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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
All Saints Day (Observed)
Saturday, November 3rd, 2018
Sunday, November 4th, 2018 (International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church)

Sermon: Blessed Are the Persecuted (Rejoice and Be Glad!)

Text: Matthew 5:10-12

Focus: God will bless and reward those persecuted for the name of Jesus.

Function: That they would persevere in faith and prayer for the persecuted Church.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to himself in heaven” (SC, 7th Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Several years ago, Jack Phillips, a Christian baker in Lakewood, Colorado, was sued by a gay couple for refusing to decorate a wedding cake for them. He objected on the basis of conscience and his Christian faith. While he offered to sell them a pre-made wedding cake, they were not satisfied and took him to court. After a long, drawn out legal struggle with the Colorado Human Rights Commission, Mr. Phillips finally received a favorable judgment from the United States Supreme Court earlier this year.¹ But it was only a matter of time before a transgender person targeted him again, this time asking him to bake a cake celebrating their transition. True to form, Mr. Phillips refused, again on the basis of his faith in Jesus. He now faces another civil lawsuit.²

I don’t know what you’d call it, but I believe that Mr. Phillips is being persecuted for his Christian faith, for it is his belief in Jesus and decision to follow God’s Law and not the laws or

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-court-baker/supreme-court-backs-christian-baker-who-spurned-gay-couple-idUSKCN1J01WU>

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/colorado-baker-back-court-after-turning-away-transgender-woman-n901041>

opinions of men, that has repeatedly put him in the hotseat. Mr. Phillips' life and limb may not be in danger. He is not under arrest. But his livelihood is certainly under threat by the forces arrayed against him.

Persecution of Christians is nothing new, although we are unused to it here in America, where the Church enjoyed a privileged position in our culture for most of our brief history. But not so around the world! From the very beginning, governments and religious rulers have threatened the Church, her pastors, and God's people. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah was beaten, thrown in prison, tossed down a well, and ultimately kidnapped. According to legend, Isaiah was sawn in half. John the Baptist was beheaded. And just days after Pentecost, when God poured out his Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples, the apostles were arrested, beaten, and questioned for preaching the name of Jesus in the Temple. Jesus said that this shouldn't surprise us. He warns:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...” (John 15:18-20a, ESV).³

Why does the world hate Christians? Because the world hates Jesus! We are his disciples, and we should not expect to fare any better than the Master did. They arrested, mocked, flogged, beat, and ultimately killed Jesus on a cross. They will do that and worse to his Church.

Persecution takes many forms. Sometimes it's “mere” mockery. People might make fun of you for being a Christian, indicating that you are stupid or bigoted or foolish because you follow the crucified Christ. Even in the first centuries of Christianity, the Greeks and Romans

³ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

made fun of believers. In your bulletin is a reprint of some ancient Roman graffiti mocking Christians. It depicts a figure worshiping Jesus with a donkey's head on the cross:



(Apparently, for some bizarre reason, it was a common jest that Jews and Christians supposedly worshiped donkeys). The Greek caption reads, “Alexamenos worships [his] God.” I know that we like to say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But words *do* hurt. And sometimes we are tempted to keep quiet and hold our faith close to the chest at school or work so that our classmates and colleagues don’t discover that we are Christians.

Persecution takes more nefarious forms in other places around the world. In Islamic countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sudan, it is illegal to convert to Christianity, and your own family members might murder you in a so-called “honor killing” if you reject the prophet Mohammed. In North Korea, Christians are betrayed to the secret police by their family

members and executed. In China, the Communist government makes raids on house churches and arrests pastors not sanctioned by the Communist Party. Just a few weeks ago I heard about a Christian orphanage in China for children with disabilities. These children were rejected by their parents and would likely have been euthanized by the state were it not for the intervention of kind, compassionate Christian people. But the Chinese government shut down the orphanage and arrested the missionaries who operate it, including some Americans.

The world is not always safe for Christianity. And yet, even when we suffer for the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord declares us to be blessed:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10-12).

Jesus says that when we are persecuted because of righteousness—that is, for believing and following Jesus—we are blessed. And when people tell lies about us because of Jesus, we are blessed. We may not feel blessed. But we *are* blessed. The kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, belongs to us.

While Christians suffer here on earth, our reward is in heaven. And when Christ returns on the Last Day, we will receive that reward (Rev. 2:10; 2 Tim. 4:8). Although now we are mocked, beaten, imprisoned, and killed here on earth, Jesus won the victory by the cross and empty tomb. So we too will conquer “by the blood of the Lamb and by the Word of [our] testimony” if we love Jesus more than life itself (cf. Rev. 12:11). In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “The faith-community of the blessed is the community of the Crucified. With him they lost everything, and with him they found everything. Now the word

comes down from the cross: blessed, blessed.”⁴ “Rejoice and be glad,” Jesus says, “for your reward is great in heaven.”

Yet while we remain in this vale of tears, we have work to do. The Bible says, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Heb. 13:3). The number one thing that we can do for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ is to pray for them. In your bulletin you will find an insert created by The Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian organization committed to telling the stories of the persecuted Church and supporting them with prayer and resources. This insert has a list of 10 different ways we can pray for persecuted Christians:

“Pray our brothers and sisters will:

1. Sense God’s presence.
2. Know we are praying for them.
3. Experience God’s comfort.
4. See God open doors to evangelism.
5. Boldly share the Gospel.
6. Mature in their faith.
7. Be granted wisdom in covert ministry.
8. Remain joyful amid suffering.
9. Forgive and love their persecutors.
10. Be rooted in God’s Word.”

I hope this list will be a benefit in your prayers this week.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, vol. 4 in series *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, eds. Martin Kuske *et al* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 109.

Finally, we need to remember that it is not for us to seek vengeance in this life. Rather than responding to our persecutors with violence, we overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21). Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Rather than revenge, pray for their repentance and salvation. Ask God to help you love and forgive your enemies. Church history is full of accounts of Christian martyrs winning over their jailers and executioners by their bold courage and Christian love. After all, the English word “martyr” comes from the Greek, *martyros*, which means “witness” or “testimony.” A martyr is one who speaks the ultimate witness by giving their life for Jesus, the one who gave his life for us all, dying on the cross to forgive our sins and rising again to give us eternal life.

Jesus did not return insults when he was on trial. “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7). And when Jesus finally spoke, on the cross, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Father, forgive our enemies and persecutors, for they know not what they do. And Father, forgive us too. Rejoice and be glad! We are blessed! For the kingdom of heaven belongs to us in the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.