

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus says that we are blessed when certain unpleasant things happen to us. How opposite from the world who would say that if these things happened to them they'd think they were cursed. I'd like to concentrate on just one of the *Beatitudes* today, perhaps the most shocking one to the world. Today let's take a look at what Jesus says about persecution and see that being persecuted is truly a reason to rejoice.

***Matthew 5:10-12 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. In fact, that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you."***

In October of 1982, Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, Wisconsin, was packed. More than 78,000 die-hard University of Wisconsin fans were watching their football team take on the Michigan State Spartans. What seemed odd, however, were the spontaneous bursts of applause and shouts from the Wisconsin fans. It wasn't just when the Badgers did something good, but seemingly when Michigan State did something good, too. Here, to the world, as their team was locked in a struggle on the gridiron, it looked as if the Badger fans were ready to cheer no matter what was happening on the field. And for no apparent reason, the fans kept chanting, "Coop! Coop! Coop!" Michigan State coach Muddy Waters would later express his confusion, "I didn't know what the heck was going on!"

It turns out, seventy miles away, the Brewers were playing the St. Louis Cardinals at Milwaukee County Stadium in Game Four of the World Series. Down one game in the series, they were trailing the Cardinals 5-1 as the Badger-Spartan game got off to a slow start.

But the Brewers rallied behind the hitting of Robin Yount, Cecil Cooper and Gorman Thomas, and the Camp Randall crowd, listening on personal radios, were well aware of what was going on across the state, started chanting, 'Coop, Coop, Coop' for first baseman Cecil Cooper.

With 8:09 left in the third quarter of the football game, the final score of the baseball game was flashed up on the Camp Randall scoreboard - Milwaukee 7, St. Louis 5. The crowd went wild. At that moment, the hapless Spartans, trailing only 16-10, were deep in Badger territory.

Wisconsin won 24-23 on safety David Greenwood's interception of a two-point conversion pass with 13 seconds left. Badger coach Dave McClain said he wasn't bothered by the crowd's preoccupation with the Brewers. 'That didn't bother me at all,' McClain said. 'I'm glad the Brewers won. They were way behind in the beginning there, I guess. It was a great comeback. 'Anytime the fans cheer, I just enjoy hearing them cheer.' And Coach Waters? 'I didn't even know they were playing the World Series,' he said.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus, specifically in our text for today, and throughout Scripture, encourages us to rejoice in the midst of our struggle, our suffering, indeed, our persecution by responding to something other than our immediate circumstances. Though the situation before us may be difficult, challenging, even bleak, there is a bigger picture behind what we see and feel. That's why Jesus can say that those who are persecuted are truly blessed—because

there's more to it than just the outward physical circumstances. There is the spiritual side to our persecution.

To help us understand what Jesus says in our text for today, rather than just guess at what he's talking about, let us see what other portions of the Bible say about persecution to help clear things up.

First of all, let's understand that Jesus is talking about being persecuted or suffering for believing in him, that is ***because of righteousness***. He's not talking about suffering for something we did. The Apostle Peter writes: ***Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or as a meddler. 16 But if you suffer for being a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God in connection with this name. (1Peter 4:15-16)***

Too many group together suffering for Christ with the poor consequences of their choices. Peter is saying that not everything you endure is spiritual warfare, but some is the consequence of sin. If you are a murderer you deserve to suffer the consequences. If you are a thief you deserve to suffer as a thief. If you are any sort of criminal, committing any sort of crime, your suffering for that is just. But if you're suffering for these reasons, don't think that you're being persecuted. Don't think yourselves blessed. You may be a Christian but here you are not suffering in connection with Christ. You're not being persecuted ***because of righteousness***.

But many are. In 2018, over 1800 churches and Christian buildings have been attacked. More than 3100 believers have been detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned. More than 4300 brothers and sisters in the faith have been martyred. 245 million Christians – more than 1 in 10 - live in areas of high religious persecution.<sup>ii</sup> And the stories are heart-breaking: people tortured, violated, executed – indignity overshadowed by atrocity. The

majority of these accounts are so heinous and violent, I'm not comfortable sharing them in church this morning.

Of course few, if *any* of us, here at New Life have suffered like this. In some ways it is so beyond us. But that doesn't mean that Jesus' words aren't applicable. We too have been persecuted. Jesus says, ***Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me***. We've lost friends because we love Jesus and they don't, because we've told them that we can't join them in their sin. We're talked about behind our backs by people at work and labeled ignorant, intolerant or, worst of worsts, even hypocrites. Because we believe the world was created by God and didn't just evolve, we're made fun of at school and told to keep our religion to ourselves. Yes, we've been persecuted! Or have we?

When we are faced with suffering, how often don't we dwell on the pain and allow our immediate circumstances to overshadow the larger picture. We take the easy road out, rather than face persecution. We keep our mouths shut or join the crowd just to save face. Sadly, we often don't live our name, CHRISTian, and therefore side-step persecution.

But think of what ***this name*** CHRISTian means. Think of who you are. You are one of Christ's own. He's taken a personal interest in you. He's loved you. He's cared for you. He's even died for you, forgiving all your sins. He's taken you, once covered in the mud and dirt of sin— even the horrendous filth of denying him to avoid persecution – and he's washed you clean with the only crud-cutter strong enough to do the job, his own blood.

And now as you sparkle in the clean brightness of his forgiveness, you stand out in this sin-dirtied world. And people hate you because of it. People persecute you

because you're different...because you have the peace they want but only on their own terms...because, deep down, they resent you for it.

Now, while that explains *why* we're persecuted, it doesn't exactly clarify how it makes us blessed. So let me ask you a question: If God had never made you his own, if he had never removed your sins, if he had never given you faith, would you be persecuted? Of course not. You'd be one of the persecutors. The fact that you suffer, that you're persecuted in connection with the name of Jesus just proves all the more strongly that God has chosen you to be your own. Persecution, as strange as it may sound, marks you as a child of God. ***In fact, Jesus says, that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*** You see, grace, faith, eternal life and...

*persecution...* all go hand-in-hand. As crazy as it sounds, especially to the world, the fact that you are being persecuted is not a cause for fear but for rejoicing! It's not a curse but a blessing, reminding you that God is leading you through the dangerous jungles of the world into his glorious kingdom.

And here's the thing, it makes us stronger. Again the Apostle Peter wrote, ***Dear friends, do not be surprised by the fiery trial that is happening among you to test you, as if something strange were happening to you... (1 Peter 4:12)*** By calling persecution a "***fiery ordeal***" Peter paints a picture for us. It brings to mind passages from the Book of Isaiah ***See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction (48:10)*** and from the Psalms ***You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire***

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>

***and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance. (66:12)***

These passages compare suffering for the Lord to be like a fire—refining, purifying, strengthening the steel which passes through it. When a blacksmith makes a sword he constantly is heating up the metal and sticking it into a pool of water, heating it up and dipping it back into the water. If he would skip this process, the sword may look beautiful but the moment it smashed against another sword it would crumble. There would be no strength to it because it wasn't purified, strengthened in the fire.

No, the fire of persecution does for the Christian what the fire of the furnace does for the sword. Every time that God allows a trial to come our way he uses it to test us, to prove us, to strengthen us. The Christian is allowed to struggle, to suffer, in order to grow in faith and appreciation for God's grace. Let's be honest with ourselves, it is during our painful struggle that the Christian most readily turns to God in prayer, in Word and in Sacrament. It is there that we find prayers answered and faith strengthened just as he promises you, his dear child. ***[For] if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:17)*** Blessed are the persecuted!?! Absolutely. My dear fellow redeemed, restored, forgiven and yes, persecuted, Christian friends, ***Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. AMEN.***

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/10/16/Muddy-Waters-says-he-was-confused-at-first-by/3701403588800/>