

June 20, 2014 -- *Congregational Topic: Persecution Then and Now* © - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-60; Matthew 10:16-23

Persecution should come as no surprise to the follower of Christ. Jesus tells us in our reading today, “*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*”¹⁷ *Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues;*¹⁸ *and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.*” When we go out into the world with the light of Christ and the Holy Spirit, there is every possibility and even a likelihood that the world will react violently and with extreme prejudice against our witness.

We need to be careful to not confuse prejudice with persecution. Prejudice often leads to persecution, but just because someone vehemently dislikes something you support or define your life by and they voice that opinion does not equate with persecution. Often, prejudice does indeed lay the groundwork for persecution, but of itself, it is not persecution.

Often in the American public sphere, which is really a mirror ball of self-glorification, we will hear politicians and others proclaim they are being persecuted for their beliefs. This suggests to me that we have a very narrow and skewed understanding of what persecution actually is. I do not deny that some of what happens in America may be precursors to a potential future of persecution, but right now, along with a few other countries, we live in a free society that is hallmarked by the freedom to believe and change belief. When one is truly persecuted, one’s empowerment comes through Jesus Christ. One does not need to claim persecution when empowered by Christ. It is self-evident. But when persecution is equated with victimhood, as it typically is in the American mind, our claim to persecution exposes the claim for what it really is: a glorification of the personal ego rather than a faith which is threatened for the greater glory of God.

So what is persecution, actually? The Christian organization, Open Doors International, which helps empower, strengthen and support persecuted Christians around the world defines persecution in this way: “Persecution occurs whenever a believer is denied the protection of religious freedom, prevented from converting to Christianity because of legal or social threats, physically attacked or killed because of their faith, forced to leave their job or home because of the threat of violence, or imprisoned and interrogated for refusing to deny their faith.”

Over 100 million Christians worldwide suffer interrogation, arrest and even death for their faith, with millions more facing discrimination and alienation.”

www.opendoorsusa.org/about-us/faq

As an organization, Open Doors has spent 60 years providing Bibles in areas of persecution toward Christians. They also provide leadership training, support networks and financial resources for Christians in persecuted regions. Every year, they produce a Watch List, which measures the greatest persecution happening around the world. This year, there are 14 countries where *extreme persecution* is happening. This means people are being killed, imprisoned, enslaved and tortured for their Christian faith. Another 13 countries are participating in *severe persecution*. This is either state-sanctioned or allowed by the governing authorities in those areas. Amazingly, there are several organizations that bring together concerned Christians to go into these areas and provide resources and training. Can you imagine being a Christian in North Korea, which heads the list for *extreme persecution* this year? To be clear, someplace like North Korea is intolerant of any religion, not just Christianity. But if you are a Christian there, you are actually risking your life everyday by even opening a Bible, or praying at a clandestine meeting in an empty building, or attempting to worship. This is persecution.

Open Doors' definition of persecution is a very different view of persecution from just having to deal with someone being upset with having to say "Happy Holidays" at work rather than "Merry Christmas". The capacity to gather as we do every Sunday without interference from the nation, the state or the county is a blessing we easily take for granted. Surrounded as we are by free and open worshipers in this place, and surrounded as we are by free and open believers in all kinds of things and unbelievers against all kinds of things in our daily lives, it is very easy to forget it is not like this in many, many places around the world. We, who are able to enact the right to belief and worship, should have that same expectation for all people everywhere. To claim such a value and right for others puts us in direct alignment with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states: "*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his/her religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his/her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*" (Art. 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

As Christians, we have a long history of being persecuted. In that long tradition of persecution, Jesus going to the Cross is the exemplar, the model, of what standing strong in one's faith in the midst of persecution and threat looks like.

I tell you none of this to suggest that we seek out persecution, or to shame the truly persecuted by claiming persecution for ourselves when it is not happening, but to show you that, by the very trajectory and example of the faith we have chosen, it is to be expected. *"Indeed, all who wish to live a Godly life will be persecuted"* (2 Tim 3:12). Live your faith and you will run up at some point against those who would put themselves against you. As we look at the reality of persecution and how it is embedded into the very life of faith for so many throughout history, it is important to consider *how one faces* persecution, rather than *giving into what one feels about it*.

The disciples of Christ knew this, and, according to the Didache, which is a history of the disciples, most of them, according to the legends, died as martyrs of the faith. "Martyr" by the way is the Greek word for "witness". We heard about the first martyr to the faith today, in our story of Stephen. One could say John the Baptist died for the faith, beheaded by Herod. Only James is mentioned as having died by the sword in Scripture (Acts 12). Peter was crucified upside down by the Romans around 67AD, as was the Apostle Paul. . Thomas died by spear in India at the hands of a regional king. Only John, the beloved disciple, is said to have died of old age. The legends say all of them faced their deaths with the same strength and hope as Stephen. Did they in reality? I personally believe there is great value in believing it to be true, so that if ever we must face persecution, we will have powerful models to rely on the same strength they did - that Jesus stood with them to the very end.

After the disciples are various pogroms and empire-instituted persecutions. Often, the persecution of Christians was regional and undeclared. They were usually sentenced as enemies of the state and resisters to local laws. As a result, they often shared a spot in the coliseums with prisoners of war and common criminals. Perpetua and Felicity are two of the most famous martyrs who were imprisoned and martyred for their faith. Together, they faced down lions and bulls while kneeling in prayer as thousands cheered their deaths from the stands in the coliseum. They died in 203 AD.

Diocletian is the most well-known example of early Empire-sanctioned persecution. From 303-311, he oversaw a state-sanctioned attempt to eradicate the Christian faith from the Empire. He failed, but thousands died for their faith in the interim.

Once Christianity became established in the West, the persecutions which occurred often became internecine, sect, conflicts. Catholics persecuted so-called heretics, like the Cathars of the Ural mountains. Often, individual Christians became martyrs as pawns in a political chess game, like Thomas a'Becket in 1170, who stood against Henry II's attempts to claim rights against church land in England, or Joan of Arc, who was put to death by the English army as an example to the people, which is a persecution by terror and power. Both Becket and Joan of Arc, instead of becoming examples of what happens to resisters against governments and empires, became heroes of the common people and the faithful.

During and after the Reformation, many of the persecutions were between Protestant and Catholic movements. Our own tradition derives out of persecution of the Puritans in England by the Anglican church. More often than not, persecution is a tool of powerful political movements to control the masses. All of it constitutes persecution, but the great shame of Christians and all others who have been persecuted is that, in the event the persecuted have the opportunity to gain power, they will also persecute. Oliver Cromwell, good Calvinist that he was and harboring dark and deep wounds from Catholic persecution, himself became a bloody avenger against those who persecuted him. Our very own Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors, persecuted for the new ways of worship they adopted in England, themselves persecuted new ways of knowing God in this country.

In the modern world, persecution casts a dark, long and disturbing shadow. The 20th century alone is a large and troubling testament to Christian persecution. I give you two examples. First, the persecution of the church in Nazi Germany along with the Jewish people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was at the center of this persecution. Bonhoeffer started the Confessing Church of Germany as a resistance to the attempt by Nazis to absorb the Christian church for their own purposes. Given many opportunities to leave the country, he refused so that he could resist the establishment of the Third Reich. In and out of prison, his final act was to participate in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He was executed in 1946.

At the same time Bonhoeffer was starting his Confessing Church, several students at the University of Munich were deeply moved by the persecution occurring around them to the Jews and others. Some of them had been direct witnesses of atrocities against the Jews and had also seen the horrors of war on the Russian front. The students, about 15 in all, along with their philosophy professor, all of whom came from various religious backgrounds, formed The White Rose Society. For 8 months in 1942-1943, they created an underground resistance movement against Hitler and the Nazis. They became the voice of

the persecuted by distributing anonymous pamphlets. Here is a quote from their first pamphlet:

"Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as allowing itself to be "governed" without opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to base instinct. It is certain that today every honest German is ashamed of his government. Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes - crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure - reach the light of day?"

First Leaflet -The White Rose Society - Munich, 1942

In February, 1943, the Gestapo got an anonymous tip about the White Rose Society and arrested many of the group. Their trials were extended over several months so as to avoid a public reaction to so many executions from one trial. All of them were sentenced to death. Alexander Schmorell, who was an Orthodox Christian, was sainted by the Russian Orthodox Church as a Passion Bearer in 2012. It is said that Sophie Scholl's last words were, "*God, you are my refuge into eternity.*" These are, indeed, the words of the faithful in the face of persecution.

A second example of the face of persecution and how it looks like Christ on the Cross is the story of Archbishop Romero. Considered by many when he became archbishop to be a tool of the state and nothing interesting by his fellow priests, Romero watched the state of El Salvador gun down a friend of his. This priest friend was a strong and unwavering advocate and supporter of the poor. Romero decided that if this is the way this close man of Christ died, then the path he must follow must be his friend's path. So overnight, Romero became an advocate of the poor and, as a result, became a traitor to the violent regime in power in El Salvador. Devoutly Catholic neighborhoods were targeted by death squads as a reign of terror by the government of El Salvador and many priests and nuns were killed by them, often in front of the people. On March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero celebrated Mass at a small hospital chapel. As he approached the bread and the cup, he was shot dead in front of the congregation. No investigation took place, but in that moment Romero became a modern day model of Jesus Christ. 250,000 people came out for his funeral, a signal to the beginning of the end of the totalitarian regime in El Salvador.

Next week, we will look at persecution today and how we as free Christians in a free world should confront and understand persecution. Let us end with a prayer from the Church of England for those persecuted in other lands. Let us pray...

O Lord God, your Son Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.

In his resurrection he restores life and peace in all creation.

Comfort, we pray, all victims of intolerance and those oppressed by their fellow humans.

Remember in your kingdom those who have died. Lead the oppressors towards compassion and give hope to the suffering. Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.