

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Matthew 5:11-16
Sunday, February 5, 2017

Blessed are the persecuted

1. While so many are protesting greater regulations on who we let in our country and how we vet them, we are also learning that more and more places around the world are completely hostile to Christians. I just read, for example, that Christian converts are being executed by Somali Muslims. This is on top of the list of other countries where we already know that Christians are persecuted to the point of death.
2. One of the most dangerous things someone can be in this world is a Christian. That is a terrifying thought, made slightly less terrifying by the fact that we don't get executed for it here in America. When a country is under Sharia Law, it is illegal to convert away from Islam, even if you were never truly a Muslim. Islam, much like Judaism, is less about personal profession of faith than about personal circumstances.
 - a. For example, if you were born into a Muslim family, you are Muslim. You don't have a say in it. If you were forced to convert on pain of death, you are a Muslim, even if you don't truly believe. If you discover a faith in Jesus and convert, you have broken the law and are subject to execution.
3. The question, then, is why would anyone in an Islamic country convert to Christianity? Why do people allow themselves to be lined up in rows and beheaded without a single one recanting their faith in Jesus? Certainly, it has something to do with their belief that Jesus is real, his promises are sure, and their future in him is secure.
4. Without ever wanting to face what they face, I pray that my faith is truly as strong as those people. When I think about it, I realize that, for them, some of these scripture verses that can pass us right by become the very things to which they stake their entire lives. One such set of verses comes from Matthew 5:11-12. These are the two verses preceding this week's readings, but I actually think that they are tied directly to verses 13-16 from today's gospel reading.
 - a. ¹¹“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
5. These are incredibly powerful words by Jesus. He understood the cost of being his disciple. Throughout the gospels Jesus warns that they will lose everything, that he didn't come to bring peace, but a sword, that families will turn on one another because of him, that they will be arrested because of him, that they will be executed because of him, and on and on. Jesus didn't paint a picture of his disciples walking an easy path along a sandy beach during sunset. He painted a picture of his disciples fighting for their lives as a tsunami crashes in on the shore.
6. We seem surprised in some respects when things don't go well for us because of our faith. Indeed, the Word/Faith movement within the Church has suggested that God wants us to have our best life now, when Jesus himself told us that we will have our best life later.
7. During the Q&A portion of his time speaking to a college audience, Christian apologist William Lane Craig was asked by a student what that student should do when he is persecuted for his faith. Dr. Craig's response was, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” How easily we forget the words of Jesus.

8. Yet I do believe that it is these very words that makes it easier for Christians the world over to face persecution and execution. They understand the realities and the true cost of following Jesus, and they believe his promises to be true. In particular, they know they are living for the next life, and they believe that “their reward is great in heaven.”

Don't let fear of persecution stop you from being salt and light

1. As I said, I think that those two verses tie directly to the first four verses for today's gospel reading. Jesus followed up his statements about persecution by immediately calling his disciples to be salt and light to the world. Being both salt and light are references that are meant to be viewed as positive in that if we are effective at them then people will see our God. So, in the face of persecution, how would that look?
 - a. In America, that looks like Christians taking to Facebook to tear down religious or political opponents, often being just as ugly and unChrist-like as our opponents.
 - b. In Somalia, it looks like a group of Christians being lined up and shot, all while praising Jesus and loving their persecutors, often leading to some of those same Muslims wondering what those Christians had that caused them to face death in such a bold and courageous way- leading to their own conversion to Christianity.
2. Salt and light isn't just about standing up for God and godliness (as if we can do so by any means), but about standing up for God by being godly. Salt provides good flavor; light draws in so people can see. We have to flavor people's understanding of God in a positive way, and be the kind of light that draws people out of darkness and towards God's light.
3. We can't let fear of persecution stop us from being salt and light. And we can't let mistreatment make us think it is ok to respond in kind. We want to flavor the world for Christ by being good ambassadors that represent him through our words, actions, and character. We want to brighten the world by letting his goodness shine through us so that it is he who shines the light into the dark places.
4. We have the incredible witness of those the world over who are so profoundly living and dying as salt and light for Christ. Let us keep those people in our prayers, and let us pray that we can match their witness and glorifying Christ through our thoughts, words, deeds, indeed, even in our lives and deaths.