

**BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN**  
**Matthew 5:10-12**

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, January 29, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**SCRIPTURE**

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Throughout the history of Judaism and Christianity – and other religions of the world as well – people led by their faith have stood up for what they believe to be right and have often suffered for it.

In the Biblical days...

- We see Joseph thrown into prison for resisting an overture from Pharaoh's wife<sup>1</sup> and Jeremiah thrown into a cistern because of delivering God's message of criticism to the people of Judah and Jerusalem, Jeremiah's own family and kin.<sup>2</sup>
- We see Daniel surviving a lion's den<sup>3</sup> and his companions Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego surviving a fiery furnace,<sup>4</sup> as each had refused to renounce their faith or cease their prayers as the Emperor has decreed.
- In the New Testament, we see Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt with their infant to escape Herod's deadly order, the Magi returning home by an alternate route to avoid the same tyrannical ruler,<sup>5</sup> and both John the Baptist<sup>6</sup> and Stephen<sup>7</sup> losing their lives for the Christ one has come to announce and the other to follow.

I.

In our nation, people of faith have at times been reviled (and even given their lives) as they have sought to help establish our country on the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and then on the United States Constitution, which live alongside and are consistent with our faith. And people of faith have been reviled as they have sought to help move us toward greater realization of our ideals during periods since our founding.

One of the highest points of such "living out" – in my opinion – has occurred in the multi-century struggle to abolish slavery and establish full civil rights in our land. We remember Christians who were at the forefront of those movements:

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 39.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 38.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 6.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 3:19-30.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 2.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 14.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 6:8-8:1.

- The Quaker Benjamin Lay
- The orator Frederick Douglass
- The “New Moses” Harriet Tubman
- The woman who wouldn’t give up her seat Rosa Parks
- Fannie Lou Hamer who simply was “sick and tired of being sick and tired”
- The Presbyterian Minister James Reeb
- And of course Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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And as we keep current on world affairs, we continue to be moved by international heroism, much of it inspired by faith:

- The people and leaders of Ukraine
- Women in Afghanistan and Iran
- Citizens of China
- Russian dissidents.

*“Ye holy twelve, ye martyrs strong,  
All saints triumphant, raise the song.”<sup>8</sup>*

## II.

It is doubtless this heroic faith that Jesus had in mind when he shared with a small band of initial disciples the opening to the Sermon of the Mount, the central core of his teaching in Matthew. Jesus spoke in lyrical sentences we know as the Beatitudes:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

These Beatitudes close with a crescendo that moves from the general to the specific, from the public to the personal, from third person to second person:

*Blessed are you [Jesus says]  
When people revile you  
And persecute you  
And utter all kinds of evil against you  
Falsely on my account.  
Rejoice and be glad,  
For your reward is great in heaven,*

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<sup>8</sup> J. Athelstan Riley, “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones,” 1906, available at [https://hymnary.org/text/ye\\_watchers\\_and\\_ye\\_holy\\_ones](https://hymnary.org/text/ye_watchers_and_ye_holy_ones).

*For in the same way they persecuted the prophets  
Who were before you.*

This kind of revilement and persecution is a horrible thing: *horrible* because it happens far too often, *horrible* because it so often moves from violent language to violent actions, *horrible* because it happens across centuries and nations aimed at secular and religious alike.

Yet in many faiths, ours included, such suffering is also *holy* in that people who experience it – who have sometimes entered into it with eyes wide open – do so because they are responding to a voice that comes from *beyond* themselves but which they recognize as the voice of God, speaking *within* themselves in a whisper they hear with their consciences rather than their ears:

*Blessed are you [the voice whispers]  
When people revile you  
And persecute you  
And utter all kinds of evil against you...  
Rejoice and be glad  
For your reward is great in heaven.*

### III.

Though most of us do not hear a voice calling us to martyrdom at home or abroad, we can hear – figuratively or literally – a voice that calls us – in a situation we face by default or by choice – to act out of the deepest convictions of our faith, out of our deepest sense of what is right, out of the mysterious *combination* of the two.

For nearly all of us, times *will* arise and *do* arise and *should* arise:

*When we hunger and thirst  
For what is right and just and true:  
In our work,  
In our community,  
In events or challenges before our nation.*

Times *will* arise and *do* arise and *should* arise:

*When we hunger and thirst for what is right:  
In a relationship that means so much to us  
But has a continuing flaw that  
Keeps us from giving ourselves fully to it  
Or receiving fully from it.*

Times *will* arise and *do* arise and *should* arise:

*When we hunger and thirst for what is right:  
In our family immediate or extended  
Whose weaknesses we have finally recognized  
And are willing to face  
Because of the kinship and love we are not yet willing to cede.*

As children and youth becoming adults and as adults with long experience in that latter and lengthy stage of life, it is not simply the *public* or *political* in which we yearn for what is right; it is also in the *personal* and *familial* where hunger and thirst for things to be right, even when it means risking rejection and revilement.

#### IV.

People often say to me: “I don’t see how you can be a Pastor. How can go to the hospital when someone is dying? How can you be around so much sadness?”

Those of us who don this pulpit garb do see a fair amount of death, a fair amount of illness, a fair amount of sadness. But we also see multitudes of courage, fortitude, commitment, love, people most often quietly seeking to do the right thing, day after day, year after year, and more often than not, doing it.

For many years there has been a popular expression: “What would Jesus do?” A similar version of this statement often comes in the form of statements like, “If we would all just live according to the Sermon on the Mount, then the world would be fine.” I agree with this spirit of both these statements, but I prefer to frame them along slightly different lines:

Instead of asking “What would Jesus do?” I suggest we ask:

*What would the God I have come to know through Jesus Christ have me do?  
Drawing on all I know about God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit, and drawing on what I know  
about the situation before me: “What would God have me do?”*

When we ask that question, we find within ourselves enormous courage, in the moment at hand, sometimes day in and day out, for the situations we face, for the world in which we live, for the living of our days.

Speaking to all of us who seek to make daily decisions about what is right, Jesus promises:

*We will be blessed in the present  
For acting on that hunger and thirst  
And seeking what is right.*

*Though the hunger may not be fully satisfied  
Nor the thirst fully assuaged,  
The times of blessing we know in the present  
Will become fulfillment in the future,  
When God acts to complete his reign and rule  
And all things are set right.*

*Even when in our hunger and thirst for what is right,  
We are questioned by people around us,  
We can rest with some sense of peace  
That we are doing the right thing.  
And at times this peace can lead us  
To rejoice and be glad.*

What would God have us do?

## V.

On this day, I cannot help but comment – albeit in a preliminary way – on the death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of police officers in the city in which I grew up. I’ve read news accounts and watched portions of the video shown on cable news, but the not the hour’s length available. I have simply never had the stomach for watching violence on the screen.

Conscientious Christians have been asking for several years: “What would God have us do about violence so often perpetrated disproportionately against black men and women in our cities, even when it is perpetrated by black men and in this instance black officers of the law?”

It is my hope that the relatively speedy reaction of officials to the brutal death of Tyre Nichols represents some learning on the part of our nation for how to handle issues of urban policing since the death of George Floyd in 2020. Memphis experienced a similar case in 1971 – when I was in high school -- in which over a two-year period four officers were tried for the death of a 17-year-old male, Elton Hayes, and all were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury.<sup>9</sup>

- In the case of Tyre Nichols, I hope that the quick response of the police chief in dismissing the officers involved, the quick indictments, and the way city officials prepared the city (and world) for the release of the video and helped keep violence down and moved the process of justice forward more quickly.
- I hope that the family’s praise of the work of the police chief and district attorney in their response have helped keep the streets more peaceful.
- I hope the calm of leaders in the majority black community in Memphis have added to an overall sense that justice may in fact be done in this case.

Behind that immediate hope, I pray is that in the city in which I was raised and the nation in which I have spent my entire life have ordinary citizens and wise leaders asking what some in the highly religious population of Memphis seem to be asking:

*“What would God have us do?”*

So that rectification of racial injustice in our nation  
May can come closer.

*“What would God have us do?”*

So that those who have suffered “all kinds of evil”  
Across the centuries and in our own day  
Will not have suffered in vain.

*“What would God have us do?”*

So that all who hunger and thirst for racial rectification  
And have faced revilement and persecution  
For their hunger and thirst  
Will find some reason, even in this life,  
To “rejoice and be glad.”

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.kiro7.com/news/trending/tyre-nichols-death-incident-similar-1971-case-involving-17-year-old-elton-hayes/BQPRK4ABZJES3PNNKVMIPM5DGQ/>.

Amen.