

Matthew 5:10-12

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (NIV)

Acts 5:17-42 (excerpts printed here)

²⁷The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

²⁹Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³²We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men....I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

⁴⁰His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴²Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

PRAY

When I was growing up, my grandmother had two framed needlepoint portraits on a wall in her house. One was of “Blue Boy” by Thomas Gainsborough (1790) and the other of “Pinky” by Thomas Lawrence (1794). Each of these fit in an eight by ten-inch frame. These became familiar images to me. Imagine my surprise when, as an adult I visited the Huntington Library in Southern California where I encountered the original oil paintings.

Framed in elaborate gold frames, each portrait is life size! The discrepancy between those of my youthful encounter, and seeing the originals was startling. The originals are impressive for their magnificence in every way, not simply for their size.

Today’s message concludes this series on the Beatitudes, each one with its corresponding blessing. When we began, I shared that one summer when I was about eight years old, while staying in a cabin in the Sierra Nevada’s, with my grandparents, my sister and I memorized the Beatitudes, at my grandmother’s urging.

My youthful experience with the beatitudes then and now, as with the artistic masterpiece mentioned, has certainly changed. I have found them impressive for their simplicity and magnificence. I have found them personally challenging. Jesus’ focus here is on God’s Kingdom values and how those are lived out in the here and now, by us, his disciples. These values are counter-cultural; not universally regarded or rewarded today. Those who are spiritually impoverished, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for right relationships, who are humble and speak truth to power, the merciful, the pure in heart, and those who prize and make peace? They are often perceived as troublemakers. Think: Gandhi or M. L. King, Jr.

This last beatitude is perhaps the hardest. I think I would save the best for last, but Jesus saves the hardest for last. Jesus does not sugar coat any of his teaching, and in this last beatitude, he spells out the cost of discipleship. Like the others, this beatitude has its blessing but that comes after a high price is paid.

If you were a car salesman, you would not say to the potential buyer on their first test drive: “This is a great car, it has four-wheel drive, all weather tires, etc. *but* the

cost of maintenance over the life of the car will be exorbitant, the seats are very uncomfortable, it's a real gas guzzler and it failed to pass the minimum crash rating tests by Consumer Reports." Based on that sales pitch you would probably keep on looking!

I don't know about you, but being persecuted, reviled, insulted, and being the victim of falsehoods is not my idea of a fun time! You?? Of course not.

But, if I am going to experience trouble, "it is important that we get in trouble for the right reasons: "for righteousness sake." (DF Bruner, Vol 1, p. 153) In his own comment on this last beatitude, Jesus unobtrusively inserts his name in the place of the word "righteousness". There is no better reason to get in trouble, than for Jesus' sake, as we seek to live into these beatitudes and set wrongs "right". That is the meaning of righteousness!

And the reward or unexpected blessing that will be ours? JOY! Really? When was the last time you experienced deep, soul satisfying joy?? This is certainly counter-intuitive! But let's take a look at the passage in Acts 5: 17-42.

The early church, under the leadership of the apostles/first disciples, is growing. They are performing many "signs and wonders" among the people. They are highly regarded by the people, and the church is growing numerically. Crowds gather, people are coming to faith and being healed. Sounds exciting, doesn't it?

But then comes trouble: In a fit of jealousy, the religious authorities, the Sadducees, arrest and jail the apostles! But an angel of the Lord enacts a jail break, sending them right back out to the Temple courts to bear witness to Jesus! Now what is not readily obvious in the English translation, is that the word "witness" in Greek, is "*martyr*" -yes, the very same word from which we derive the English word: martyr! Witnesses tell what they have seen and heard. Simple.

Fast-forward, when the Council or Sanhedrin convene, along with the Chief Priest, and they summon the prisoners to court...only to learn that the prisoners are back in the Temple causing trouble! I mean, telling people about Jesus!

This time, they did not use force, but persuaded them to come before the Council to be questioned by the High Priest.

²⁸“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

²⁹Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³²We are **witnesses** of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” Acts 5:28-32

Infuriated, the High Priest calls for their execution! But a well-respected Pharisee named Gamaliel makes a reasoned plea. Perhaps like a couple other charismatic men who gained followings, but who proved to be a flash in the pan, this movement might be similar. Gamaliel advised:

^{v.38...} *Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” (v.38-39)*

After a flogging and severe warning NOT to speak “in the name of Jesus”, they were released. What Luke tells us next, is mind boggling to me:

⁴¹*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, **rejoicing** because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴²Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. (5:41-42)*

I do not want us to miss this: after false imprisonment and flogging—which is intended to kill—the apostles leave **“rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name”**.

I found myself moved to tears several times this week as I contemplated the disciples’ reaction. (repeat v. 41)

This perfectly illustrates for us this final beatitude, “in action”. Their very lives were at risk, but there was nothing they would *not* risk to be witnesses—to tell what they had seen and heard from Jesus!

I get a sense that these disciples were both elated and energized to continue to witness, and ever more willing to “suffer disgrace for the Name”! They are filled with JOY - the result of their obedience. (Trust and obey!)

I don't know about you, but I have not experienced persecution, verbal abuse or false accusations as a result of my faith. Have you?

Pay attention to what Jesus says: ¹¹“Blessed are you **when** people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” **When, not if!**

Jesus' words are meant to be a warning as much as an encouragement. There is a sense of inevitability here. On the night of his betrayal and death Jesus told the disciples: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” (John 15:18)

The values that Jesus promotes as integral to Kingdom of God are counter cultural. True then, true today. If we do not experience some inner dissonance between what Jesus teaches and what the world values, then we are not paying attention.

What is the blessing that results from suffering for Jesus' sake, persecution/insults/falsehoods because of Jesus, and in the name of right-relationships? **Joy!** The author of Hebrews says of Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2): “*For the **joy** set before him he [Christ] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

Not all suffering we experience is due to our obedience to Christ; some is just the natural consequence of being fallen creatures living in a fallen world. Covid19 and other illnesses, a poor economy, a natural disaster (earthquake/ hurricane/ tornado)—these entail suffering, no doubt. These are different from suffering rejection or worse, because of our faith in Christ.

Friends, we are living in an unprecedented season of both pandemics, with its own unique stresses, and a season in our national life where longstanding racial inequities and tensions have erupted. I believe this is an invitation to soul searching and self-examination, not only for me personally, but for us corporately as a group of believers, and even as a denomination.

I believe it offers an opportunity to listen to voices often unheard, to learn, and to work toward mutual understanding, and change where it is warranted. This is a vital conversation in which you and I, as Christ's disciples—are called to live out these beatitudes. It will require of us humility, a willingness to take risks, to pay the price of living into these Kingdom values that Christ has here described:

“To acknowledge our poverty of spirit and our need for God”

“to mourn” the ways that we have contributed—knowingly or unknowingly- to these inequities and tensions

“to hunger and thirst for right relationships”

“to be merciful and receive mercy”

“to be pure in heart”

“to be persecuted for doing what is necessary to right wrong relationships”

The blessing of this beatitude is a deep soul-satisfying JOY!

I pray that we can “rejoice and be glad” for being counted worthy of suffering disgrace for and in the Name of Jesus!

PRAY

Benediction:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. **And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** Hebrews 12:1-2