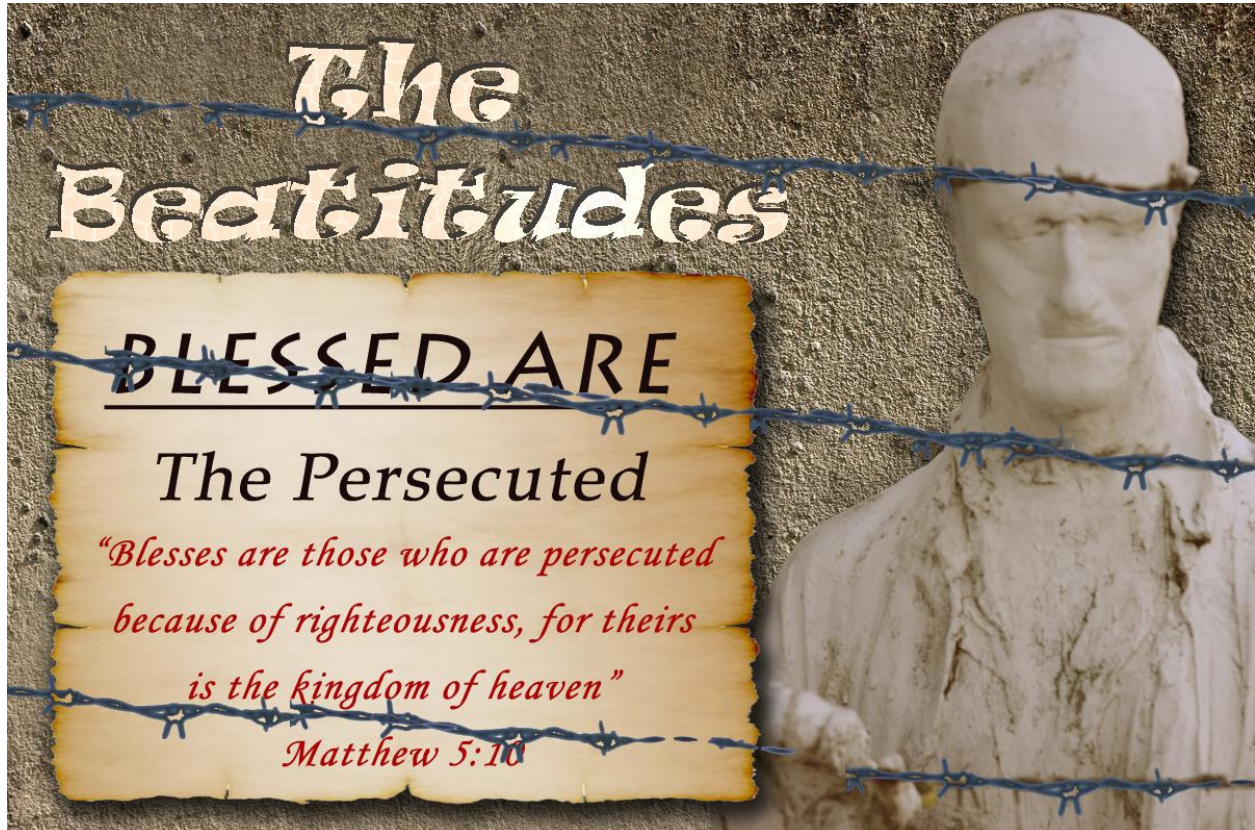


August 21

“Blessed are the Persecuted”

Matthew 5:10

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



Special Music:

“The Promise”

The Martins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlijZRWiRm4>

THE PATH OF PERSECUTION

**Blood drips from the fingertips
Of the persecuted.
Mind and flesh
Left tattered by the whims
Of indifference and prejudice.
Humans reconstituted into spooks
Contained by mesh and barb wire
That imprison the body
But not the fire
Of a burnished heart.
Each soul made to suffer
Simply because another
Finds their existence offensive.
Saints and martyrs
Political up-starters
Inappropriate colors
Sisters and brothers
Descended from legacies
And family trees,
Uprooted,
Removed from the garden.
Ideas and pigment clash
With Insensibilities,
Where tolerance is cast
Into the shadows.
Sustenance refused**

**And corpses abused
Until nothing remains
Except stains
Like blood drops in sweat shops,
As self-anointed gods
Attempt to erase
The very memory
Of the victim's souls.
But, what God has created
Cannot be undone.
A soul, is a soul, is a soul.
And the soul which is taken to task
For Seeking the difficult path
To righteousness
Will find its way home to heaven.**

Pope Alexander VI had a problem. In the late 1400's, Spain was in discovery mode, searching for wealth and new resources. Columbus had just "discovered" the new world in his quest for a new route to India and the Pope wanted to encourage and support continued exploration. We hear it on TV and in the movies all the time, "if you want to find out what is really going on, follow the money." Untold wealth was at Spain's fingertips and the Pope saw this as a opportunity to expand the coffers and the reach of the church.

But there was a problem. It seems this "new world" was inhabited by natives, non-Christians, savages in the eyes of Spain and the Pope. This "new world" contained a tremendous amount of land. There was the North American and South American continent as well as a plethora of islands, all rich with resources for the taking. But how could a good Christina justify taking land and resources that did not belong to them? So, Pope Alexander got to thinking. Could savages truly own land? After all, they were barely more than animals. Maybe all he needed to do to rectify the problem was by adjust the definition of ownership. After all, didn't God give the world to "Christians." It might be a little difficult to sell, but he set forth to do so.

He did so by developing a new branch of theology and justifying it with scripture. In this new theological leg, European humans were considered superior in every way to the savages of the "new world." He explained that the savages had been placed in the "new world" by God to protect and nurture it until the true owners (white Europeans) could come to claim it. The pope then wrote a Papal Bull (which is basically a treatise presented by the pope to explain new and

old theological concepts in the social context of the period). Papal Bulls were treated as fact, truth, undisputable, and the faithful of the church embraced them.

The Papal Bull that Pope Alexander presented has come to be known as “The Doctrine of Discovery” and in it, the Pope stated that any lands that were not occupied by Christians could be “discovered” and be exploited with the justification that “the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted, increased, and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.” In other words, God thinks this is a good thing because we are going to spread the gospel and bring salvation to the savages.

But that really wasn’t the case. It was more a doctrine set to ease the conscious of everyone involved. But to make it all official, an explorer only had to read the doctrine in English to natives when they encountered them, even though the natives couldn’t understand English. Nor did they have any concept of land ownership. Having read the doctrine, the explorers claimed the land, subjugated the people, and started collecting the resources, often using the natives for slave labor. This was all fine with the church as long as they received their tribute and could hold their heads high by pretending it was about bringing Christianity to the poor, underprivileged savages.

I won’t read the whole doctrine to you. It’s rather long. I will get you a copy if you like. And yes, I can hear it now, “Why would I want to read it, pastor? Like you said, it’s a long document that was written over 600 years ago by a Catholic Pope.” Well, the short answer is because it still gets waived around as

justification for how indigenous people are treated. In 1823, the US supreme court unanimously agreed that the Doctrine of Discovery gave European nations the right to the subjugation of indigenous people. By making this claim, the Doctrine of Discovery gained legs within the American legal system. That has never been rescinded. The Doctrine of Discovery is still very much a part of our inheritance and our legal system.

Humanity's inhumanity to fellow humans is nothing new. World leaders have often taken the "we are better than you, we want what you have, so we are going to take it" approach. And all too often, we have turned to church leaders to justify our actions so that we can feel good about it. In 1933, Pope Pius XI signed a concordat with Hitler to protect Catholics in Europe, while turning a blind eye to the holocaust. Even today, church leaders make governmental compromises in an effort to regulate religious principals among citizens. There are those that condemn the Taliban while trying to legislate Christian morality. History has proven over and over that when a government legislates morality based on religious views, chaos ensues. Saying something is Godly does not make it Godly. Slavery was endorsed, encouraged, and justified by the church through scripture in the 1700's and 1800's.

Persecution is:

The poison of prejudice

The nectar of indifference

The manifestation of intolerance

The essence of ignorance.

And the rotting fruit of hubris.

Our way is not always the better way. Our truth is not always the better truth. We are Children of the Living God dedicated only to His truth, not our own, and when God tells us to love one another, that is not up for interpretation or for us to justify who we love. He tells us to love our enemies. He tells us:

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

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells us:

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

I am about to tell you something you may not want to hear. I am going to promise that if we do as Christ tells us, if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, we will, at some point in our lives, be persecuted. It may be subtle. Maybe someone throws an egg at your car. Maybe someone gets in your face and yells about how you are corrupting society. Maybe someone goes out of their way to hurt you in some way. Godly Righteousness offends some people. It can be seen by other individuals as viewing yourself better than them. “What, are you too good to have a drink with me?” “I don’t trust people that don’t curse.” “You think you are better than me just because you go to church.” “I don’t find that Bible of yours very impressive.”

I beg you not to fall into that trap. There is someone there who is hurting and they think that they can make themselves better by making us look smaller. But our God is bigger than all creation. And this shouldn’t surprise you, we don’t

have to prove it. This is not a matter of more votes for God making God bigger or better. God is the Creator simply because God is the Creator. It takes a great deal of hubris and ego to spit into the face of Jesus. But like I said last week, we are not put on this earth to defend Jesus. He does not need nor want us to do that. Instead, we need to example Jesus, embrace Jesus' reaction to that kind of "I'm on a pedestal and you're not" kind of attitude. Jesus forgives them. Jesus loves them. Jesus died for them, just like he died for you and me.

There is not a wiseman, theologian, religious leader, pastor, guru, counselor, philosopher, psychic, or sage that has ever lived or will live that has authority over the message of Jesus Christ. When Jesus spoke, He made things clear. If someone else's words are contrary to what He teaches, Jesus still wins by default. God wins by default. The Creator of all wins by default. We should never try to justify any action on our part without holding up the actual words and example of Jesus Christ as the primary source for that action.

I wanted to start this message today with stories of Christian martyrs in the early centuries of the church. But to be honest with you, God led me in another direction. The injustices, humiliation, sacrifices, torture, and deaths of early martyrs is made painfully real in historical writings. But God did not want me to grab your attention with sensationalism or grotesque voyeurism. There is a morbid and horrific seed in the mind of some individuals that seeks to contrive evil and monstrous ways to tear, mutilate, burn, drown, and suffocate the human body to illicit a desired response. Such persecution is not limited to Christian believers. It can include political dissidents, racial oppression, religious

suppression, ethnic dissuasion, and all manner of superior expression. It's not about numbers. In the Roman empire, citizenship was highly sought after but seldom obtained, yet a minimal number of elite citizens in the Roman Empire controlled a major part of the world through domination. In South Africa during the Apartheid years, 20% of the population was white, yet they controlled, manipulated, and subjugated the rest of the population.

I recently read of a group of Christian worshippers who were part of an underground group of believers in North Korea who were found out and executed. I get daily reports of Christians dying for their beliefs in Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, the Philippines, Africa, China, and so many parts of the world where Christianity is condemned and often banned. But it is also true of other religions as well. The problem with many of these reports is that they are unverifiable. How do we verify what is happening in North Korea? The world is so full of disinformation these days, even from major media outlets. It is difficult if not impossible to separate truth from fact. At the same time, how do we ignore reports like this? How do we ignore the possibility that our Christian brothers and sisters are being oppressed?

There is no upside to Persecution. It is a dark, cancerous, ugly, malignancy of the soul. It is just as ugly and sickening when it is perpetrated by Christians as it is in non-Christians. It is also contagious. Persecution is rampant and it takes many forms. In the U.S. it may take on a more modest context to the sensationalism of incidents abroad, but it is still rampant, and it is still ugly. It still alienates, maims, and kills. Imagine having an Asian heritage

and pulling into a gas station only to realize that all of the gas pumps suddenly stop working. Imagine entering a restaurant and being ignored by the servers because you are Jewish. But even here in the States, there is a great deal of difficulty separating fact, from fluff, from outright fiction. The only way that I have of verifying the face of persecution is when I have seen or experienced it myself. I have found myself in those situations because I was Caucasian in an area that was primarily ethnically different. I have had my life threatened for my beliefs. But you will not hear that on the nightly news or in a special bulletin online. In our modern chaos, we will only find news that is objectified towards manipulation and phrased to pick the scab of our sensibilities, consciousness, or morbid curiosity. Let's face it, sensationalism sells.

There are several Holocaust Museum's scattered around the world and I had the opportunity to visit the one in San Francisco. It was a humbling experience. The museum exists to document the horrors of The Holocaust so that we don't forget. We should never allow ourselves to forget the inhuman and collectively evil events that have shaped our history. Visiting places that remind us of the history of human degradation, subjugation, humiliation, and extermination are hard. We realize just how susceptible we are to the human inclination of claiming superiority and where that can lead, and no matter who we are. Throwing some out-of-context Biblical verses into the air to justify such warped and ugly attitudes can never justify the actions or events.

People that do not have a thirst for Godly righteousness, cannot understand or appreciate those who do. People that plant both feet in this world

cannot understand what it means to seek righteousness. People who are so focused on their own rightness will actively seek to avoid righteousness, because righteousness becomes a stumbling block to their success. People who believe that they are an island unto themselves have no sense of humility or justice. And in the end, they have no place in the Kingdom of heaven. But those that they persecute, do. Those that have continued to seek after justice and righteousness in a world filled with hate and injustice, where their spirits, minds, and bodies are bound, bloodied, and broken, will find a place of rest in the Kingdom of God.

The world has always had its bullies, those who persecute others for their own gain. The world has always had those who are persecuted and suffer at the hands of those bullies. But God promises a place of sanctuary within His Kingdom for those who persevere in the war against injustice, those who are seeking righteousness in the bitterest of circumstances.

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

In everything that He did, Jesus brought hope. The hope for something better. The hope for rest beyond the pain. Hope for healing beyond the brokenness.

“So, you’ve said a lot of dark things today, preacher. But what does any of it have to do with me? I don’t persecute people! I don’t kick them when they are down. I don’t send them to concentration camps. I don’t murder them and their

families. I don't even turn off the gas at the service station when someone I don't like shows up. Just what has any of this got to do with me?"

Well, let's bring it home. When we look in the mirror, what do we see? Do we see a struggling Christian trying to make things right in the world? Do we see our flaws staring back at us? Do we get a sense of humility before God when we look in our own eyes? Or do we see our place in this world as the hands and feet of Jesus, forgiving, loving, lifting, seeking righteousness and justice? Do we see someone willing to kneel in humility and allow God to use us to move His Kingdom forward by being the exempling Jesus?

I ask us all to think about this week. We CAN make a difference. We CAN pray for discernment, separating the wheat from the chaff to find truth. We CAN be a voice for God's justice. We CAN be someone's hope in the turmoil. We CAN be the hands and feet of Jesus.

God bless you all.

AMEN

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