

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 6, 2011
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHO ARE THE BLESSED? Part 4"

Matthew 5:9,10

Jesus' beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount tell us who are the blessed in God's sight. Now this word blessed does not have to do with how we feel at any given moment. It describes a spiritual condition. It means that in God's sight you are fortunate, because you are in a place to receive God's gift attached to the beatitude.

Today we are going to look at the last two beatitudes. **First, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9)**

The debate continues in Canadian politics. Are we a nation of peace-keepers or peace-makers? Actually, we're both. Our soldiers have acted as peace-keepers, and that is no easy task. And on many occasions we put Canadians into military action in order to end hostilities and make peace. I hate war, as we all do, but I can't quite adopt strict pacifism. Yes, it's embraced by many Christians and I respect it. But after all other avenues are exhausted, war may have to be the last resort for making peace in this dark and sinful world. Now war makes God's heart weep, and ours too, but it's a reality that peace is sometimes made through armed conflict.

We do long for peace, but there is so little of it. It's said that in 5,000 years of recorded history there have been only 286 years of peace; 7% of the time. A junior high student was working hard on a paper and her father asked her about it. She said, "I'm writing about the condition of the world and how to bring peace." Dad replied, "Isn't that a big topic for a junior high student?" "Oh no, Dad," she replied, "and don't worry, there are three of us working on it." I think it will take more than that.

Peace is lacking in the world because we lack peace within. The human heart is the source of the unrest which spills over into relationships between individuals, between nations, between ethnic groups. Even our homes and marriages and churches are not always models of peace. So the world needs peacemakers. Real peace-making actually begins with God, for God is the great peace-maker.

In Africa a river cut a deep ravine through a plateau. In due course, a village grew on each side of the ravine. Since the river couldn't be crossed, the villagers were strangers to one another, suspicious and hostile, hurling insults and arrows across the river. Eventually the government built a bridge across the river and the villagers finally had real contact with each other. They discovered that they had much in common. Their enmity was set aside and a bond of friendship developed between them. The bridge that had united them in peace was named "The Bridge of Reconciliation."

This story resembles the estrangement that existed between God and ourselves. From the time of Adam and Eve we were divided from God by our sin. We were afraid of God. We tried to hide from Him. But then God sent His Son into the world to make peace. At great cost, he laid down his sinless life for our sins. At the Cross God's love for us was poured out and his justice was satisfied. And now Christ is our peace, as Paul says. When we step out on to the bridge by faith in Christ we are reconciled to God. We are forgiven by his grace. We are his forever. We no longer have to fight God because God has made us his friends. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you..." And when we accept God's peace through Christ, we become peace-makers.

For one thing, Christians are peace-makers because we proclaim to the world what God has done in Christ. Some Japanese soldiers were found hiding out in the jungles of Burma thirty years after World War 2 ended. They were still ready to fight, because they hadn't heard the war was over. Christians declare that the war with God is over because God has ended it through Christ. We tell people that peace with God does not have to be fought for; it can be received as a gift by faith in Christ. We invite people to stop struggling against God, and to step out by faith on the bridge of reconciliation and live at peace with God.

Christians are also actively involved in peace-making. We seek to be reconciled with those from whom we are estranged. We are generous in offering forgiveness. We are willing to honestly examine ourselves and to fix that which is causing strife. When you are divided from someone, you take the initiative. You don't wait for the other person to make the first move. No, you go first. Now there's no guarantee that your offer of peace will be accepted, but at least you've done your part. And it's a Godly thing to do.

Furthermore, we sometimes we act as the bridge between two divided parties. We try to find common ground between people that brings them together. We don't seek a cheap peace which glosses over problems. We seek a costly and lasting peace, a peace that goes deep.

Do you remember how Northern Ireland was so filled with bombing and fear and terror a generation ago? But change began when an IRA bomb killed eleven people at a Remembrance Day Service. Gordon Wilson lay under the rubble with his 20 year old daughter Marie and held her hand as she died. A few days after her funeral Gordon Wilson publically forgave the killers and prayed for them. His Christian spirit changed the attitude of a town of 13,000 people. Throughout the land people on both sides of the conflict vowed that this would never happen again. To a large degree it hasn't. Gordon Wilson was a peacemaker following the path of Jesus himself.

The promise of this beatitude is that peacemakers shall be called "the sons or the children of God." In the Bible that phrase "sons of God" means to be like God. When you are a peace-maker you are sharing in God's own character and giving witness to him.

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter is not judged highly by historians. Yet during his Presidency he brokered a peace deal between Israel and Egypt which has lasted for over thirty years. Israel is hoping and praying that it will hold even with the changes in Egypt. But no matter how Jimmy Carter is ranked in the pantheon of U.S. Presidents, he genuinely sought peace and made it happen insofar as he could. So he is indeed worthy of being called a child of God.

Do you desire peace and work for it, wherever and whenever you can? Then no matter what the world says about you, you will be called a child of God. And there is no higher or more lasting recognition than that. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Finally, **"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:10)**

Now the word "persecuted" means to press hard after, to harass and pressure, like police chasing down criminals. Let's face it, most of us have never been persecuted like that. Oh yes, we may have been sometimes shunned by others for our faith. We may have been excluded from certain activities which we shouldn't have been involved with in the first place. And when Christians go against prevailing wisdom we're told to sit down and shut up, or we're just ignored. And we sigh when the Lord's Prayer or a nativity scene is removed from a public space or gathering.

Now a few Canadians have run afoul of the law because of their Christian commitment and paid a considerable price. Do a Google search on a Mississauga resident named Scott Brockie, and you'll see an example of a Christian being persecuted for righteousness' sake. At least it seems that way to me. Another

example took place at the memorial service in the late 90's for victims of the plane crash off the coast of Nova Scotia. All faiths were involved but Christian clergy were told by someone in the office of the Prime Minister at the time, "You can participate, but you can't read from the New Testament." In other words, say nothing about Jesus. Thankfully Christian clergy took part under protest and read from the New Testament anyway. But generally Christians in Canada don't know what it is to be persecuted. That's because of our religious freedoms. Some would say also say it's because our faith is often bland and inoffensive.

Jesus explained that being "persecuted for righteousness sake" means being persecuted because we bear his name. "Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you and utter evil against you falsely on my account." (5:11) Jesus' Name, and therefore those who bear it are an offense in an unbelieving world. Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire for not making the required public confession "Caesar is Lord," because for Christians only "Jesus is Lord."

I did a Google search on the persecuted Christian church today. Thousands of items came up. It's estimated that 200 million Christians are being persecuted world-wide. Here are some recent headlines, "Pakistani Christian Killed by Employer;" "Anti-Christian Attacks in China." "In Iran Arrests and Imprisonment of Christians Intensify." "Media Ignores Burma Christian Genocide."

But the good news is that persecution always makes the church stronger and bolder. It's been true throughout church history. In counties where persecution is taking place, the church is growing and making converts. Courageous leaders are being raised up. Ordinary Christians are emboldened to stand up for Jesus.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." Jesus promises that his persecuted people will receive heavenly blessings to see them through. This is why the persecuted church grows strong. Weak in themselves and under attack from the world persecuted Christians receive strength and courage from God. The very resources of Heaven are theirs. So too is the promise of everlasting life. The Bible says that "those who stand firm to the end will be saved."

So what should we do? We should pray for persecuted Christians around the world and learn from their courage and conviction. And we should welcome even the minor persecution that may come to us because that would strengthen the church. It would indicate that we are growing deep in our commitment to Christ. It would mean that we are being salt and light in the world as Christ calls us to be. If and when persecution comes we should rejoice and be glad, for Jesus says our reward is great in heaven.