

THE PEACEMAKERS & THE PERSECUTED

Many of you have taken our Lenten theme to heart, and you have pondered, prayed, and tried to build the Beatitudes more deeply into your way of thinking and being. I do not have to tell you how deep are the blessings or how true the promises. To my personal dismay, I note that today must close our series of sermons on the Beatitudes. Next week is Palm Sunday. I do hope it will become clearer to you than ever before how the WAY of Life embodied in the Beatitudes inevitably leads Jesus to the events of Holy Week. He does not just talk and teach – He lives it! He lives it more truly and completely than any other human who ever came here. Some of His better followers pick up the shape and form of His Way of Life as well, but in comparison to Jesus, they always seem to have a lot of haze around the edges. Some of *us* have so much haze around the edges that it is hard to see if there is any of His shape and form to our lives at all – hard to be sure if we are actually followers of Jesus. As the old saw goes: “If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be evidence enough to convict you?” Could even a good prosecuting attorney make the charges stick?

In any case, there are only five Sundays in Lent, and there are nine Beatitudes shading into the Sermon on the Mount. Clearly I have had time to barely hint and point toward some of the wisdom contained in this, one of the deepest pools of Christian truth. It is nonetheless appropriate. We each have to go swim in the pool ourselves if we want baptism to be more than “water off a duck’s back.”

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I hope you are not too weary of “vocabulary lessons.” I’m starting to feel like every Sunday I stand up here and tell you that the words we use do not mean what most people think they mean. The problem is, it’s true. I can’t bear sending you out of here thinking that Christianity is about what most people today think it’s about: being ignorant, poor, ineffective, and conciliatory; being a sucker for every shyster, and a dupe for every self-appointed religious entrepreneur; being scared half to death all the time that the loving Jesus will suddenly return, beat you up, and throw you into the flames, maybe because you didn’t get some of the wording right, or because you haven’t cleaned up all your hang-ups yet.

It is the power of the *words* that proclaim the “Good News” – or that keep turning it all ugly and wrong.

Any word can be ruined by poor or shallow usage, of course. A deep and profound “God bless you” can become so lazy and familiar that it turns into “goodbye.” It may even be punctuated with the slamming of a door. How strange. Jesus canceled out the concept of “goodbye.” No such thing can match with eternal life. But we have turned a blessing into the ultimate essence of sin (separation – rejection – alienation). Remember the barbershop group in *The Music Man*, singing, “How can there be any *sin* in *sincere* – what is the *good* in *goodbye*?” Well, *sincere* means “without wax,” and *goodbye* means “God bless ye.” And it makes it really hard to preach if we do not “speak the same language.” So some of you tease me about spending so much sermon time in vocabulary lessons and twisting the Christian Faith all around to something different than it is. But I am not the one who has Christianity all screwed around backward and upside down until it sounds like a vengeful, angry God on the one hand, or a shallow American success story on the other.

It is difficult, I think, for us non-Jews to comprehend what a Jewish teacher might mean by “peace” or “peacemakers.” Neither does the Greek word (*eirene*) carry the power of the Hebrew word (*shalom*). “*Blessed are the peacemakers*” can and has been used to refer to a vast array of different levels of “peace,” many of them almost the dead opposite of what this beatitude intends. How come I get to choose which level of peace it means? I do not, but I can ask you to notice the promise-end of the beatitude: “*for they will be called children of God.*” That, together with the context of the Sermon on the Mount and the laying out of the precepts and principles of the Christian Way of Life, does give me a right to suggest that *this* peace refers to the highest dimension of *shalom*: To be in tune with God. To be in synchronicity with God. To do all things in harmony with how things are made and created to work together. To have no warfare, conflict, argument, or disagreement between our inner being and God’s Being – God’s purpose, will, plans, actions. To be *with* instead of *against* God. *Shalom* at this level refers to the most beautiful, blessed, creative, productive, joyful, fulfilled “condition” that humans can imagine. Half the time we cannot imagine being in such total harmony with our chosen mate, never mind with God. Yet the soul longs, hungers, reaches out for such PEACE, UNITY, RELATIONSHIP. Grace is when we get to taste it, even though we have not earned or deserved it – a taste that beckons and encourages and leads us on.

You do realize, I presume, that Jesus lived in a time permeated with apocalyptic dreams and hopes and preaching. Rebel bands – Zealots – were always watching for a chance to throw the Romans out by guerrilla warfare. Patriotism, memory of the Maccabees, hunger for a new king like the mighty David – a Messiah who would come and defeat the Romans and restore freedom to Israel – Jesus lived in the middle of this incredible ferment ... and would have *nothing* to do with it! “Blessed are the peacemakers” *lost* Jesus a lot of followers.

A “peacemaker,” then, is one who works for God’s Kingdom – one who works for all things to be in unity and harmony with God. You see the problem? We are always reducing this particular beatitude into some seemingly authoritative argument to support our worldly agendas. Two friends are in a quarrel. You step into the middle, calm them both down, get them to talk more slowly and patiently, until all three of you are friends again, shaking hands, and liking each other. Presto! You are a “peacemaker.” Well, it’s better than a fistfight, and you would be glad if it came out that way, and so would I, and we suspect God would too. But does that have anything to do with this beatitude? What if neither friend is consciously trying to be in tune with God’s will? What if both are being utterly selfish, and the reconciliation comes because they realize they can help each other toward their selfish ends? Nothing wrong with that, *per se*. But what has it to do with God’s Kingdom? You are not a peacemaker, not in the category this beatitude is talking about, unless you are helping to reconcile people *with God* – helping people to find *peace with God* – helping people to walk toward and into the will and purpose and love that God has designed for them.

You can win the Nobel Peace Prize – even stop two warring nations from fighting and help them to sign a peace treaty that turns them into allies – and we would all rejoice, and doubtless God would be pleased by the cessation of hostilities, and still it would have no bearing, no connection, no relevance to the meaning of this beatitude. Nations can exist at war or at peace in this world and have no conscious awareness or intention to love or to serve God – to be at peace with God – to cooperate with God or to do God’s will.

The beatitude is about peace *with God*. It comes from a man who does not speak or think like we are used to. “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” (Matthew 10:34) “*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be*

five divided, three against two and two against three ...” (Luke 12:51, 52) “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27) “Jesus answered [Pilate], ‘My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.’” (John 18:36) Paul sums it up, as he often does: “All this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Corinthians 5:18-19 REB)

This last, from Paul, is an exact restatement of the seventh beatitude. “Enlisted us in the ministry of reconciliation” and “Blessed are the peacemakers” are synonymous – they are total parallels. Only, God is not reconciling the world to *itself* – he is not patting it on the head and telling it that it’s just fine the way it is, or asking all the quarreling people to kiss and make up. Nobody and nothing in this world is right until it is right with God. Reducing “peacemaking” to a this-worldly harmony or a this-worldly caring that has no awareness – no living relationship with or obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – is a terrible travesty that leads not to blessing or being children of God, but toward false hope and ultimate despair. And nobody does that better, or more often, than liberal Christendom in our country today.

We are not the first to run into the problems and travail of wrestling with these distinctions. Who was “The Prince of Peace” and “The Son of God” in Jesus’ day? Augustus Caesar, of course. Who was the designer and the creator of the *Pax Romana* (the Peace of Rome)? Augustus Caesar, of course. He had brought peace (*eirene*, not *shalom*) to their whole world. The highways and the seas were safer than the world had ever imagined they could be. A merchant could now expect to get his caravan of goods from one city to another without having to hire a small army to accompany him. It was marvelous. People came down out of the great fortress stronghold cities, like Pergamum and Sardis, and lived and built towns right out in the open where there was water and easy access, and they did not have to spend hours every day hauling stuff to impregnable fortress strongholds. The Dow Jones was going through the roof, and irrigation canals, roads, temples, and whole cities were being built everywhere. The world had never experienced such prosperity. “Augustus Caesar! Augustus Caesar! Surely he is a god!” Can you imagine the wealth, the power of the Roman legions, the hubbub around vast and wealthy temples all over the world? “How do we know that Athena is the truest god and the best

church? Well, just look at all the people who go to worship there! Who has ever seen a grander temple?!”

Meanwhile Paul, Peter, and a handful of others were wandering around without escort or fanfare, without enough wealth to even buy candlesticks in any of the vast temples that served thousands of people in every city they visited. And they were talking to tiny pockets of people here and there. They talked about a Galilean carpenter, and a different kind of peace, and a Kingdom not of this world, and what happened to Him here. They were arrested, kicked around, and thrown into prison because, few and humble though they were, faith and love are very threatening subjects in this world, especially faith and love directed toward God. So they ended up dying for their efforts ... as He had before them. Only, the people they talked to could tell that the peace they spoke of was for real – something they really knew and lived for. And nobody could kill them fast enough to keep it from spreading.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” Oh my friends, do not reduce this down to some picayune and trivial level of what this world calls “peace.” We can have peace with God in this world, but this world can neither give it nor take it away. If you want the blessing of being a “peacemaker,” do not reduce it down to something Jesus would not have walked across the street for. Jesus did not sell His life cheap, you know. He lived for the big stuff – the biggest there is.

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It is the inevitable result of being peacemakers – in the truest sense – that we also become the persecuted. But again the dichotomy: Political causes can get you killed too. They are not necessarily or automatically for Jesus’ sake. And Jesus (fundamentalist and liberal Christendom notwithstanding) *refused* the political solution. In the wilderness temptations, a political solution was Satan’s second try, and Jesus answered him: *“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”* (Luke 4:8)

To many, many people, this is the most troubling part of the Christian call. While we are still interested but on the outside looking in, it is troubling to realize that all the beautiful, wonderful, and appealing disciplines and concepts of the Christian Way of Life come with no guarantee in this world – are “in but not of” this world, are alongside of, but extra to, this world – so that sometimes they have great impact here,

but we never know if, or when. And if we go to complain to our Lord, He just smiles sadly and says, “Go read the story again.” We try to be faithful here, but *here* is not what it is about. It is better than that. It is bigger than that. If you reduce it to “here” – lock it down and try to understand it, trust it, or use it only for “here” – you will lose it all. *“Only if you lose your life for my sake will you find it.”*

But if we are going to quote, we might as well go back to the Beatitudes themselves. I put the last two together, for time’s sake. *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely on my account.... Great is your reward in heaven.”* Not *if* you are reviled and persecuted – *when!* If you live the LIFE, it is inevitable – only a matter of time, and from time to time.

And we are back to the same promise as with the first beatitude: If you are persecuted for the Kingdom, you are in the Kingdom. No waiting. The reality and awareness of the Kingdom is now. Actually, this too is inevitable. That is, you cannot be persecuted for the Kingdom unless you are aware enough of its existence to get into trouble for it. And many of us are mature enough that we don’t want or need any more than the awareness of the Kingdom and the awareness of the Lord’s presence with us. That is quite sufficient to hook us and keep us. We are not interested in any further rewards or blessings. But Jesus doesn’t care much about our maturity. He insists that the rewards are great in Heaven. God is generous and full of blessing, and he loves to shower gifts on the children – whether we like it or not – in this world and in the next. But the gifts are not always the gifts of this world. They are better than that.

In any case, our problem is getting used to the notion that LOVE brings suffering in this world. We understand punishment for mistakes, crimes, and blunders, and sometimes even the pain of natural laws working in the way they always do. But Jesus ends the Beatitudes by reminding us of what is coming if we are faithful – if we live the LIFE He invites us into: **If we have peace with God, animosity with this world is inevitable – because this world is not at peace with God.** I don’t say it as often as you think I do; you just don’t like to hear it. And I don’t like to hear it any more than you do. But there is no escaping the principle, from one end of the Scriptures to the other, and in all our experiences of actually living the WAY.

Some Christians are always scaring themselves and each other with concepts of Hell. It is one of the foolish aberrations. They get stuck on the imagery, and lose the very point of the passages they read. Do souls fear flames? Hell is not about “hot.” It is about ALONE. You do not have to die before you experience it. You do not have to die before you experience the love of God, either.

So what *should* we be scaring ourselves about? We should be scaring ourselves about minimizing God’s presence with us; about minimizing how much we love God; about pretending Jesus’ Way is not as important to us as it really is. We do it so we can keep out of trouble here; so we don’t offend people here; so we don’t risk losing friends or jobs or the cooperation we need from others in order to be successful here. It is one of our most closely guarded secrets. We keep hoping God knows it – how much we love him – even if we are afraid to ever mention it, even to ourselves. But consciously or subconsciously we know: if our love for God starts to show very much, the world will descend upon us. It is the one thing the world fears more than any other. So Jesus tries to prepare us: *“Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”* (Luke 6:26) Have we admitted that there is a difference between being people-pleasers and being God-pleasers? *“Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”* (John 12:42-43)

Get ready. Never be surprised. Never let dislike, mockery, rejection, false blame, or persecution throw you off course. It is predictable – to be expected. That is partly why it is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day. We have to keep clearing it up. When are we catching flak from friend or foe because we are in the wrong or are being bratty, stubborn, greedy, or whatever – and when are we catching flak because we are doing precisely what we are supposed to be doing, right where God put us, for this very reason?

At the core of our religion, there stands a cross. Among many, many things, it says that serving the God of love – and being truly loving – does not always mean you will be loved back ... at least not at first.

“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.” Are some of us missing a very big, very special, and incredible blessing?