



Today, someone, somewhere in the world, will lose their life. It will not be as a result of hunger or disease. It won't be a result of their age or infirmity. The loss of life will result from religious persecution.

This morning we complete our series of messages on the Beatitudes, as we talk about persecution. The final beatitude is, perhaps, the most difficult of all, and it is also the longest – three verses, while the others are one verse each – and four times as long in number of words compared to the next longest. It is the longest, I assume, because it is the most difficult. It is easy to like a beatitude that promises us comfort, or mercy, but one that tells us we are blessed when persecuted or insulted is much, much tougher.

For the final time in this series, let's read the Beatitudes. I hope that, as we have read through them each week, they have become more etched into our hearts and minds.

Matthew 5:1-12

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,

2 and he began to teach them. He said:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed 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.

12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

1. The Reality of Persecution.

Let’s talk first about what persecution is not. Persecution is not disagreement or ridicule. In our hyper-partisan, contentious society, as we have lost much of the ability to talk to one another, some people believe that simply to be in disagreement is equal to persecution. It is not.

Ridicule, although unpleasant and unfortunate, is also not persecution. Members of the early church sometimes faced ridicule, an example of which is found in Acts chapter 2:13. In chapter 2, Luke writes about the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church. Many of the people who were in the crowd that day recognized the divine power of the moment, but not everyone. Verse 13 says, *but some people in the crowd made fun of the believers. “They’ve had too much wine!” they said.* While unpleasant, and perhaps, at times, bigoted, ridicule is not persecution. I do not enjoy ridicule and I believe we should always work to discourage it, and I do not want to add my voice to any form of ridicule, because doing so creates an environment in which the seeds of persecution can be planted.

So what is persecution? Persecution is the denial of a right or rights that are enjoyed by others. It is the targeting of an individual or a group because of their race, their religion, or some other facet of life, particularly one that sets them apart from the majority.

According to a report by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, one-third of the world’s population (2.2 billion people) live in areas of the world where religious persecution increased between 2006 and 2009. (you can find the report at this link – <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/08/09/rising-restrictions-on-religion2/>). And some estimates, indicated in other research, put that number as high as 2/3. Note that this is not the total number of people who live under religious persecution, but the number who live where it has increased. Clearly, much of the world’s population live where being a person of faith is made difficult because of persecution.

While not all countries are experiencing this rise in religious persecution, it is becoming a daily fact of life for people of faith in the most populous countries, with two of the biggest offenders being China and India. China has been vigorous about cracking down on the house church movement, as the government fears the move toward freedom and independence that are natural outgrowths of the message of the Gospel. China, which is officially atheistic in its governance, only allows worship to take place in state-approved churches, which probably number somewhere in the amount of 20 million people. In the state-approved churches there are often government representatives

present in the worship service, listening to what is said and monitoring that activities that take place. In contrast to the state-approved churches, it is estimated that 60 million people – and possibly millions more – worship in the house churches, which operate without government approval and whose leaders are often subject to harassment and arrest. The house church movement is booming in China, so much so that in not many years China will have more Christians than any other country on earth, and this in an environment of persecution. Though we don't hear about it often, Chinese authorities have, in the past few years, destroyed many churches, often coming in the middle of the night with equipment to tear down the buildings.

The Middle East, obviously, is one of the most dangerous places in the world for those who are Christian, or members of other minority religions. ISIS, certainly, has become one of the primary threats throughout the region, but it is often government authorities who aid in religious persecution. When ISIS fighters began to move through Iraq and Syria several years ago, they began a violent purge of Christians from communities that had a Christian presence for many centuries. In some cases, ISIS gave Christians a matter of hours to flee their homes or face death. If they fled, they could only take with them a few items, leaving behind their homes and most of their belongings. The Middle East is the birthplace of our faith, but persecution there has caused many believers to flee from that part of the world. Some, however, persevere under very difficult circumstances. I recently saw a picture of a congregation in Syria that had returned to their building to have the first worship service in several years. The church building was heavily damaged and was in need of significant repair, but the congregation was joyous to be back in their spiritual home.

2. *The Gospel Challenges Power.*

Several years ago I read a fascinating article about some research that connected Christian missionary work and the rise of democracy around the world. The researchers discovered that where missionary work had taken place there was a corresponding rise in the spread of – or desire for – democracy. This should not come as a surprise. The gospel asserts that all people are created as free individuals, are meant to live in freedom, and are endowed with a God-given right to worship – or not worship – as their conscience dictates. Democracy and freedom are what happens when people hear the message that God has created all people as equals and that he desires that they live in freedom. Paul writes in Galatians 5:1 that *it is for freedom that Christ has set us free*, and freedom is a central tenant to the gospel.

We were not created to live under oppression, or to be pawns of political bullies and tyrants. The early church faced much persecution because this message of equality and freedom made Rome uneasy. The Roman Empire was not interested in sharing power with anyone, and they were not about to allow freedom and democracy to threaten their grip on power.

Jesus was a challenge to a lot of people in power. He was a challenge to the Romans and to the religious leaders of his own people. When Jesus was asked whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not his response was not as neat and easy as we generally think (Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26). When Jesus said to *render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God* he was presenting us with the reality that both Caesar and God claim ownership over all; there is no power sharing. For the followers of Jesus, calling him *Lord* was a capital offense. That was a title reserved only for the emperor. To use other titles, such as *Son of God* and *Prince of Peace*, were also capital offenses. Though we don't often pick up on the political nature of the life and teaching of Jesus, much of what he said and did was a direct confrontation of the power of Rome, and Rome did not abide any competitors.

3. *Faith, Hope, and Love Wins.*

The Christian faith was born under persecution. The theme of persecution is alluded to in many of the writings of the New Testament. Paul's letter of Philippians, which was written while he was in prison, awaiting execution at the hands of the Roman Empire, is an amazing document of someone who was facing martyrdom. In spite of his circumstances, the letter is often referred to as *the book of joy*. How could anyone be so joyful in such difficult circumstances? Paul was able to maintain his joy because he knew that, ultimately, he was in God's hands regardless of his circumstances and regardless of what happened to him. The book of Acts tells us the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:8-15), and of how, on that day *a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison* (Acts 8:1-3).

Peter was no stranger to persecution. The book of Acts tells us that he was taken before the Sanhedrin for trial (4:1-22), that he was imprisoned (5:17-20), beaten (5:40), and imprisoned again (12:1-19). In his first letter he writes that *in this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine* (I Peter 1:6-7). Peter is saying that even in persecution there is some kind of benefit that can be found. Who among us has not said, *I wish I didn't have to experience that difficulty, but, through that difficulty I learned...*? It is the triumph of faith that can find something good, and even beautiful, even in the midst of suffering and persecution.

This is a lesson that persecutors do not learn – you cannot overcome the power of faith, hope, and love. These great qualities of faith, hope, and love – the triumverate of Christian values – hold within them the greatest power on earth, and no amount of persecution can ever overcome them. This is what led the great church father Tertullian to proclaim that *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*. As much as the

persecutors of the church tried to defeat it, they could not do so. No power held by an earthly kingdom can defeat the power of faith, hope, and love.

When Tanya and I were in St. Peter's Square several years ago it was interesting to note the presence of an ancient Egyptian obelisk in that square. What in the world is that object doing in that location? That obelisk is one of a number located throughout the city of Rome. They were brought there by Roman emperors as a way to demonstrate their political might. To take such an object from another kingdom, another military power, was a way to show Rome's superior military and political might.

Interestingly, that obelisk was probably one of the last things Peter saw as he was crucified. And look at what occupies that vast territory now. The city that was once a symbol of the might and power of Rome has now become one of the centers of the Christian faith. Not far from that location, at the Colosseum, a cross now stand in the place where the emperor's seat was located. It would have been inconceivable, two thousand years ago, for anyone to imagine that a new religion, heavily persecuted by Rome, would not only survive, but thrive. The vast Roman Empire, which dominated the world, is long gone, but the Christian faith persist.

4. *Our blessing of freedom.*

As we gather for worship this morning, and as millions more gather for worship across our country, we must remember that we are historic anomalies. For most of the history of our faith, people did not enjoy the freedom we enjoy to worship according to the dictates of our conscience. In fact, for a number of centuries, in some countries, people could not even choose their own religion. The Latin phrase *cuius regio, eius religio* (the religion of the king is the religion of the people) was the rule for much of Europe for centuries.

For us, we are blessed because –

Not one prevented us from attending worship today, and no one compelled us to be here (sorry, kids, your parents don't count. My siblings and I were expected to attend church with our parents; it wasn't a choice and there were time I did not want to go, but I am grateful that they insisted).

No one will tell us how, or how not, to worship.

No one will tell me what to preach or not to preach.

No government regulators attend our worship.

No one will tell our congregation what we can and cannot do.

We need no government approval for what we do.

No one will threaten us for being here.

As Americans, we enjoy the gift of religious freedom, a bedrock principle of our society, but we cannot forget our brothers and sisters who do not enjoy the luxury of living their faith without the fear of persecution.

Perhaps we cannot fully appreciate what we have always had, but we must always advocate for the freedom of others, especially the most basic right of all humanity – the right to religious freedom.

5. *We are called to the kingdom of God, which is an alternative vision of how to live.*

Jesus spoke often about the kingdom of God, and it is very clear from what he had to say that the kingdom of God is very different from the kingdoms of this world. Jesus' words about the kingdom of God often provoked a sharp reaction, because kingdoms of this world do not like competition. In the time of Jesus it was certainly clear that the Roman Empire did not want competition from any other kingdom.

The kingdom of God is one that supercedes all manmade boundaries. Humanity is so caught up in tribalism, nationalism, and other ways of thinking that draw lines between people. The kingdom of God does not draw boundaries; it erases them. Even in our faith we sometimes draw boundaries. I am often puzzled at the religious language of “turning America back to God.” I can't imagine Jesus having a “turn Israel back to God” rally. It would please me very much to see our nation embrace faith in a greater way, but it is important that we remember that the kingdom of God is not limited to our nation alone. The goal of the kingdom of God, and thus are goal, is not to improve our society alone. The goal of the kingdom of God is to bring all people to the love of God. In this way, the kingdom of God is a radically alternative vision of life that goes far beyond any nationalism or other limiting view of life and humanity.

When Tanya and I were preparing to travel to Europe several years ago, we talked about the countries and cities we wanted to visit. Once we chose our destinations, we needed to decide what we would visit in those locations. I only had two requests. In London I wanted to walk across Abbey Road and have my picture taken, matching the cover of the Beatles album of that name. Tanya took the picture of me walking across the road and I had it enlarged to a poster size. I hung the poster in our basement, just below the Beatles Abbey Road poster. My poster is in the basement because, evidently, a big picture of me walking across Abbey Road does not qualify as “living room art.” The second place I wanted to visit was very much a spiritual pilgrimage to the catacombs in Rome. Tanya and I traveled just outside of the city of Rome and entered one of the catacombs with a tour group. The early Christians often met for worship in the catacombs because that is a place they could go and not fear being harrassed by Roman soldiers or anyone else. They were not bothered because the catacombs were tombs, and no one else wanted to go down into those tombs. Imagine what it would be like to have to go below ground, into tombs carved out of the volcanic rock, in order to worship. Throughout the catacombs were shelves, where bodies were placed, and larger rooms, where some families had their own tombs. As we neared the end of our tour I could hear another group behind us. The group was from Asia, and I had heard their voices echoing down the stone corridors and it really caught my attention when I heard them begin to sing. They were in one of the larger rooms, a room about half the size of our sanctuary. I

walked back through the corridor and stood outside of the room where they had gathered, so I could hear them sing. They were in a circle, holding hands, and singing *Amazing Grace*, in English. There was a stone altar in the room, and I imagined this was what it must have been like, centuries ago – followers of Jesus, gathered in that tomb, three stories below ground, singing and worshipping. It was an incredibly moving moment, hearing the voices of those who were far from the birthplace of our faith, and from the place where the early church was persecuted. It was evidence, beautiful evidence, of how the church has become a global presence.

Kingdoms come and go, but God's kingdom remains. Rome's great empire, a powerful empire that forced the early church into the tombs in order to worship, has passed away, but God's kingdom and church has not only remained, but prospered. There are kingdoms in this world still that seek to hinder or eliminate the church and God's kingdom, but still it persists, and thrives.

Blessed indeed are the persecuted, because the kingdoms that threaten and persecute them will not be the ultimate victors. The kingdom of God reigns now and forevermore!