that happiness lies within all these things that Jesus mentions.

In fact, in our nation, perhaps more than any other nation of the world, we have pursued happiness since the Declaration of Independence by trying to get rid of as much trouble or difficulty as possible. And I'm in favor of that. Indeed, we have succeeded better than any other group of people in history to get rid of disease, to get rid of difficulty, to make life easier at every possible level, because we think that if we can do that, get rid of all those troubles, we'll find our happiness there.

What Jesus is saying, though, is this: that whether or not we succeed in that pursuit of living a trouble-free life, *happiness is what he wants for us, and we can find it whether or not those troubles are still here, or whether or not they are gone. Whether or not we are on top of the world or whether the world is on top of us, even when we are*

*poor in spirit, even when we mourn, and yes, even when we are persecuted, the happiness of which he speaks, that he longs for you and me to share in, can still be ours, even then.*

Now at this stage we may well say to ourselves that sounds all well and good, but hasn't Jesus lost a little bit of touch with reality to think that we can have that kind of happiness here on Earth. It's one thing to 'teach' this approach to life theoretically, but to actually live it out? Surely he's lost touch with reality. And we could be excused for saying that; except that Jesus is persistent in this line of thinking, and on that first Palm Sunday he is not only the who has taught about this in the past, but he now actually demonstrates this kind of happiness within his life to those who gather around about him on.

As he approaches the city of Jerusalem and descends down the Mount of Olives into the city in which he is going to be persecuted and put to death we find Jesus leading the parade, the Palm Sunday parade and it is a happy occasion. It's not merely joyful. It's not a good Presbyterian happy with no smile. It's a happy occasion. They're waving palms and they're singing Psalms and he's leading the crowd and he is not doing this with a somber face. It's a happy moment even though he knows exactly what lies ahead of him.

Let me set the context so we get the full picture here. Palm Sunday – what preceded it? Well, for about two and a half years (we're not exactly sure of the full length of Jesus' ministry) Jesus is helping and healing and teaching people. Some of it was in Jerusalem where Jesus was on that first Palm Sunday. Most of it was up north, about 70 miles north, in a region called Galilee, a fertile region which surrounded a gorgeous lake called the Sea of Galilee or the Lake of Tiberius. This was Jesus' home territory and there he helped and healed thousands of people who gathered to him. Great crowds came to Jesus.

Some years ago I was in the Dominican Republic at a mission from the congregation I was serving, a medical mission. There were dentists and doctors with us and we set up a clinic very close to the Haitian border. And people streamed to this clinic held in a school. They streamed to the clinic from all around. Nobody had cars, they were poor as poor could be. But word got out that there were people there who could help them in the face of their pain. I don't know how many teeth were pulled that day but there must have been hundreds. Imagine living with tooth ache with no resolution, no resolution at all; no thought that the pain could go away. And they heard. And when they heard they came from miles around. And as I watched this I said "My goodness. It must have been what it was like when word got out that Jesus, a healer and helper was in town."

Well the crowds flocked to Jesus and when they flocked to him he not only healed and helped them, but he taught them and spoke about the power of God the King. In a world in which these people were powerless, in which all kinds of forces of evil seemed to control their lives whether the forces were spiritual, whether they were material, whether they were political (for example, the force of the Roman empire), Jesus said to these people that

*there is a King who has more power than you know of, and he welcomes you to live your life in the sphere of his influence, under his power and authority, in his kingdom. This is your home and you are invited in, whoever you are, to find your home within the realm and under the rule of God in a world in which you are powerless. And within that realm I offer you a happiness that nothing, nothing can take away.*

And there were thousands who listened to this but not everybody listened, and not everybody was happy. When Jesus preached like this there were some people who felt the power that they wielded over others, from which they received their happiness, was being sucked out of them. And so instead of honoring Jesus and listening to Jesus and following Jesus, they made their plans to do away with this man who was destabilizing their world – stabilizing it for some, destabilizing it for others.

And Jesus knew this was happening. He knew it was happening and he walked straight into the midst of it. Not running away from evil, from trouble, from suffering but walking into the midst of it, and doing this on that Palm Sunday knowing full well, as he climbed onto that donkey on the brow of the Mount of Olives and headed down the hill, across the Kidron Valley and up the other side to the glorious temple, restored by Herod, -- knowing exactly what awaited him there.

And yet it was happy and he asked that others follow with him. What Jesus wanted at that moment was not only for his teaching to find a home in the lives of others, but for the demonstration of his life to find a home as well. For others to realize that at this very moment, this existential moment when suffering faced him, he had

- a faith in God who could *turn evil into good*, who could *redeem any evil*,
- a faith in God who could *take pain and infuse it with purpose*.
- a faith in a God who *when doors were closed in the face of people, could open them*.

This was the faith that enabled him to ride that donkey with, well, what is the word we want? equanimity? or joy? or peace? or happiness? – into that city. And he wanted others to know this as well. So when he arrives in the city as we follow the passage that we read in John Chapter 12, we find Jesus turning to those who seek him out – a group of people who were identified as “the Greeks” (they represent people like you and me, the people from the rest of the world outside of Jerusalem), who come seeking him. And to these people as well as to his disciples Jesus speaks this way – he says (12:24-26)

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies [DR: the going is going to be tough my friends, he says] it remains just a single grain.*

*But if it dies [if it's willing to go through that trouble, that difficulty] it will bear much fruit [ah, the happiness that comes from leading a fruitful and effective life].*

*Those who love their life lose it [Cling to it, you lose]. Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life [Those willing to give it away and trusting it into the hands of God will find a life that nothing can take away from them].*

*Whoever serves me must follow me [This is not an option. And we know where he's going. He knows exactly where he's going and it is to the cross – must follow me].*

*And where I am there will my servant be also [And then the promise:] whoever serves me the Father will honor! [Will honor! That is, whatever evil we face as we serve him, he will redeem. Whatever pain we enter he will infuse with purpose. Whatever doors are slammed in our face he will open.]*

This is what God did with Jesus – the suffering on the cross redeemed for good, becoming the source of salvation, the bearing of our punishment so that all our sin could be forgiven – evil redeemed, pain filled with purpose and death, that closed door, opening up to resurrection.

What a great promise, what a great example. What great teaching when he says to each of us: this is what I want you to know and believe.

For the early Christians this promise of God honoring them in a world which did not honor them, God redeeming them from evil in a world which confronted them with real evil and which overtly persecuted them, was of enormous significance. It changed their lives. And the persecution began, well, as soon as Jesus died and in the years that followed.

One of the great descriptions of that persecution comes from a Roman historian by the name of Tacitus (Annals, 15:45) who looks back to the days of the Emperor Nero. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/tac/a15040.htm>. He's writing at the end of the 1st Century, and he looks back to the mid-60s when Nero sets fire to the City of Rome and looks for scapegoats and he finds this new group in the city called the followers of a man called Crestus, and he blames them for the fire of Rome. And he arrests them and he tortures them and on some, Tacitus says, he places the skins of wild beasts and sets them on fire so that they die in this burning pile. This is persecution indeed and they held on to these promises which Jesus makes and found their joy and their happiness and their peace and their equanimity riding on with Jesus all through that.

We may say to ourselves well those were those days 2000 years ago that doesn't happen now. Oh but it does, it does! Just this past week in Indonesia a church that had been in existence for well over a decade was torn down simply because it was a Christian church. There is persecution today (<http://www.persecution.org/2013/03/26/hundreds-cheer-and-clap-as-indonesian-church-is-demolished/>). And this article that I want to read for you was written just this past Thursday, this past Thursday. The title of it is, hit the press, "Will Pope Francis Become The Savior Of The Persecuted Church?"

<http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2013/3/21/will-pope-francis-i-become-the-savior-of-the-persecuted-church>) Let me read you (an edited) part of it:

Christianity is the world's largest religion and with more than one billion members, the Roman Catholic church is its largest denomination.

Anyone who watched the recent installation of Pope Francis would have taken away the enduring impression of a powerful influential faith that commands respect even from its detractors.

But in other parts of the world it's a very different story.

In the choked streets of northern Nigeria cities Christians lead a fragile endangered existence.

In recent months the Christian inhabitants of the Joseph Colony neighborhood in Lahore, Pakistan experienced what can only be described as a pogrom.

Pakistan is also the country that imprisoned a woman, Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five who is facing the death penalty under that country's blasphemy laws.

Herein lies the paradox: the world's largest religion is also the world's most persecuted faith. Advocacy groups working on behalf of the persecuted church estimate that from one hundred to two hundred million Christians live with varying degrees of oppression.

Not only in Indonesia or Pakistan or Nigeria but also in North Korea, Sudan, China, other countries as well. You may well be asking but who wrote this? Is this a Christian advocating for the Christians? Well the answer is that this particular article comes off the Jewish news service and was written by a man called Ben Cohen – who is Jewish, and who has found it as part of his calling to stir up Christians to know what's going on with Christians around the world. And this particular article was written just this past week (March 21, 2013).

Sometimes following Christ for some people even now in this world means following him into religious persecution – potentially deadly – in which Jesus says to them, "Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness." He wants them, even then, to find this kind of happiness. And though this might happen to us (and it is not inconceivable as things shift and change within our culture and as Christendom seems to die, that it would happen to us), the fact of the matter is more often than not these days when it comes to your life and my life, the kind of persecution we face is rather light compared to that. But nevertheless when we're in it, it's still real. For example, the kind of persecution which would occur if we stand up for what is right and nobody stands with us. When we stand up for what is right and we're left all alone and there may be a sneer or a jeer for we know that our view is now the minority view and we do not have the support that once we had.

Chris Blake tells the story of a young student, a high school student, who faced the possibility of this kind of sneering and rejection on remaining alone for doing

what was right. I don't know if this story is true but it nevertheless is very true in terms of being something that could possibly happen and does happen in high schools certainly in our land and probably around the world. This is what Chris Blake writes (*Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*):

Every student in our high school knew about it. Nobody did it, nobody. Lunch time at Monroe High School was consistent. Those who did not eat in the cafeteria headed with their sack lunches towards the quad. The quad was a large treeless square of concrete in the center of campus. It was the meeting place. Around the quad the various school cliques assembled. Everybody knew their place. But inside the quad it was different. Inside was no-man's land. Nobody at Monroe walked across the middle of the quad to get from one side to the others. Students walked around the quad, around the people, around the stairs. Everybody knew about it so nobody did it.

Then one day at the beginning of Spring a new student arrived at Monroe that did not know the rules. Her name was Lisa. She was unfamiliar to the area. In fact she was new to the State. She had enrolled at Monroe that morning. All morning she struggled to find her classes, sometimes arriving late which was especially embarrassing but she had made her way through the morning to lunch. Standing in front of her locker she decided to carry along with her lunch all of her books for afternoon classes. So Lisa began the longest walk of her life through the hall, down the steps, across the lawn, across the sidewalk, across the quad. As Lisa walked she shifted the heavy books alternately resting the arm that held her light lunch. She had grabbed too many books. The top book kept slipping off and she was forced to keep her eye on it in a balancing act until she moved past the people. All at once she sensed something. The air was eerily quiet. A nameless dread clutched her. She stopped. She lifted her head. Hundreds of eyes were staring. They bore into her. She froze, dazed, pinned down. Her mind screamed "no, this can't be happening!" But it was.

And that was when she slipped down to the pavement, lay there in the center of the quad. And that's when the laughter started, like an electric current jolting the perimeter and wrapping itself around and around its victim. She lay there until from the edge of the perimeter a figure emerged slowly.

A tall boy. He was walking rigidly as though he were measuring each step. He headed straight toward the place where the fingers pointed as more and more students noticed someone else in the middle, the calls softened and then they ceased. A hush flickered over the crowd. The boy walked into the silence. He walked steadily, his eyes fixed on the form lying on the concrete. By the time he reached the girl the silence was deafening. The boy simply knelt and picked up the lunch sack and the scattered books, then he placed his hand under the girl's arm and she got up. They walked across the quad, through the quiet perimeter that parted before them.

The next day at Monroe High School at lunch time a curious thing happened. From all parts of the campus different groups of students walked freely across the quad. No one could really explain why it was okay now, but everyone knew that it was.

And all because of Lisa and this courageous boy who came from nowhere! Courage, stand up. Do what's right; when others are laughing or jeering, or when they may exclude you, when you have no idea whether you will be welcomed back into that perimeter, into that circle.

There are times when we are called to face that kind of persecution for what we know to be good and true – and I think in our world we will as Christians increasingly have to face it. And we don't know the outcome – he didn't, we don't, but, wait a minute . . . yes we do!

Remember? Our God is a God

- who can *redeem all evil*,
- who can *infuse pain and alienation with purpose*,
- who can *open every door that seems closed*.

And we know this because of Jesus – not only his teaching, but his life and his faith, his trust, on that Palm Sunday and in the hours and days that lay ahead of him.

This is who our God is, who speaks to us as he spoke to those disciples on that first Palm Sunday saying to them, “If you are my follower you must follow where I lead you. And my path leads to a cross. But know this, that if you lose your life in this way for my sake you will not lose. As the Father honors him so the Father will honor us.”

- He will redeem us from all evil.
- He will infuse our pain, our suffering and our alienation with purpose.
- And whatever door seems to be closed he will open.

He did it. He does it. He will do it again. This is what Jesus did and what he taught on that first Palm Sunday and what he wants you and me to hear today. Happiness, joy, equanimity, poise, majesty, a sense of fruitfulness, that's what he wants for you and me.

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