

Where Blessing is Found
#9 – “In suffering for faith”

Matthew 5: 10-12
I Peter 1: 3-9

Stephen Plunkett, in a book called *This We Believe*, recalls a scene in Alan Paton’s famous novel, *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*. Paton tells of Robert Mansfield, a white South African who is headmaster of a local school. Mansfield resigns from his post because he is outraged that under the law of apartheid of the time, his school is not permitted to compete against a team from a neighbouring black school in a sporting event. Out of his Christian faith, he refuses to be part of an institution that supports institutionalized bigotry and injustice.

After the resignation, a black man named Emmanuel Nene pays Mansfield a visit, saying he came to meet the man of courage who had resigned his livelihood because of his convictions, and he wants to shake the hand of the man whose daily life was moulded by such a living faith. In the conversation, however, Nene lets it be known that he has come also for another reason. He wants Mansfield to know that he has decided to join a multiracial political party and join the fight for racial equality. He knows this will brand him as a radical and an enemy of the state, but this is what he has resolved to do. Mansfield warns him of the consequences that he will surely suffer. “Yes, I understand,” says Nene. “I know I am going to get wounded not only by the government but by my own people as well, just like you.” Then as Nene prepares to leave, he adds, “You know, I don’t worry about the wounds. When I go up there, [pointing to heaven], which is my intention, the big Judge will say, ‘Nene, where are your wounds? Wasn’t there anything worth fighting for?’ And I just couldn’t face that question.”

Plunkett goes on to ask the following questions: where are our wounds. Where in our lives is the evidence of self-denial, sacrificial choice and self-giving love that is at the heart of the gospel?

I suspect most of us have squirmed under similar guilt-inducing questions: if they still persecuted people for being a Christian, would they be able to find enough evidence to prove that you are one? Clarence Jordan, in writing about this passage, asked the question in a slightly different way. He said, “One wonders why Christians get off so easily today. Is it because unchristian North Americans are that much [nicer, nobler and] better than unchristian Romans [of ancient times], or is our light so dim that the tormentor can’t see it? What are the things we do that are worth persecuting?”

I don’t believe Jesus spoke this final beatitude, however, for the sake of making believers feel guilty, because it was to set us free from the power and bondage of guilt, shame and sin for which he came and for which he suffered. And yet the question remains an important challenge: where are our wounds, received and born for Christ and for his righteousness?

The eighth beatitude reminds us of Jesus’ dreadful honesty. In chapter 15 of John’s gospel (vs. 18-20), we hear Jesus telling the disciples “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” The Apostle Paul puts it this way to his friend Timothy: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ...” (2 Tim 3:12)

Persecution is to be expected if we choose to follow Jesus, to throw our lot in with him and claim him as Lord and Saviour. Persecution is to be expected if we invite the Holy Spirit

to take real control of our lives and to be at work changing us from the inside out, in our inner character, so that we are more and more like Jesus. Persecution is to be expected if we desire that his righteousness becomes more and more evidenced in us, in how we act, speak, forgive, and seek to live with his graciousness and mercy, and in how we work to live by kingdom values rather than by the values assigned by this fallen, perverse world. Persecution is to be expected if we desire to live such a life of holiness, set such an ethic and example of goodness, righteousness, loveliness, and if we strive for kingdom justice for all who most need it and least receive it in our world. Persecution will come because by our very behaviour, values and virtue, our lives cast a shining light of conscience and judgment, as it were, on the sinfulness, lostness, shameful or callousness of our world and its standards, or obvious lack thereof. Persecution, whether merely in the form of ridicule, criticism and disdain, or in the form of broken and strained relationships is to be expected if we not only say but live out our conviction and desire to put Jesus and our relationship with him before all else.

Throughout the early church, when the gospels were first circulating, persecution by the Roman empire, was very real and very horrific. While such times of persecution and torture from the authorities came largely in sporadic outbursts of hatred against Christians, because of false accusations as to what the Christian faith involved or because they were the next most convenient scapegoat after the Jews, the suffering and sacrifice for following Jesus was, in the early church, paid at a profound level on a daily basis, as it is in countless nations around our world still today. The reason we place weekly prayer reminders from the Voice of the Martyrs in our bulletin is that we be constantly aware and at prayer for hundreds of thousands of our sisters and brothers who daily risk and receive wounds for following and serving Jesus.

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Unlike our too easy compromise and conformity with the often far from neutral and often ungodly values and lifestyle of our secular world, becoming a Christian in the early church and in parts of the globe today often meant loss of livelihood and family. Since almost every building in the ancient world would have been dedicated to some pagan deity, it became impossible, for instance, for a man who earned his income as a mason or carpenter to continue in his trade, because in good conscience he could not allow himself to build a structure that honored anything as god and lord other than Jesus. A butcher would not be able to continue his trade when he gave himself to Jesus since so many of the carcasses he would handle on his block would have been animals consecrated to this god or that goddess. Families would have been torn apart, when one member fell in love with and surrendered to Jesus, for they would literally have been ostracized. In a former church in Toronto, I had the privilege of giving away the bride at her marriage, for the church was literally the only family she had; for her own biological family had completely disowned her when she became a Christian. The wounds she chose to bear for the sake of her commitment to Christ were deep, real and personal.

While we might not feel loyalty to Jesus must be demonstrated by such rigorous worries about being contaminated by the secular, disbelieving world as did the first century Christians, may it also be that we have lost so much of the sense of our call to be different, to be in but not of the world, that we have become virtually indistinguishable as the children of light in a dark world.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, Jesus said, and by that he did not mean only the wounds inflicted by a disbelieving, intellectually arrogant, morally dismissive and at times, physically hostile world. I think there are two other elements to the persecution and wounds we may bear in living for our Master Jesus.

Blessed are those who suffer and bear the wounds for righteousness. Some of the wounds we may bear for Jesus and for our faith will come because we enter into battle for our souls. St. Paul, in that wonderful passage in the letter to the Ephesians in which he talks about putting on the full armour of God, reminded his friends that we battle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Friends, don't ever forget that in choosing to follow Jesus, we invite the hostility of the evil one, and the more we seek to cling to Jesus, honor Jesus, love Jesus, serve Jesus and grow in deeper intimate walk with Jesus, the more the enemy will try to lure us, discourage us and distract us with all the doubts, temptations, struggles, accusations, shames and fear that he can throw at us. And sadly, the enemy is not above using and manipulating the very people we most love to be at times the means of such attacks. Folks, we're not just playing at religion; we're engaged in spiritual warfare for the welfare and well-being of our souls and of the souls of those we love and that Jesus loves and for the soul of this world.

Good news! Jesus died that we may live. In his death, he broke the power of evil and overcame the death grip of sin upon our lives. There is therefore no more condemnation in Christ. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. But while the victory is assured, the battle this side of heaven continues, and our race of faith hasn't ended, and so we can never just sit back and complacently sing "The strife is o'er, the battle's won," because the enemy remains perversely antagonistic, relentlessly harassing, forever wanting to snatch away our trust, our confidence, our peace, our joy, and turn our hearts and hope away from Jesus. In our walk of faith, we need always take seriously that the enemy of our souls wants to do anything and everything to attack and destroy. To remain faithful

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to Jesus, to remain ever focused on Jesus, to remain ever diligent in loving Jesus, serving Jesus, glorifying Jesus, will bring on the battle scars. But glorious wounds they will be, for by them we will be drawn ever closer to our King, our Saviour, our Lord and our friend.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. There is another area of suffering that may come, dare I say, must come in striving for righteousness. Not all the resistance to our following Jesus and letting him rule our lives comes from the outside. Sometimes the fiercest battles we will face for our souls to be held fast in the grip of grace arise because we want Christ to be our comforter but not our King. We want him to save us from the consequences of our sins, but not from our sins themselves. We want him to relieve our guilt but not rule our hearts. We want him to make our life easier, but aren't at all interested in having him make our lives holier.

The end or purpose of our discipleship is not just to get to heaven: it is to be formed into spiritual maturity and into the image and likeness of Christ. Jesus said that if we were to follow him, we must pick up our cross, which doesn't mean so much that we must struggle with the sacrifice of having to drive a long way to church, or to come on our own because our spouse or children aren't interested, or put up with the pains of our arthritis and aching joints, as hurtful and challenging as those things may be. To pick up our cross means that we are willing to let Jesus crucify in us everything that is most un-Christ-like. It means surrendering the pride that wants always to be right in every argument. It means killing off the lust for control and for being as independent of God as possible. It means instead of being so fast to pray for other people to fix their quirks and weirdness to suit us, we learn to pray for God to change and fix us first so that we might become a means of blessing to others. It means giving up the drive to think our way or work our way into heaven, to believe that if we just have the right theology or

squeaky clean behavior, that somehow we can earn God's favor and merit his joy. To pick up and carry our cross and follow Jesus means learning humility, meekness, utter reliance upon God, and a repentant spirit. It means learning to hunger and thirst for God's Spirit in everything in life and, being so filled with his grace and power, learning how to be the merciful, how to be the pure in heart and how to be the peacemakers in all of our living. Blessed are the broken, who allow Christ to be their healer. Blessed are those who dare to let themselves be changed by the power of God's grace and Spirit, no matter how stretching and demanding and costly the process may be. Blessed are those who in wisdom know that no spiritual band aid is sufficient for the healing of their hearts but dare to ask the great Physician for the soul surgery he alone can perform, that a new and right heart may be put within us, instead of the hearts of stone we bear. Blessed are those who dare to suffer whatever the cost for righteousness sake, for the sake of becoming conformed to the image of Jesus, for the sake of being his holy witnesses and martyrs in this world. To them the kingdom of heaven truly belongs.

"You know," Nene said, "I don't worry about the wounds. When I go up there, the big Judge will say, 'Nene, where are your wounds? Wasn't there anything worth fighting for?'"

You and I were so precious, so worth fighting for, Jesus suffered and gave his very life. Will we, like prophets and martyrs before us, strive and labour and fight for the righteousness of living such holy and glorious and beautiful and gracious and faithful lives for him who died for us?

Let us pray:

Gracious God, long before our timid hearts first learned to love you, you loved us. In love you called us into life, and in love you gave your own Son that we may have life abundantly

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rich and eternally blessed with your presence and your grace. Help us never forget that you are love, so that this sure trust might triumph in our hearts over ever seduction from this world, over any fright from the past, over any distress of the moment. But grant also that this sure conviction might discipline our souls, so that we would remain ever faithful and sincere in our love for you, and in our readiness to stand boldly on your side, to face more courageously the world and every adversary to your kingdom's justice and rule. Save us from ever being dismayed by any storm of trouble or temptation, but keep our eyes fixed steadfastly on you in fearless and joyful faith. May we live as your witnesses, martyrs, servants and friends who are so rooted in that gracious confidence that you will perfectly keep us, save us, strengthen us and bring us through by the power of your love and the riches of your mercy. For your righteousness sake we pray, Amen.