

THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Matthew 5: 43-48

THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Romans 12: 9-21

MEMORY VERSE: “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5: 10

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

What a week we’ve had! Pastor Doug and I, like many of you, lost power on Saturday afternoon. Slowly, power was restored; we got our power back finally on Thursday around 4:30. I must admit I felt, if not persecuted exactly, at the very least, discriminated against. The people in charge at PPL had to set some priorities – helping the most people first and smaller sections later. We were part of the latter group. Our house is on a small street – and therefore, not very high up the priorities list. I must admit that as we drove back and forth to church, I noticed homes where there were lights on in every room, cars whose drivers were so warm that they were driving with their windows open, people walking around in shorts. Meanwhile, the thermometer in our home was reading 49 degrees, and it felt as if we would never get warm.

While I was feeling something close to envy about those with heat and lights and us without, I realized that there were others who were continuing to suffer along with us. There were hundreds of thousands who lost power – we weren’t the only ones still waiting. We ran into some kindred sufferers because we could not cook at home. We were eating all three meals out and, in this setting, we ran into many, many people just like us. We all spoke of our lengthy stints without power. Since our connection to the outside world had been severely limited, I cannot make a blanket statement, but anecdotally, from the stories and comments made to us and within our hearing over those past several days, I can state that people took this difficulty remarkably well. People were sometimes able to joke about their situations. Others turned philosophical. I never heard anyone become frustrated, angry, or irate. No screaming, yelling, or shouting. All in all, people have taken this unusual situation with remarkable composure.

I know what we have been experiencing is not in any way persecution, certainly not the kind of persecution that Jesus warned his followers about.

Jesus knew what the consequences would be for those living as His followers. He wanted to prepare them for what was to come. That’s what this beatitude signifies – there will be persecution – persecution that is the result of living in a way others find offensive. Following a different way – the way of righteousness will bring persecution, but it will also gain the kingdom of heaven.

The verse following these beatitudes in Matthew, chapter 5, elaborates. It says: Blessed are you (and notice the change in pronoun – going from speaking about “those” to a more personal “you”). Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

These verses leave no doubt that persecution was a part of following God in Old Testament times; it was still a part of faithful following when Jesus spoke these words, in fact, Jesus was hated by many, especially those religious authorities who were challenged by his new and revolutionary ways of seeing God and worshipping Him. And these verses also suggest that persecution will continue into the future – Jesus is telling us that it will never be easy to be a follower. We will always offend those who are not believers.

Some, if not all of us, can relate to this. Persecution in 21st century America is not as harsh as persecution is in many other countries; however, there is persecution here nevertheless. It can take any number of forms. I’ll name a few, but I imagine those of you here today can add to the list. You are passed over for promotion because you have a reputation for being too honest – you won’t play the corporate game. Or you are passed over because it is known that your family is important to you and you would not give up time at home to travel, work 100 hours a week, or relocate. Persecution may take the form of exclusion – others plan activities that are not glorifying God and don’t invite you. These decisions are subtle and possibly not even at the conscious level, but they are real.

Even in high school such decisions are made – to exclude members of a social group because they wouldn’t go along with some planned activity that is illegal or immoral. Such young people can be shunned and excluded because they

won't give in to peer pressure and do things that they know won't be pleasing to God. These are all examples of persecution because of our faith.

How then are we to respond to such persecution? Jesus must have known we needed guidance in this area. Just a few verses later in Matthew – still a part of the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus tells us what to do. This was our first scripture reading this morning. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us. We are to extend God's love even to those who hate and persecute us. In this way we are to be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect.

This is a hard saying – we know we can't be perfect – and it would be next to impossible to show perfect love to those who hate and persecute us. How then can we be perfect? One way to view this is that the loving relationship we have with God through Christ Jesus makes us appear perfect to the Father. Through the lens of Christ we are seen as washed clean – in other words, perfect.

Paul emphasizes the importance of this loving attitude. In his great and marvelous letter to the church in Rome – he states in chapter 12 – what Pastor Doug just read. Here Paul tells us that we should love and that love must be sincere, not just a surface mask, but felt deep down. We are to hate the persecution and the evil that others might try to entice us with. We are to be devoted to our brothers and sisters in the faith, honor one another, serve God with zeal, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, share with those in need, and practice hospitality.

Also, we are to bless those who persecute us, live in harmony with all people, and always do what is right in God's eyes. We are not to plan revenge. And finally, Paul asks us not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. Paul even quotes a proverb – chapter 25, verses 20 and 21 to help us: we are to treat our enemy in exactly the same way as we treat fellow believers – if our enemy is hungry, feed him; if thirsty, give him drink. In doing this we will heap burning coals on his head.

Wow! This is another hard saying. Heap burning coals – that sounds painful, even like punishment, but it's not that. It really says that by our faithful witness

to the love of God, even under persecution, our enemies can be turned away from sinful practices to repentance and faith. They can be convicted of their sinful ways and turn toward God. One quote I found meaningful by William Barkley regarding this verse: Vengeance may break the enemy’s spirit, but kindness will break his heart. Showing God’s love to all people all the time.

This is quite a difficult teaching. Yet that is what was asked of the prophets in the OT, it is what was asked of Jesus, and then his disciples. It is what was asked of those who have gone before us – our saints – it is what is asked of us and it is what will be asked of those who come after us.

In this past week Pastor Doug and I had some feelings akin to persecution, but we also were able to experience the blessing of others who had lost power and were showing kindness and patience. They were practicing what Paul was talking about. In responding to difficulty in this way, people were witnessing to the world that peace and understanding that can come only from God.

Jesus never said being a Christian would be an easy task. It is easy only in that we are not called to minister on our own, but we have our faithful Father God always with us, our brother Jesus Christ at our side, and our helper and guide, the Holy Spirit, to intercede for us. Through good times and bad, through power outages and social and job discriminations, God is always with us, caring for us, listening to our prayers, loving and comforting us. Persecution may be part of what it means to be a Christian, but being a Christian means we are never, never alone. That is something to celebrate. Thanks be to God.