

July 27, 2014 -- "Persecution Then and Now: Part 2" - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture -- Epistle Reading: *1 Corinthians 4:8-13; Hebrews 13:1-3* Gospel Reading: *John 15:18-27*

Just a couple weeks ago, Pope Francis declared that Christians are not only the most persecuted people on earth, but also more people are persecuted for their beliefs than at any time in history. If you listen closely to the news, underneath, for those of us who follow the path of Jesus Christ, you will hear some very disturbing things. For the first time in 1600 years, no Mass was celebrated in Mosul, Iraq, because 3 weeks ago, ISIS took over the town. Last week, ISIS burned down the church. The population of Christians in Iraq used to be 1.2 million. Today, it is less than 250,000. The civil war in Syria has created a huge refugee crisis. The vast majority of those refugees are Christians who used to live in close harmony with their Muslim brothers and sisters. Just last week, a province in India outlawed all expressions of faith other than Hinduism. Perhaps you heard of the woman in Sudan who was imprisoned for converting to Christianity. She gave birth to her baby while in prison, with her legs chained. She was released 2 weeks ago after the public outcry shamed the government into releasing her. Last week, 50 churches were burned to the ground in Nigeria. The group who did this was Boko Haram, which translates as "*no education for women*". 3 months ago, Boko Haram kidnapped 300 girls, the vast majority of them Christians. The threat from the leader of Boko Haram is to convert them, then sell them into slavery.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says today,

"Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me."

The reality is that any one of us, or any of our churches, in any place in the world can come under the threat of persecution. We need to be aware of this reality by, first,

not making the experience of persecution meaningless by claiming it when we are not persecuted ourselves, and second, by identifying and recognizing what is happening around the world and seeking out what the Lord would have us do.

We do not live in a world of two churches - a free church and a persecuted church. We are one body of believers.

“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:13).

The atrocities I mentioned above are happening to our church, in our church, with our church. The answer to *“Why is this happening?”* is simple. It is because we follow Jesus Christ. Among all the other places in which the blessings of God may show themselves, in persecution, Jesus reserves his greatest rewards.

“¹⁰ ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’ (Matt. 5:10-12).

Do you remember when Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus? Jesus tells Nicodemus,

“¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light” (Jn 3:19-20).

The presence of the light of God in Christ will bring forth also those who resist the light of Christ. They will seek to put out the light.

As members of the same church as our brothers and sisters around the world who suffer persecution, what shall we do as those who are free to worship and believe according to our own conscience and will? I have four suggestions.

First, we must **identify** ourselves with those who are persecuted. We must hear their stories and their testimony of faith. That initial identification leads to a greater identification, where we see ourselves on the cross with Jesus Christ. This is what we share with people of faith everywhere - Christ on the Cross for the sake of the world.

I mentioned Open Doors International last week. Their approach to sending people in to help persecuted Christians is, first and foremost, to *listen* to their stories. It is useless for me, a middle-class American, to try to tell someone persecuted to remember that it will get better because it often doesn't for those persecuted. It is one thing to walk in solidarity with someone and another entirely to pretend to know what the person needs in the name of God.

When dealing with persecution, we must take the time to hear the stories. We must take the time to try to understand what the persecuted are experiencing. This is a commitment of time and relationship. It could take a very long time for someone from our culture and worldview to understand the experience, faith and needs of someone who is persecuted for their faith. From the perspective of faith, as a movement of the Holy Spirit, the only true needed thing when we enter into the conversation is for us to be in the position of one who does not know or understand. Listening and understanding puts us in the position of serving, of washing the feet of those who look to us for leadership, of loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is how we become like Christ.

This is what Paul is doing when he says to the Corinthian church,

“We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day” (2 Cor 4).

Paul is speaking to a group of people who have very entrenched standards for worldly leadership. By saying these things, he is deliberately reversing that standard. He is trying to get the new church to identify with the foundation of their faith - Jesus Christ.

Christ's leadership is the opposite of worldly leadership. To paraphrase slightly the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi,

Because I now follow Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection,

Where there is hatred, I now seek to sow love;

Where there is injury, I seek to sow pardon;

Where there is discord, I seek to sow harmony;

Where there is error, I seek to sow truth;

Where there is doubt, I seek to sow faith;

Where there is despair, I seek to sow hope;

Where there is darkness, I seek to sow light;

And where there is sadness, I seek to sow joy.

In Christ's name, I seek not so much

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

When we identify with the experience of the persecuted, we begin to identify with Jesus Christ and him crucified. We move toward the suffering, not away from them; and we do not expect them to move toward us. If we take St. Francis' prayer to heart, we will see that Christ resides with the persecuted, the suffering, the hurt, the abused and harmed. It is there we must go also to find Christ.

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb 13:3).

Second, now that we have identified with the single truth of the faith - Jesus Christ, we must ***recognize we are one church and therefore one body***. Remember, there is only one church in which these things are taking place. The only action that unifies us across denomination, across language, across styles of worship, across statements of belief is the act of prayer. Prayer is *“the ultimate fellowship”*. So in identification with Christ on the Cross, we pray with and for our brothers and sisters in prisons, who mourn the death of loved ones who died because of their belief, who are in hiding and who worship in hiding - in house churches in China, in basements in North Korea, in refugee camps at the edges of Palestine and Syria and Iraq, who are under threat from new laws and growing mistrust and hatred.

When we pray by ourselves, or here in our service, we are joining with millions around the world who are also praying. Each voice, each congregation, each prayer behind the bars of a prison or behind a wall of hiding rises to the Lord, and we join that fellowship of prayer as one church and one body. Paul says in Philippians 4,

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Third, because we are free, ***we must fight for the freedom of belief for all***. No one is free until all are free, and as we know,

“Where the Spirit of God is, there also is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17).

This means that, under no circumstance, will we allow the freedom of belief to be undermined in our families, our communities, our churches, or our country. It also means that, under no circumstances, will we allow the success of our resistance to

tyranny and oppression to turn itself into an excuse to then persecute those who do not conform with our new-found freedom.

A faith chosen by coercion or force or fear is not a faith freely chosen. Something so fundamental to our well-being and community relationship should always be freely given and freely chosen. Think of the stories of Jesus. He may get angry; he may even get forceful in explaining the consequences of one's choices of behavior and thinking. But he never coerces or forces belief. He makes room for people to freely to choose to believe in him. So it should also be with us.

And finally, fourth, ***we must recognize we may never end persecution until Christ returns.*** In testimony after testimony, however, the prayer for most who are persecuted is not that it end, but that they are able to endure and persevere. Their prayer is that they do not crumble in the face of great power and that the weakness experienced in suffering become the strength of Christ on the Cross, that they do not lose faith in the face of violence and pain. As Paul says in Romans,

“Suffering creates endurance, and endurance character, and character leads to hope - and hope does not disappoint” (Rom 5:4).

When we listen and understand, pray with and for and seek the freedom of the persecuted, we also learn to endure with the persecuted. Our character is deepened and built through their suffering and our identification with the persecuted. And finally, we begin to see the hope the persecuted hold to, a hope built on the things of God and Christ, not the violence and failures of humankind.

When Kate and I lived in the martial arts commune, we had the privilege of hearing the story of a survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, a wholesale persecution against an entire nation. This man had walked through the Killing Fields and watched his family killed before his eyes. The man was devoted to his only child, the only other survivor of his family. He told his story for about 45 minutes. It was beyond anything I could have imagined, the death and horror he witnessed.

And then the man did something that at the time made our little group very uncomfortable. At the time, neither Kate nor I were involved in the church. But this Cambodian refugee and survivor of a genocide spent another 10 minutes testifying to us about his faith in Christ. I still remember it. People got very uncomfortable, but remembering that experience, he used the model of endurance, character and hope. He spoke to the suffering he endured, then to how the experience had changed him, how his character had been formed and altered by the experience. And then he spoke to the hope that began to arise in his survival. He gave all his experience over to God and began to see the hand of God in his life and in his survival and in his hope. It was a testimony to the power of the presence of Christ even in the worst of all possible circumstances. The man was gentle, caring and given to laughter, and yet every step he took was on the pathways of pain, loss and horror. This is the power of God in the face of the worst of situations, the presence of God within the endurance and character of those who are persecuted. Their hope should also be our hope.

I will finish with a quote from Archbishop Romero, from a speech he gave a month and a half before his death. Persecution is always targeted finally. It may appear random, but one group always is targeted and suffers above all others. Romero said:

“But it is important to note why [the Church] has been persecuted. Not any and every priest has been persecuted, not any and every institution has been attacked. That part of the church has been attacked and persecuted that put itself on the side of the people and went to the people's defense. Here again we find the same key to understanding the persecution of the church: the poor.”

—Óscar Romero, Speech at the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, Feb. 2, 1980.

(wikipedia)

Amen.