

## **HOW TO BE HAPPY WHEN THE WORLD GIVES YOU GRIEF**

***A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 14, 2016***

***Based on Matthew 5:1-12 and I Peter 4:12-19***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled “Bless You – experiencing God’s blessing in a world full of challenge.” The concluding sermon in the series will be next Sunday. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

We have observed in this series that we find Jesus’ central teaching about blessing in the Beatitudes – a set of eight sayings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount. We heard all eight in the Scripture reading this morning: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. And finally, the one that will be our focus this morning: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

You will note that a basic feature of most of the beatitudes is that they are counterintuitive – Jesus says that people are blessed when they are in a situation that does not sound very blessed. This is especially the case with the final beatitude, where Jesus says, “Blessed are the persecuted.” The verse becomes all the more jarring when we realize that the Greek word translated here as “blessed” is the word “makarios,” which carries the idea of being “happy.” The verse could be translated as “Happy are the persecuted.”

Obviously, Jesus is challenging conventional notions about where happiness is to be found. And just to be sure we get the point, Jesus adds emphasis to this final beatitude by repeating the idea. He begins by saying, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Then he goes on to say the same thing again but with lots more detail: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” This does not sound like the road to happiness. But Jesus continues and says, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jesus concludes by referring to the persecution of the Biblical prophets, who indeed were often severely persecuted on account of their faithfulness to God. The prophet Jeremiah was once thrown into a cistern and left to rot because he had spoken unpopular words. The prophet Elijah had to flee for his life from the wicked Queen Jezebel. In the New Testament, John the Baptist was beheaded for his work; and Jesus of course was crucified. The persecution of the faithful would continue unabated in the early church. The apostle Paul was imprisoned, beaten, stoned, and flogged; and many early Christians suffered extreme persecution under the Roman Empire. Today Christians all around the world continue to be persecuted. The persecution has been especially severe in a number of Muslim countries, there has been persecution in India, and in recent times persecution has been dramatically increasing in China. Christianity has been growing at a rapid pace in China, which apparently is alarming the Communist Party leadership. The government has

launched a campaign to forcibly tear down the crosses from the tops of church buildings, so as to make less evident how many Christians there are. Nearly 1700 crosses have been toppled by the government to date. The pastor of China's largest church – the Chongyi Church – a pastor known in the international community as Joseph Gu, has publicly resisted the crackdown. He was arrested and has been in prison since January. He and his wife sent a letter to the congregation in which they wrote, "Chongyi Church is experiencing unprecedented chilling trials. Increasingly, we feel God's good intentions in this storm. It will refine every impurity in our ministry team."

For centuries, people of faith facing persecution have taken it as an opportunity to deepen and purify their faith, so that they could witness yet more powerfully for Christ. And as Christians have responded to persecution with commitment, the result has been some of the greatest times of growth in the church.

We of course do not face the kind of violent, outward persecution that afflicts many Christians in other countries; but we may still find ourselves in circumstances where our faith is coming under considerable pressure. We may be in circles at work or school or among acquaintances where our faith is belittled, we may face serious trials in life that cause our faith to be challenged, and we live in a society in which our faith can be undermined by the secular, materialistic culture that surrounds us. What then do we do when our faith in various ways is under assault?

Jesus says, "Rejoice and be glad!" (Matthew 5:12a) But how can we be glad or happy when the world is giving us grief? Jesus goes on to give us two key reasons for rejoicing—two key attitudes to have when we are faced with trials in our own lives.

First, he says, your reward is great in heaven. Jesus urges us here to keep our eye on the goal. The present trials are transitory. We can find the strength to persevere, and a sense of joy in doing so, if we remember that we are heading through Christ toward a tremendous destiny.

Secondly, Jesus lifts up the specific example of the prophets, as he says, "for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The prophets were people who aligned themselves with the purposes of God and who devoted themselves to God's work no matter what the difficulty. The prophets were people who found joy, not because things were going nicely for them, but because they were able to share meaningfully in what God was doing in the world.

This then is how Jesus says we can rejoice and be glad, even when our circumstances are tough. We can do so by joining with the prophets in aligning ourselves with God's will and keeping our eye on our ultimate destiny. Clearly, the joy of which Jesus speaks here is not a pleasant feeling arising from good fortune. The joy of Jesus is much deeper – it is the spiritual blessing of being in harmony with God and sharing in God's purpose.

All this means that when we face persecutions and trials, the answer is not just to try to escape difficulty or to manufacture some distractions to offset our troubles. The real answer is to devote ourselves yet more fully to God and to God's work.

This is precisely what the prophets have done throughout the ages; and it is what we continue to do as a church today. As we wrestle with trials in our personal lives, and as we face great challenges in the world at large, our answer is to join with God and be in mission to the world.

A good example of that in recent weeks can be seen in our church's response to the story of a girl in Uganda named Zanetah. Zanetah is the niece of church members Andy and Josephine Lepp. She suffers from sickle cell disease, a debilitating illness which causes excruciating bouts of pain. There is a treatment for the disease, which can bring about a complete cure, but the cost for the treatment, which would involve travel to a hospital in India where the treatment could be done, would amount to \$55,000. How could this family possibly raise \$55,000? Our church responded a few weeks ago by making an appeal for Zanetah. We recently got a letter from her father, which I would like to read to you:

"This is to acknowledge receipt and appreciate all the contributions you made toward our daughter Zanetah's bone marrow treatment costs in India. We are informed that you raised a total of \$9002 toward Zanetah's treatment. This is by far the largest contribution made by any group toward Zanetah's campaign drive! I and my family are therefore extremely overwhelmed by the love and support you have extended to us in this very stressful and challenging time. Our prayer is for God to bless you exceedingly in all your endeavors.

We are glad to inform you that as of today, the Save Zanetah campaign has raised a total of 50,828 (of the required 55,000), thus leaving a balance of 4,172 [and that might be even smaller by now, as the letter is several days old]. We have already made a deposit at the hospital, obtained visas, and are ready to set off on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August [that's tomorrow].

Your support is a very big boost toward Zanetah's treatment, and we as a family can never thank you enough for the generosity you have displayed. I specifically acknowledge my brother-in-law, Dr. Andrew Lepp, for taking the bold move to fundraise for Zanetah. I acknowledge the United Methodist Church of Kent for accepting to run this campaign for someone thousands of miles away and unknown to them. This is a true revelation of the boundless love of Jesus Christ at work in your hearts. May God bless you and always reward you for your efforts."

There is real joy to be found in sharing in God's work. All this relates to what we noted in the opening sermon in this series – that when the Bible speaks of blessing, and uses a word that also connotes happiness, it is not talking about the sort of fleeting feeling of personal well-being that people often think of when they think of happiness today. The blessing of God is a spiritual condition of fellowship with God, and with God's purpose, which brings a deep and abiding joy even in the face of serious trials. This is what the apostle Peter was talking about in the passage we heard earlier, where he echoed the words of Jesus and said, "Rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings . . . . If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of God is resting on you." (I Peter 4:13-14)

How then can you be happy, or glad, when the world gives you grief? You don't have

to be happy about the grief; but we can find joy in the midst of trial when we look to God in faith and commit ourselves to God's call. Peter summed it up well as he said, "Let those who are suffering . . . entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good." (1 Peter 4:19)