

“HE NEVER SAID IT WOULD BE EASY:  
II – ‘BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN PEOPLE REVILE YOU  
AND PERSECUTE YOU’”

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Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus stood in the midst of a crowd one day and said a lot of words that, at face value, didn't seem to make sense. Words like: blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, and the words we're going to consider this morning, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you.

Anybody here ever been reviled or persecuted? Did that feel like a blessing?

A number of years ago, when I first came back to Elkton to serve here in this church, I was invited to have lunch with two other clergymen – Laurie Loveless, who many of you know serves as the Senior Pastor of Elkton Presbyterian Church right next door (at least until the end of June when she's retiring), and Beverly Porteus, who then was the priest at Trinity Episcopal Church down on Bridge Street. She retired a few years ago.

Anyway, at this luncheon, we were sharing stories and experiences, and I asked them how things were for them being clergymen in Elkton. Beverly, who was actually one of the first women to pastor one of the mainline denomination churches in town said that about a week after she came she got a scathing letter in the mail from a man who told her she was an abomination in the sight of God, and basically was going to hell for what she was doing. Talk about being reviled and persecuted.

Well, I've never experienced that depth of criticism but I've had my share. There was once a man in a church I served who would face the wall anytime I preached, and occasionally, when he was particularly irritated at me showing up in the pulpit, he would sigh loudly during my sermon. His grandest gesture of all was the day he held an open hymnal in front of his face to block me from his sight while I preached. And, of course, he was sitting close to the front where everyone could see him.

I don't remember feeling particularly blessed that day. But I was young and insecure, and now, looking back on it, in light of Jesus' words today, I guess I was doing something right. Because all I was doing was what God had called me to do, and that was preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, in essence, “Blessed are you when you're being faithful to God's call of your life, and living out your faith in visible and vocal ways, and people criticize you. Because you're being faithful to God, and God notices, and you're in a

long line of people who have faced criticism for doing the same thing over the ages. Don't let it get to you, because your reward will be great in heaven."

I wish all of us could remember that, so that we would be bold in our faith. I wish we could remember that Jesus says we're blessed when being a child of God brings us trouble and criticism. But I'm afraid that, too often, we try to avoid criticism and thus, play it safe.

I read about a young man who, long ago, spend a summer working in a logging camp. He was a Christian, and had been raised in church, going to Sunday School, worship and youth group. His mother was more than a little worried about the way he'd be treated in the logging camp, around those rough and tumble men. She was afraid they'd really mock him and put him down for his Christian convictions. But she let him go anyway.

At the end of the summer, when he got back home, she was anxious to hear about his experience, and said, "Well, son, how was it? Did the men pick on you for being a Christian?" His face brightened up and he replied, "Never. They never found out." (Ellsworth Kalas, *Beatitudes from the Back Side*, p. 87)

Well, that's one way of not being reviled or persecuted, and sadly, a way that many Christians sometimes go – hiding their light under a bushel for fear of being "picked on." And I think sometimes, that society has programmed us that way. Keep your faith private. "It's okay to believe, just don't try to shove it down my throat" type stuff. We get so afraid of offending someone, that we don't say anything.

Which is not what Jesus calls us to do. Our faith should affect the things we do, the words we speak, the actions we take. And we are called to be a light in the darkness, so when darkness shows up, God wants us to speak out. As one person put it, "The Beatitudes are a call to action to make Jesus present and visible and manifest when the world tries desperately to silence those who speak the truth." "The Beatitudes are a call to action for the sake of creating the world God imagines." (On-line, Karoline Lewis, "Righteous Living," 01/22/17)

So are you willing to be criticized, to face being reviled and persecuted for righteousness' sake? If you are faithful to the Gospel, it will happen, because as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, when you do, "people will put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit you. **What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable.**"

Try standing up sometime and speaking on behalf of immigrants and see what happens. It won't matter that Jesus, over and over again, talks to us about loving strangers and caring for those who are hurting – you'll be criticized.

In the same way, talk about helping the homeless. Even though you follow the Jesus who always tried to help people who had lost their way and were struggling, you're sure to get an earful from the "let them pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" crowd.

Or from a different angle – have any of you ever felt persecuted by your own family or friends – because you are a person of faith, and you believe in prayer, and you come to church and Sunday School? Have you been the butt of jokes and made to feel like you're weak? It hurts, but as Eugene Peterson reminds us – "the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable."

If you keep the Sabbath holy, and commit to being in church and Sunday School, and that means not being available for other things – like sports schedules or family events – I guarantee you that you'll hear it. If you're not put down, at least they'll try to persuade you to change – to accommodate worldly ways.

I think you might all agree that it's not necessarily easy being a Christian, a person of faith in the world today. It's a different world, where it used to be a world filled with people who went to church and believed. Now, not so much. Now, probably all of us have people that we dearly love in our lives who don't practice faith. Oh, they are good, decent, upstanding, moral and ethical people, and we do dearly love them – but oh, something's missing, and if you're like me, you ache for them – and if you're like me – when they make jokes, or put what you so believe in down, it hurts – really hurts. So we know the truth of Jesus' words today.

And sadly, sometimes the criticism and revision and persecution comes from other Christians. They'll tell you you're too liberal, or too conservative, or don't read the right version of the Bible, or aren't qualified to do thus or so in the church, or for any number of reasons. That really hurts – when the criticism comes from fellow believers.

But my friends, Jesus' invitation to us is to not let that stop us – no matter how it happens or who is criticizing, reviling or persecuting us. Don't let being put down, or criticized stop you from doing what God calls you to do, or saying what God calls you to say. Be bold in your faith, and know that it will cost you. The price is worth paying, and you'll stand in a long line of faithful witnesses to Christ who paid the price too – and you will get your reward in heaven.

When we are bold in our faith, I think it brings a smile to the face of God. But more than that, I think it can change the world, at least our little part of it. So friends, be strong. Be strong in your faith, and be strong in your witness to Christ. Because the world needs to know him – his love, his passion, his compassion – and we're the ones who can make him known. We say it in our mission statement as a church – "To know Jesus, be known by Jesus, **and make him known to others.**"

So do not be afraid to be who you are - a child of God and a disciple of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. Live the truth, speak the truth, and when you find yourself reviled or persecuted, know that you must be doing something right! And remember, through it all, that the Good News of the Gospel is that you are not alone – God is with you every step of the way. So trust in him, lean on him, and let your light shine and your life speak – and if it brings you pain – give that to him as well. May it be so.

Amen.