9/28/20 Devotional

Let us consider the following verses from the Gospel of Matthew:

“*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven****.*** *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.”*Matthew 5:10-12.

This devotion concludes our series on the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Early Christians held on to Jesus’ promise in this beatitude, especially under horrific Roman persecution. Jesus knew that his followers would be tried and tested for their faith. He knew they would suffer for refusing to worship the Roman emperor. Jesus’ followers proclaimed that Jesus alone was Lord.

Persecution is arguably the greatest test for faith. It tests our soul to the limit. It requires incredible courage. It strips away superficial faith. Persecution strengthens the faith of those who endure. Our attitude through it and our ability, by God’s grace to endure it, serves as a witness to others.

The magazine Voice of the Martyrs reminds us that Christian persecution continues today. In China, in preparation for the 2008 Olympics, Foreign missionaries were expelled and Christian leaders were jailed. House church members were threatened and told to give up their faith. Bibles were confiscated and Christian bookstores closed. One Pastor, Hua Huiqu, 45 years old, tells how the government has regularly harassed his family. He and his 77 year-old mother were arrested and jailed for continuing his 60-member house church. The charge was disturbing the social order.

Persecution is not God’s judgment toward believers. It is not God’s displeasure with the faithful. Persecution is the result of living in a not fully redeemed world. It is the cost of obedience to Jesus Christ. It is the price for sharing in the witness and ministry of Jesus Christ into which we have been baptized and commissioned. Persecution is participating in and sharing in Christ’s sufferings. It is the high price of following Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It reminds us of Jesus’ charge to take up our cross and follow him.

The admired German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a famous book in response to Christian persecution: “The co*st of Discipleship.”* Persecution comes in many forms – discrimination, harassment, humiliation, bullying, embarrassment, rejection, suffering and martyrdom. God’s amazing promise is that even in times of persecution, you will discover God’s grace, you will find blessing.

Jesus’ teaches us in these beatitudes that happiness is not really something we can set out to find. Happiness, paradoxically, finds us in the profound experiences of life. It is something that finds us when we give ourselves to God and enter into God’s work. It is not something we can buy. It is not some feeling we can manufacture. Happiness is a gift of God which results from following God in one’s life. Happiness is a by-product of the life of faith. It is a derivative of faith. It is a serendipity in the life of faith. It is a surprise, a gift of grace, when one lives in the Kingdom of God. Happiness is a dimension which we discover in our journey with God in the midst of life’s events and experiences. Yes, even in times of persecution.

The happiness of faith is counter-intuitive. It is unique. It is an unexpected gift from God. It is something the world cannot give. It is a joy that comes from life in the Kingdom of God. The joy of faith comes most completely, when we give ourselves to God and to others generously, faithfully and freely in the name of Jesus Christ.

The love of Christ be with you all,

Rev. Alan W. Deuel