

Blessed are the Persecuted

Seventh in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of
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by
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Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered,

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?”¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

¹⁸I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, ‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’¹⁹ I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.²⁰ Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

²¹After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.”²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.²³ One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him;²⁴ Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.²⁵ So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”²⁶ Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.²⁷ After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor.³⁰ So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Whenever I read this thirteenth chapter of John's gospel, I almost always focus my attention on the action of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, and his words about loving others as we have been loved by him. Particularly on Maundy Thursday, since the word *Maundy* comes from the Latin word for Commandment. *This is my commandment, Jesus says, that you love one another, as I have loved you.* On the one hand, it's a night all about service and love; a precious last teaching from Jesus before his death. On the other hand, a close reading of the gospel cannot miss the undercurrent of betrayal that sets into motion his persecution and death.

The Beatitudes culminate *Blessing the Persecuted*, with a two-fold blessing which is more detailed than any of the others: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Persecution comes in many forms; it can mean physical or verbal abuse, or both. It would appear that persecution comes with the territory of being a disciple. Jesus does not say if you are persecuted, but when you are persecuted. According to tonight's gospel reading, what Jesus did, is expected of his followers; and sometimes that includes suffering for our faith, at the very least, it means sacrificial service.

The meal before Jesus and his disciples this evening is Passover – the high holy day of the Jewish people remembering the Exodus from slavery, when during the last of the plagues the angel of death passed over the homes of the Israelites. Into this scene of religious celebration, of true freedom found in service to God and one another, Jesus turns our attention toward Judas – who is opening the gates of Hell that will become Jesus' persecution, saying, "One of you will betray me."

Judas had followed Jesus with all the rest of them, and so his betrayal was born of that intimate, close trust and friendship, the worst kind of

betrayal. Now, the gospel writer John speaks of the devil and of Satan here, but we must remember that this is not simply a matter of “the devil made him do it.” The Hebrew word for Satan means “accuser,” it is a legal term for someone who brings a prosecution, a charge, against another.

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, notes that when Jesus tells Judas to “Do it quickly,” Jesus knew that Judas was setting in motion his ultimate persecution. That’s why “Jesus is troubled in spirit.” Wright says, “There is no shame in spirit-trouble; it’s what you get when you’re a foot-washer, a generous-love person, open to deep friendship and to the serious wounds that only friends can give.”¹

Love requires sacrifice; with deep love come deep wounds; loving as Jesus loved – among the marginalized and the outcasts will sometimes mean setting ourselves up to be persecuted – ridiculed, abused by word or deed. If we love as Jesus has loved us, it will require of us sacrifice, sometimes even persecution.

On the wall of a children’s home in Calcutta, run by Mother Teresa’s order, The Sisters of Charity, are these words: “People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway. If you are successful in doing good, you win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway. The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway. What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway. People really need help but may attack you if you help them. Help people anyway. Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.”²

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone, Part Two*, p. 45.

² James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, p. 92-93.

Friends, gathered here on Maundy Thursday, we are invited to love, do good, be honest, build, help and give. In a word, we are invited to follow Jesus to the end. We are invited to love as we have been loved by him. We are invited to serve one another, and to minister to those in need. The only way we can do these things is to do them together.

As Eric Kolbell has written: “Jesus is blessing the persecuted more as an invitation than a warning. I think he’s telling his audience that in order to put flesh on the bones of a fragile faith, people will have to band together, look after one another, and bind to one another with a love that is greater than the sum total of all the jealousies and resentments that might keep them apart. You will have to become more than strangers side by side, he is telling them, for in the days ahead you will need to become community, the living body of these living words.”³

Tonight, everything is set in motion for Jesus to be persecuted, persecuted unto death. The only way to follow is to go together, as his living body, the church, to engage in his courageous kind of love and service, to acknowledge his sacrifice will always be greater than our small acts of discipleship, his forgiveness will out run all our betrayals, and to remember as we go, Jesus will always be the one who was persecuted for our sakes, and by God’s grace we feel the ripple effects of his blessing.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. If we love and serve as he did, we will have a share in the key to that Kingdom.

AMEN.

³ Eric Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*.