

This Maundy Thursday we continue our walk through the Beatitudes and we will certainly see the intersection of this night with the passages being explored. On this night, we remember Jesus gathering his disciples, including the one who would betray him, around a table; a table where he would break bread and drink from a cup instituting what we now know as the Lord's Supper. The table is set, so let us listen to the Word that Jesus would have for us this night...

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The word of the Lord... thanks be to God...

When I hear this closing portion of the Beatitudes I wonder if many Christians like ourselves can even begin to fathom what this means. Tonight, it is safe for us to gather and proclaim Christ; we do not have to fear that our house of worship will be destroyed or that someone might perpetrate violence against us, as was done against our brothers and sisters in Christ in Egypt on Palm Sunday. Yet, some among us may have suffered persecution or at the very least discrimination during their lifetimes. But, for most of us it's possible that we have never really "suffered" for the faith.

As a matter of fact, the gospel of prosperity has so permeated Western culture that American Christians often see their blessings as proof of God's favor. Some people even say their blessings are their right as the children of a generous God. Christians in America, for the most part, do not suffer persecution... we are not discriminated against in jobs or housing or in the colleges that our children can attend. Many American Christians even expect that following Christ will actually bring perks! That is, if we live in relationship with God, and try to do what is right, life will be good. Like the continually popular book by Harold S. Kushner implies... we don't expect bad things to happen to good people like us!

Yet, as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* Jesus said, "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. Count yourself blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me." Now I'm not sure any of us would immediately think we were blessed if these things began to happen to us.

And I believe an Italian journalist gives us some insights as to why we wouldn't feel blessed! This Italian journalist immersed himself in our culture for a year, living in Georgetown, a section of Washington, D.C. After a year, he summed up the American culture this way, "Americans are obsessed with three things: comfort, control, and competition!"

Does that resonate with you? Now I'm sure most of us like the conveniences of air-conditioning and heating in our homes and cars, yet from the journalist's perspective this represents our desire to be comfortable all the time and to control the uncontrollable... the weather. I must admit, I like the comforts of my car on cold nights when I can turn

on the seat warmer or in the summer when I can blast the air conditioning! And with March madness hardly a memory, most are hard pressed to name the final four, let alone the final eight, for as a culture that thrives on competition, we generally only remember the winner - North Carolina! If being comfortable, in control, and winning are our priorities for those of us living in America, it is easy to see why the Beatitudes don't make sense, especially these concluding verses.

Yet, our scriptures record that Jesus experienced persecution. The fact that he embodied these verses brings us to this night and back again tomorrow on Good Friday. When he pushed against injustice, it pushed back and devised a plan to get rid of him. People reviled him and uttered all kinds of evil against him. Jesus was persecuted in the cruelest of ways and suffered death.

These verses challenge us to consider the possibility that Jesus is asking us to embody these Beatitudes, as well, even at the risk of our comfort and control. Jesus is challenging us to risk our ease and maybe even our lives, as we follow in his footsteps. The question asked of us this night is simply: "Will we only be an admirer of Jesus or will we follow in Jesus footsteps?" an admirer or a follower?

In preparing for this sermon I visited a website called the Voice of the Martyrs at www.persecution.com. It's a website that gives a privileged American Christian like me a window into the lives of Christians around the globe who are suffering simply because they claim faith in Christ. Imagine suffering physical harm or being jailed for your faith, as the Pastor of the Vietnamese PC church I served alongside of was, in his country of origin for 6 years. Pastor Cuong spent six years in prison, simply because he claimed Christ. He is also barred from ever returning to his country of birth. Imagine being economically cutoff from commerce or education simply because of the faith you practice. Imagine being threatened with death because of your beliefs.

This site has reinforced my belief that I am indeed a privileged American Christian. I live in a country where I can freely live out what I believe without fear. Yet, it also made me realize that I am pretty American in the way I live out my faith... I live out my faith with relative comfort and control; seeking to be the best Christian I can possibly be. This site convicted me and made me wonder, "Am I only an admirer of Jesus?" Here is Soren Kierkegaard's description of an admirer: an admirer never makes any true sacrifices. An admirer always plays it safe... she renounces nothing, gives up nothing..." [Pause]

We know that on this night the disciples couldn't even stay awake or watch as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. They played it safe and grabbed a couple of winks. We know that Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed even after he said he would never desert Jesus. Peter wasn't willing to sacrifice his safety and so he denied Christ. All of Jesus' disciples cowered in the upper room in fear of their lives, fearful of the persecution they would most likely suffer if they admitted they followed Jesus.

Tonight, we may not be cowering in the upper room, but are we lounging in an easy chair? Are we playing it safe, staying within the confines of our comfort zones in living out our faith? Have we denied Jesus by looking the other way when injustice is being done in our places of work or communities or country or world? Are we playing it safe in order

to fit in rather than turn ourselves and the world away from the sin of self-centeredness? Have we made any sacrifices that have compromised our comfort or control?

You see I believe the Christianity of an admirer arouses no one's ire or resistance, and I am pretty sure that the cry for moderation or for not rocking the boat is neither the biblical ideal nor what the Beatitudes teach us. If we upset no one and experience no resistance, as we live out our faith, then there is a very strong possibility that we may be merely an admirer of Jesus.

You see the gospel asks us to give all we have, in full measure, to God. God blesses those who depend only on him. God blesses those who quietly trust him and do not try to get their own way. God blesses those who experience trouble for doing what is right. The Beatitudes don't say, "God blesses those who are comfortable or in control or always first!"

As we gather around this table tonight Jesus is asking each of us, "Are you willing to risk your ease? Are you willing to aspire with all your strength, with all your will to live the way of the Beatitudes?" Are we as a church willing to be a follower of the way of Christ Jesus? For when we care more about doing things God's way than about what people think of us, our actions will begin to change us and the world in which we live and move and have our being... And... it is quite possible that we will face resistance or even persecution.

Even so, like our brothers and sisters in Egypt, we do not stop praying together saying, "On earth as it is in heaven," so that we can impact one life at a time, as we follow in the way of Christ and risk our comfort, control and our need to be first!

Are you, are we admirers or followers... that is the question of this night. Amen.