

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 24, 2013, dedicated to Polly DeVennish, Bill Kutschbach, Sr. and Joe Glick, who entered eternal life, and always to the glory of God!*

**“Blessed are You When You are Reviled and Persecuted”  
Matthew 5:10-13; The Passion of St. Luke**

**(Part VII of VIII in the sermon series  
“Blessed Are You!”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.  
Amen.

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*"Blessed are they who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).*

Today, we stand at the foot of the cross and behold Jesus our Savior - the one who laid down his life for his friends. The eighth beatitude of Jesus hits home hard in the shadow of his cross and the horror of his crucifixion.

Not far from Calvary, known to most by its nickname “The Hill of Skulls,” stands the “tomb of the prophets.” Along with other prophets (many of them slain by their kings), there on the east side of the Kidron Valley, you will find the tomb of Zechariah - executed by King Joash. Across the valley and just above the Garden of Gethsemane (where Jesus had prayed while his disciples

slept) is the place where the great prophet Isaiah was hunted down like a dog and cut in two by King Manasseh's assassins. The bones of the prophets are everywhere near the Hill of Skulls.

The truth is, if we live the first seven beatitudes, we will not only be different from the rest of the world – like the prophets, and Jesus and the early Christians before us - **we will be persecuted.**

If we live the blessedness of poverty of spirit, we **will be** persecuted by the proud in spirit. If we live the blessedness of true mourning, **we will be** resisted by those who want only to see a happy face and pretend all is joy all the time. If we are meek and humble of heart, **we will be** persecuted by the powerful and the proud. If we hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice, **we will be** persecuted by the unrighteousness and those who profit from injustice. If we are merciful, **we will be** persecuted by the cruel and unmerciful. If we have pure hearts, there are those who **will** try to break our hearts. And if we bring peace on earth and good will among all people, **we will be** persecuted by those who prosper and gain by keeping the world war machines running and those who violate human beings in acts against humanity.

**To live in the way of Jesus means we will be reviled and persecuted.**

When Jesus of Nazareth stepped out of the carpenter's shop onto the world scene he was "the new kid on the block." He was the new rabbi from a backward, poor town. People in the Bible asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Our rabbi of Nazareth was mocked, resisted, and laughed at by the powerful religious leaders of his day: *"Look at Jesus, he can only get 12 stinking fishermen to follow him and the women around him are all sinners and misfits."*

Only three years later, Jesus was persecuted unto death, a brutal death by execution Roman Empire style. As Christians, we may face a similar fate. If we take seriously what we are saying and doing in his name, we should expect resistance, mockery, persecution and even death for our faithfulness to his word and way. Just this week, I was among those who were mocked and ridiculed by an Ohio state representative from Delaware County for working for the expansion of Medicaid and coverage for the 600,000 Ohioans who have NO medical care. It happens. In fact, if we get serious about Jesus' beatitudes, some of our old friends may treat us like the "new kid on the block."

Of course, the opposite could happen. Like Peter denying Jesus in the passion narrative today, we could pretend we have no idea who he is. We could walk away from the "blessings." That way, we could become passively accepted and be politely treated as acceptable members of society. This choice could make our lives easier. And it is a choice, by the way. But, to make that choice means to forsake the good news of Jesus. It means to forsake all these blessings.

As we come to the end of the Beatitudes and stand at the foot of the cross, I will not tell you what choice to make. But I will remind you that walking away from the eight beatitudes because of the hardship they may bring also means walking away from the blessings as well. Don't walk away from this too easily. You may regret the choice. Before you turn away from the blessings and the cross – which many of us wear around our necks – listen to Jesus one more time.

Jesus knew full well that following him would be hard. In the translation of Clarence Jordan, Jesus was:

*"Look my friends, you've already been through a lot. But, you're just getting started. I made it clear that you were making an all out commitment. So, you need to be faithful to your commitment, cost what it may. Don't let anybody scare you, or cause you to drop back down. I am with you through it all. You are in the company of the prophets whose glorious past stretches back to the beginning of time and whose future has no end. So go to it. I am with you, always!"*  
(Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 39).

In his book *The Sermon on the Mount*, E.T. Thompson tells the story of Dr. Turner, the pastor of the American Church in Berlin during WW II. Dr. Turner visited Pastor Heinrich Niemoeller, the aging father of Martin Niemoeller, who defied Hitler and spent seven years in a Nazi concentration camp.

Many of you know Pastor Niemoeller (spoken by him in many different ways many times after the war):

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*The they came for the homosexuals, and I did not speak out –*

*Because I was not a homosexual.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me – a and there was no one left to speak for me.*

When the visit ended, Heinrich said to Dr. Turner:

*“When you go back to America, do not let anyone pity me or my wife or wife and seven children of our son, Martin. Only pity any follower of Christ who does not know **the joy** that is set before those who endure the cross despising the shame. Yes, it is a terrible thing to have our son in a concentration camp. But there would be something more terrible to us: if God had needed a faithful martyr and our son Martin had been unwilling.”*

Martin Niemoeller didn't walk away from the blessings. As a result, he faced persecution. In Heinrich's words, though persecution is a terrible thing, unfaithfulness is far worse.

What will you and I do in our time? Will we, like the Apostle Paul and Martin Niemoeller, know the joy that is set before us - enduring the cross, despising the shame? Or will we walk away from the blessings?

Remember his words – **“Blessed are you when you are persecuted and reviled for my sake.”**

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