

"Be Peaceable, Be Free"

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Text: Luke 6: 20-26 and Matthew 5: 1-16

On this Independence Day holiday weekend, we celebrate 248 years of our nation, the United States. Many approach this weekend, this year, with a great deal of fear. We wonder whether or not our democracy, our national experiment, can survive the election of 2024. It doesn't matter your political party or presidential preference, both sides conjure up fear of the other side. Many of us are afraid of both sides and what they will or will not do. "Let Freedom Ring" we sing, but we fear whether or not we'll still have the freedoms we do today, or that we had in the past. Wouldn't it be nice if there was something more we could count on? What if there was a Kingdom, a Reign, a Commonwealth, something that we could count on when the going gets rough? Is there something, or someone that is even greater than our great nation or our president? According to Jesus there is and there always has been something greater than any person or any nation on earth. Jesus says you can be happy--and you can be happy now--despite the level of worry and even persecution you face.

I don't know if you noticed, but this Beatitude is one of only two that is in

the present tense. "Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of justice: the kingdom of Heaven *is theirs*." He didn't say it will be theirs someday, or even that we'll inherit it when we die. No, Jesus says the Reign of God, Kingdom of Heaven, or whatever language you want to use NOW belongs to those who are persecuted in the cause of justice.

His point is fairly easy to grasp: persecution in the cause of justice is inevitable. Think about his audience. What kind of persecution did people in occupied Ancient Palestine suffer? Was Jesus ignoring it? No, he said the way through is the way forward, and to go forward we have to be grounded in something bigger than our own selves, our own governments, our own religions, our own power, prestige and purse. Grounded in God, we are able to withstand, and not only withstand, but find happiness in the midst of persecution. I admit that is hard to believe. But the self Jesus proclaims is so grounded that it can consider persecution an asset.

Most of us, even those who appear the most grounded, are likely grounded in other places than grounded in God. If we're honest, many of us are grounded in our own ego needs. The need to be liked, respected, honored, employed, married, professional, whatever... For me, this is especially hard as I do so like to

be liked, and I have been known to not be as grounded in God as I'd like to be sometimes. To stay the course in right action when the whole world seems to be against it. To stay firm in my convictions and to live out what I believe to be God's call isn't always something I do well. But it's been proven over and over again that when I stop worrying so much about me or what is mine, and I become vulnerable in the cause of God's justice, then there is a peace I can't even explain. It's so wonderful, you'd think I'd do it every time, but like you, I'm human.

In his *Daily Meditation* from April 2017, Richard Rohr takes on both last week's Beatitude about peace making, and this week about persecution (Daily Meditation, Friday, April 21, 2017). Here's part of what Father Rohr had to say in that meditation:

Blessed are the peacemakers:

When our hearts are gentled and single, when we've tamed the animal instincts, we become peacemakers. We are no longer wielding the sword of the binary operator that divides the world into good guys and bad guys, insiders and outsiders, winning team and losing team. When the field of inner vision comes to rest, and that inner peaceableness flows out into the outer world as harmony and compassion: right action in the world stemming from inner attunement. Only from the unified perception of the heart can we discern what action is required of us to lovingly and effectively serve our hurting planet.

Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake:

Jesus is not talking about martyrdom here but about freedom. The Gospel of

Thomas records this beatitude with a slight but telling variation that captures the very essence of Jesus' meaning here and in fact, throughout all the Beatitudes:

Blessed are you in the midst of persecution who, when they hate and pursue you even to the core of your being, cannot find "you" anywhere.

Talk about freedom! Whatever this elixir of pure liberation may be, it is what the journey is all about. And it is attained gradually within us -- distilled drop by drop from the terror and turmoil of our egoic selfhood -- and we learn to let go and entrust ourselves to the Divine Mercy. Situations of persecution (or anything else that shakes us out of our egoic comfort zone) can become great teaching tools if we have the courage to use them that way.

We are nearing the end of the Beatitudes we've been talking about this summer. "In these eight familiar sayings we can now see that Jesus is talking about a radical transformation of consciousness, embraced through an attitude of inner receptivity; a willingness to enter the flow; a commitment to domesticate those violent animal programs within us; and above all, a passionate desire to unify the heart (Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, April 21, 2017)."

It isn't easy work, and like I mentioned before, we won't always get it right. The truth is that the Jesus way is a heck of a lot harder than most Christians make it out to be. It's not about rule keeping so much about loving. It's not about controlling other people, so much as it is about growing our own self and communities to which we belong. The Jesus way isn't about our ego, or making ourselves bigger and more important. No, the Jesus way often leads out of the mainstream, or like Richard likes to say, to the edge of the inside. It's not that we

cannot be a part of culture...look at what Jesus himself did...but it does mean that we participate differently. We aren't moved all about based on fear. We don't make all our decisions based on what scares us the most.

Instead we're forced to ask ourselves, what would love do in this situation? We may never be popular if we live this way, but the Reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven will be ours now! And that Kingdom gives us a joy that no one can ever take away.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Amen.