

## **"Goodness, Gracious!"**

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Philippians 2: 1-13 and Matthew 5: 1-16

We live in a world in which many people (maybe even all of us?) feel persecuted. Some feel it from time to time, and others feel it constantly. Persecuted for my beliefs, persecuted for my politics, persecuted for my...(fill in the blank). And while there is nothing wrong with feeling persecuted, often we feel this way because our ego has been threatened. Our way has been left alongside the highway, rather than accepted as gospel. Believe it or not, a lot of people in this world still live their lives all about themselves, while at the same time chastising others as being selfish. Many such people support their ego in Jesus' name, but have little to do with what Jesus is talking about when he says, "Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you, and..." In fact, we leave out the three most important words: "For my sake." Jesus is actually calling us to living our lives for Jesus' sake, for Jesus' purposes, and for Jesus' mission in this world. The word I'm choosing to talk about that is to live for goodness.

Now I'm not talking about being good. You know, like a lot of people who think that humans can be (or must be) without blame or blemish before the Lord.

Of course, some of those same people spend their lives talking about how depraved and sinful people are (while often excluding themselves from such a group!). Others talk about it as though if we just live the Ten Commandments, then all will be well. Actually, many today are just focused on memorizing the Ten, not actually living them, but that's another sermon. No, for Jesus, goodness is about compassion for others, community, inclusion, love, mercy, grace, and giving a rip about someone other than yourself.

Not that we cannot care about and love ourself. Quite the contrary. Jesus is calling for something more, something that arises out of true love for the true self. It's not vain, and it's not about a way to look good, sound good, or get votes. No, truly being good requires us to take a stand, however great or small, for justice, inclusion and peace for all people everywhere. That's a tall order to be sure. But at the end of the day, Jesus' most important words in today's scripture are, "for my sake". And to get there requires a lot of fortitude.

Most importantly, Jesus realizes that often the pursuit of justice is a two-step forward, one-step back proposition. In other words, sometimes we do it beautifully. We say and do the right things and the right time for the right reason. We know we do this when there is blowback. Not always, but often. I remember

in one church I served many years ago, I had a friend who attended church and was treated poorly. I went to the leadership of the church and rightfully stood up for her and others like her. Good for me! The hard part was when the church leadership responded with something to the effect of, "when you grow up, you'll understand that you can't always worry about people like that." Besides being surprised, I can tell you I stayed quiet for a while about things that were wrong. I literally took a step back.

Father Richard Rohr writes, "Authentic God experience always leads toward service, toward the depths, the margins, toward people suffering or considered outsiders. Little by little we allow our politics, economics, classism, sexism, racism, homophobia, and all superiority games to lose their former rationale. Our motivation foundationally changes from security, status, and control to generosity, humility, and cooperation (*Daily Meditations*, Monday, July 8, 2024)."

In a word, authentic God experience leads to goodness. Why does that matter? Because "goodness can never be attacked directly; the messengers or the motivation have to be discredited." Hence, persecution. Ever notice how most the time people don't challenge another person's position so much as they try to discredit the person? This is especially true when doing justice work. For a host of reasons, people don't take on the message they take on the messenger. And the more you sound like Jesus in any culture, but especially in this one, the more persecution will come your way.

In order to weather that persecution, or to begin in the first place, we must first see ourselves as good people called by God to do God's bidding. For most of us, that's a stretch. We see what's wrong with us, why we can't, why we must not. It's easy for someone to discredit us because all of us have some skeleton somewhere in some closet that somebody can exploit. Especially if they exaggerate about our "sin".

But if we figure out that we are created in God's image, and despite or missteps, we are acting in God's way, then we can begin to be "happy" in the face of persecution. So let's start there.

Bishop Michael Curry writes:

I've come to see that the call of God, the love that bids us welcome, is always a call to become the true you. . . . Not an imitation of someone else. The true you: someone made in the image of God, deserving of and receiving love.

There is a Jewish proverb, "Before every person there marches an angel proclaiming, 'Behold, the image of God.'" Unselfish, sacrificial living isn't about ignoring or denying or destroying yourself. It's about discovering your true self—the self that looks like God—and living life from that grounding. Many people are familiar with a part of Jesus's summary of the law of Moses: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. Yourself. Loving the self is a required balance. If we fail in that, we fail our neighbor, too. To love your neighbor is to relate to them as someone made in the image of the God. And it is to relate to yourself as someone made in the image of the God. It's God, up, down, and all around, and God is love. (Being God's Somebody, *Daily Meditations*, Center for Action and Contemplation, Friday, October 29, 2021)

The point is, in order to survive true persecution (persecution for Jesus' sake), one must do two things: first, ground yourself in God (we learned that last week), and second, see yourself as good in God's eyes regardless of what others think. This isn't about preserving your ego, it is about being tied to something greater when the floodwaters of criticism, persecution and hate arise. I'll admit that sometimes this is easier said than done, but that's why it's okay to take two steps forward and one step back. Justice is not linear. Faith is not linear. God's future is not linear. No, progress comes by taking the risk, engaging the journey, and trusting the fall into God's arms when all you-know-what breaks loose. It's a journey, not a destination.

I want to end today with a poem by United Methodist Clergywoman, writer, poet and artist, Jan Richardson:

#### BLESSING THE BODY

This blessing takes  
one look at you  
and all it can say is  
holy.  
Holy hands.  
Holy face.

Holy feet.  
Holy everything  
in between.  
Holy even in pain.  
Holy when we lay it down.  
Holy even when weary.  
In brokenness, holy.  
In shame, holy still.  
Holy in delight.  
Holy in distress.  
Holy when being born.  
Holy when at the hour of our death.

So, friend,  
open your eyes  
(holy eyes).

For one moment  
see what this blessing sees,  
this blessing that knows  
how you have been formed  
and knit together  
in wonder and  
in love.

Welcome this blessing  
that folds its hands

in prayer  
when it meets you;  
receive this blessing  
that wants to kneel  
in reverence  
before you—  
you who are  
temple,  
sanctuary,  
home for God  
in this world.

Amen.