

"Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted For Righteousness Sake"

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

March 29, 2020

This is an unprecedented period in our nation's history- for all intents and purposes, the world is shutting down in an effort to forestall further damage from this deadly pandemic. As a nation, we have been asked to make sacrifices on behalf of the greater good. On the advice of leading medical authorities, our political leaders have directed us to "self-segregate" or "socially distance" ourselves, that is, avoid crowds by confining ourselves to our own home and refraining from touching one another until this virus scare is over. As Governor Cuomo of New York said this past week after ordering all non-governmental personnel to remain home lest they be subject to severe fines, "What we must do in order to vanquish this scourge is to prepare for the worst but hope for the best. When we look back from this situation ten-years from now, I want to be able to say to the people of the state of NY, 'I did everything we could do, that this was about saving lives. And if everything we do can save just one life, then I'll be happy.'" Pennsylvania has followed suit as well.

Perhaps the last time Americans were asked to make a similar sacrifice was during World War II where nearly every consumer item was rationed (including sugar, gas, and clothing) and every available piece of scrap metal was collected and repurposed for the war effort. Back then, President Roosevelt asked each citizen for an "equality of sacrifice"- each doing their part to assist the nation. He went on to explain in one of his famed fireside chats: "'Sacrifice' is not exactly the proper word with which to describe this program of self-denial. When, at the end of this great struggle, we shall have saved our free way of life, we shall have made no 'sacrifice.'" In other words, he was saying that when the war was finally won and life as they had known it had at last returned to some degree of normalcy, in retrospect their patriotic efforts wouldn't seem much of a sacrifice AT ALL but rather an act of devotion borne out of a higher duty.

When you think about it, the word "sacrifice" is actually quite a RELATIVE term- one person's act of self-denial might not appear sacrificial AT ALL to somebody else. Compared to what many Christians have had to endure on behalf of their faith, we certainly couldn't BEGIN to compare THEIR sacrifices to the inconvenience of being confined to our home where we wile away most days reading books and watching television instead of going out to a dinner and movie as we'd much RATHER be doing. We who live each day within our secure borders, in our comfortable homes, have little or no idea what it is like to be imprisoned, to have all freedom taken away, to be stripped of all our privacy and dignity. When I was in seminary, I was involved in a prison ministry at San Quentin which was located only a few miles from the school. There was an inmate there whom I would visit, a young man named Richard Campbell who had been convicted of being an accessory to robbery and murder during a convenience store holdup. His partner did the shooting but both had been sentenced to the "big house" for lengthy terms. While in prison, he had become a Christian, and his family and faith were the only two things that held him together. He talked to me at length about the continuing prison wars between the Blacks and the Mexicans, the uncontrolled drug use among prisoners, and the

rampant homosexual rape. He expressed how NO ONE was safe, that you had to always look over your shoulder, ESPECIALLY if you were a Christian, because they could not be bought or manipulated like the other prisoners. This made them a constant target among the inmates. He once said to me, "David, this is what the inside of hell looks like."

The name Terry Anderson may seem familiar to you- he was our longest held hostage in Lebanon--over seven years—after having being abducted and held hostage by Shiite militants back in 1985. While held captive, he never had the chance to see a picture of his young daughter who was born shortly after his abduction, nor was he aware that both his brother and father had died during his imprisonment. He was chained hand and foot to a metal cot in a building he believed was in a suburb of Beirut. He and the other hostages were kept in an airless, windowless cell- without light, often blindfolded, and sometimes deprived of food and water or the chance to clean themselves. But far from being forsaken, his imprisonment was shared with the Rev. Lawrence Jenco. Said Anderson, "God sent me this very gentle, kind Catholic priest. So when I had a question, he had the answer." Describing his captivity, he said, "I wasn't permitted to speak, but I worked up the courage to ask one of my captors to bring me a book...to bring me the Bible." An Iranian brought him a Revised Standard Bible and he read and reread the whole book almost fifty times. "The voices of the Bible spoke to me," he said. "They came alive." He found the lament of Job, 'Why God? Why me?' ESPECIALLY significant. In no way though did he believe that God was responsible for his plight, but that men did it, and not necessarily EVIL men, but men acting in God's name who knew nothing about God. Profoundly aware of God's presence throughout his imprisonment, he now travels to churches, giving his testimony of not just the horrors of those seven years but how the grace of God ministered to him in the midst of it, maintaining his faith and his sanity throughout.

That same year, 1985, I had the remarkable opportunity to spend a week as the personal chaperon to one of the most famous victims of religious persecution in the twentieth century- the late Richard Wurmbrand. Wurmbrand was a Rumanian pastor and seminary professor who languished 14 years in Communist prisons until he was released in 1964. Taken away from his wife and family (who had also been arrested), he had no knowledge in all those years what had happened to them. Months of solitary confinement, years of periodic physical torture, constant suffering from hunger and cold, the anguish of brainwashing and mental cruelty had left him in constant pain and made it difficult for him to walk. Each afternoon, I would take him for a long walk around the neighborhood and he would tell me stories about his imprisonment and the lessons he learned from them. If I were to graphically describe for you the horrors they inflicted upon him and OTHER people of faith, you would think I was exaggerating, that's how shocking they were. What the Communists did to Christians surpasses any possibility of human understanding.

Pastor Wurmbrand said he had often been asked how after seventeen hours a day, year after year, being forced to hear:

“Communism is good!  
Communism is good!  
Communism is good!  
Communism is good!

Christianity is stupid!  
Christianity is stupid!  
Christianity is stupid!  
Give up!  
Give up!  
Give up!  
Give up!"

it was at all possible to resist the brainwashing. His response was that there was only one method of resistance and that was "heartwashing":

*If the heart is cleansed by the love of Jesus Christ, and if the heart loves Him, you can resist all tortures. What would a loving bride not do for a loving bridegroom? What would a loving mother not do for her child? If you love Christ as Mary did, who had Christ as a baby in her arms, if you love Jesus as a bride loves her bridegroom, then you CAN resist such tortures. God will judge us not according to how much we endured, but how much we could love. I am a witness for the Christians in communist prisons that they could love. They could love God and men.*

In his autobiography, *This Grace Given*, the late David H. C. Read, for many years the Sr. Pastor of the Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church in N.Y.C., described his five-year captivity in a German prisoner of war camp during the Second World War. He said of that experience:

*Being taken prisoner means being stripped down. Suddenly everything you have come to rely on is gone. Your possessions, your job, your plans, those dearest to you, your country- all these are, in a peculiar way, no longer there. There's just you- and God.*

David Read went on to say how it was his prison experience that taught him some of his greatest spiritual lessons:

*Still, the experience of being stripped of all the other things on which one normally relies does throw one back on God in a very challenging way. Is he really there? Does he care about what's happening? All the texts on which one has preached- "God is our refuge and our strength," "Fear thou not, for I am with thee," "Your heavenly father knoweth what you need," "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God"- these suddenly seem either mere pulpit rhetoric or the most important words in the world. I knew then and ever after that they were real- even when the darkness falls and the foundations quiver.*

Ben Weir is the Presbyterian missionary and former Moderator of our denomination who in the mid-1980's was snatched off a Lebanese street and kept prisoner by Shiite Moslems for almost a year and a half. In his biography, *Hostage Bound, Hostage Freed*, Rev. Weir tells how his captivity provided him with the opportunity to see God's grace at work in a very powerful way, how their prison cell was daily transformed into a sanctuary where God would be present to him and the rest of the hostages. Together, including Father Jenco, they prayed, read scripture, worshiped and celebrated Holy Communion. Regardless of their religious affiliation, that cell had become a church and they had become the Body of Christ. Rev. Weir wrote:

*As the light dimmed I would sing to myself, "Now the day is over. Night is drawing nigh.*

*Shadows of the evening steal across the sky." And I would in my heart thank God for providing me with resources and stamina beyond my expectation.*

*In the morning, I would thank God for another day of living, refreshing sleep, sound body, and expectation of his sustaining presence. After my first exercise period, I would do my Bible "reading," recalling passages that came to memory. I reviewed various psalms and fragments of them. I would choose each day a figure from the Old Testament- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Gideon, Samuel, Saul- and tell myself his story of faith.*

*I tried to reconstruct the account of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection from the dead. I detailed the travels of the apostle Paul, adding with mental pictures those places in the story that I had visited. I was astounded at Paul's persistence in the face of obstacles and dangers; I returned again and again to the verse in Romans 8:28, "In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." This assurance was the foundation for my grip on sanity and hope."*

Richard Campbell, Terry Anderson, Richard Wurmbrand, David Read, Benjamin Weir- whether a prisoner or a hostage, each knew all-too-well the experience of exile, humiliation, sensory deprivation, brainwashing, loneliness, the fear of being forgotten and losing contact with each of their families. Yet, like Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail, God gave them the strength to endure. Due to his grace, they stayed patient; they remained faithful; they did not yield to despair. God met them at the point of their deepest need and never abandoned them, even when their situation seemed most dire and their spirits were at low ebb.

In his final Beatitude, Jesus told his brethren:

*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 say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted were the prophets who went before you.*

Now not every one of the examples used in this sermon was "persecuted for righteousness faith," that is, persons targeted specifically for being Christian or for standing up for their Christian principles in the face of a hostile environment. The fact is that here in America, very FEW Christians are persecuted for their faith ALONE. To experience THAT you'd have to live, among other places, in North Korea where declaring yourself a Christian can land you in prison or a labor camp; or in Saudi Arabia where just converting to another religion other than Islam is punishable by death, where non-Muslims who engage in worship and other faith practices risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture; or in Pakistan where the churches have to worship with armed guards stationed outside their doors to keep them safe from terrorist attacks.

When our Lord inaugurated his ministry by standing up in his own synagogue and declaring that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to preach deliverance to the prisoners and set the captives free, he was announcing that it was not just directed to persons in prison like Richard Campbell, or to political hostages like Ben Weir and Terry Anderson, or even to victims of religious persecution like Pastor Wurmbrand. He was directing his ministry to the tyrannized

and oppressed of this world WHATEVER their prison may be. He was addressing those for whom each day felt as though they inhabited an invisible five-by-ten foot cell from which there was no parole or escape. That cell could be the imprisonment of poor health, where much of one's time is now consumed by trips to and from hospitals and doctors' offices and drug stores, and where there never seems to be any relief from the pain. For some, such imprisonment could be the loneliness of being locked in a loveless marriage, devoid of any emotional support and love. For some, it may be feeling trapped in some kind of permanent underclass where the opportunity to escape one's social and economic conditions may seem all-but impossible. For some, that prison may be a lack of self-esteem, where they cannot escape that inner voice which tells them they're no good and will never amount to anything; or a prison of guilt and shame in which the accusations they hear in their own heads are never silenced regardless how much alcohol they drink or drugs they may take; or possibly, theirs may be a prison of anger and bitterness at feeling monstrously abused by God and the world and now they want to inflict mindless retribution regardless how many people get injured or killed in the process. It is a fact that we all have prisons we must contend with at various times in our lives- many of which are of our own making.

Well consider closely the testimonies of the various individuals I've shared in this sermon. Did you hear how in the process of being stripped down and robbed of EVERYTHING--from their dignity to their freedom--neither the bars of their cells nor the solitariness of their confinement could keep God out or prevent him from ministering to their needs? Did you hear how through their various trials, God in fact became MORE intimate and MORE real to them than they had ever experienced before; and how because of their faith in Christ's unconditional love for them and the knowledge of what he HIMSELF had suffered, they therefore knew he could identify with THEIR sufferings, with THEIR fears and sense of abandonment, even to the point of DEATH. And because of that, they found their ordeal much more tolerable and bearable to deal with. And one MORE thing- did you see how God would often bring people to them in the midst of their captivity to offer them encouragement and support when they least expected it? Sure, they may have felt that God was absent to them at times but be assured that God was with them from the very beginning, pledging to them that as his children, he would NEVER leave or forsake them!

Well to US as he had to THEM, Christ has never STOPPED saying: "Be patient! Remain faithful! Do NOT lose hope! I understand your plight. I am with you in your situation. You are never forsaken or alone. Whatever the bars that imprison YOU- whether they are bars of guilt, bars of loneliness, bars of fear, bars of self-pity, bars of poor health, bars of a bad marriage, bars of a wayward child, bars of financial hardship- I UNDERSTAND. I know firsthand the arrows of persecution and the loneliness of imprisonment; I have borne the sufferings of many beatings and stared death in the face. Yet, in spite of it all, I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD. And because I HAVE, you can TOO!" Amen and amen.