

5th Sunday After Pentecost

July 5th, 2020

Matthew 10:24-33

Persecution! It's all about Faith

Happy 4th of July weekend everyone! Although, this weekend in particular, we might be struggling with that “happy” portion. So much Today's sermon will be a little different than normal. I'm preaching today on our gospel reading from Matthew 10. I will also be preaching on the next set of verses of Matthew 10, next week. And so, it's a sort of 2-week sermon series.

The focus is on persecution. This week, our theme is: Persecution! It's all about faith.

It's all about faith. When I look at what is happening in the world today, from the protests to riots, from the great and ever widening political divide, from monumental cultural shifts regarding freedom of speech to accusations of sexism and homophobia, all of it, as I see it, boils down to one thing: faith.

That might sound sensationalist. It might sound like I'm trying to throw a pity party, “Woe is us! Look at how we are persecuted!” I'm not trying to be sensationalist, but realist. And let us not turn persecution into victimhood for we are victors in Christ—persecution only highlights that.

I want you to consider our current climate. Think of all the tension in our country. People are talking about civil war again and that scares me. I don't want that. Let's look at a few areas today where there is tension.

There's a lot of tension right now around race. Rioters are pulling down statues of many, calling for the destruction of more, citing institutional racism. Some of those statues, I understand and can even agree, “Yeah, that person probably shouldn't have a statue.” But when you start calling for statues of Lincoln, Washington, or even abolitionists, I find a sharp disagreement. But in seeing what I'll call “mobs” destroying communities and neighborhoods, I have to wonder if its even about race and just about the institutions.

For instance, a few days ago I saw a video of rioters in Portland tearing down a 110 year old statue of an elk. Yes, an elk. The animal. What does that have to do with racism? It doesn't. In fact tearing down that statue makes no sense if you think that what is happening in our country right now is only because of racial tension. That elk statue had to come down because it's a symbol. It's a symbol of people who do not agree with the mob. Or consider how people are now clamoring for the Martin Luther statue in Baltimore to be torn down. What does Martin Luther have to do with racial tension in America? Nothing. It is a symbol of ideas that people today disagree with. He is a symbol of the Judeo-Christian values that undergird our culture. And I believe that is really what is at the heart of people's anger when they see Washington, Lincoln, or even the flag. I'm not saying that American is or should be a Christian nation. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. But there principles of Scripture embedded into our culture that people are rejecting. In that same, the racial tension in this country, is all about faith.

But perhaps there are clearer examples I can point to. I recently had a conversation with my wife about the movie *Frozen II*. She thinks I'm crazy for picking apart children's movies, but when you have to watch a movie for the 100th time, you can't help but notice the undergirding philosophy. And sorry to all you

Frozen fans, but I don't think that one of the heroines in that movie, Anna, is all that great. In that movie, one of the subplots is the budding relationship between Anna and Kristoff. But throughout the movie Anna repeatedly leaves Kristoff behind so that she can focus on her sister Elsa. Kristoff is essentially abandoned in that movie and at no point does Anna apologize for leaving him behind without any explanation. Kristoff is a hero because he simply follows and doesn't ever question her or call her out for being unkind. Can you imagine a relationship like that? Where one person never has to apologize for wrongdoing? I know...it's a kid's movie.

But, I think there is a larger narrative at play. It's closely tied into what we have heard for a number of years now, "Believe all women." Meaning, if there is ever an accusation by a woman against a man for sexual misconduct, we must believe her and treat him as guilty no matter what. Due process be damned. I agree that we should take accusations seriously. I agree that women have often been failed by people who did not treat them seriously. But I do not agree that the accusation is automatic truth. Due process exists for a reason. But the narrative, "Believe all women" has had an unintended result played out in our media: men are wrong, women are right. How do you raise a little boy and a little girl if this is the dominating philosophy in our culture?

Still, you might ask, "How does this have to do with faith?" Scripture teaches us that men are to be the spiritual heads of the household. Men are to take on the responsibility of shepherding God's people. But the world hates that notion, decrying it as sexist, as antiquated, as unequal. It fights God tooth and nail on this issue, pushing the boundaries well past equality until we end up with a skewed philosophy in our culture: Masculinity is bad.

Another cultural landmark would be homosexuality. I think most of us can easily see how it's all about faith there. Scripture talks about it openly as sinful activity. But culture dominates the narrative, saying, "Love is love and who are you to judge?"

Another cultural landmark is education. There are people are fighting right now to make sure that only public schools are the only allowed schools. Meaning that parents would be legally obligated to send their children to public schools. I think one of the big drives behind this push is sex education. There are people who openly say that schools should not have to inform parents what they are teaching their kids about sex, homosexuality, transgenderism and more. Even trying to teach children about these issues as young as kindergarten. Why? I think it's all about faith. Not letting parents teach their kids about faith.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, public education, freedom of speech, abortion, people call these differences politics. I don't think so. I think it's about faith. Those who listen to God's Word and those who want it silenced. Even if you personally don't see it the way that I do, even if right now you are thinking, "I don't know if I buy into this, pastor. It seems a little far-fetched to me that all the divide in our country has to do with belief in Jesus." Even if that's what you think, then please at least admit this: the devil will use whatever weapon he can to destroy God's church.

Those attacks by the devil do come from every angle: race, sex, politics, sexual orientation, leadership, education, how you view freedoms. The devil has a big quiver full of many arrows. Knowing this, How do you personally get through this persecution where every part of the world is seemingly opposed to God's church? Remember that persecution is all about faith.

Let me reread our text today:

24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

26 "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Three times Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." Firstly, he says, "Do not be afraid of them!" Do not be afraid of the people who oppose you. Do not be afraid of the world. Elsewhere, in John 16, Jesus says, "*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). Do not be afraid of the professors who teach "God is dead." Or the politicians who threaten to take actions against churches or the activists who say that Christians are intolerant bigots for adhering to God's Word.

Secondly, Jesus says, "Do not fear those who kill the body." What Christ has done and what Christ says here reminds us that life is far more than a few decades here. Jesus tells us that we need not fear those who only matter for this life. Rather, to be concerned with him who has the power over our eternity, namely, God himself. He tells us not to fear the persecutor but have respect for God Almighty.

Finally, Jesus tells us, "Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows." Yes, persecution is all around. Yes. It will get worse. Yes, the devil is hard at work. But do not fear. Do not fear because Jesus didn't die on the cross for sparrows. It wasn't mother nature that Jesus came to this earth to redeem. It was you and me. When our sins were taken away, our fears and uncertainties about the future were also laid to rest. While the world may be diametrically opposed to us because of faith and only because of faith, let us also remember Paul's words to the Romans

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn... 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

There is great tension in this country right now. Faith is at the center of it all because those who do not believe what God says will do everything to tear down every reminder of every sin, every judgment, and every word of God that threatens them. Is there hope for an easing of that tension? Is there something we can do to help?

Yes and No.

Let me start with the "No" because I want to be honest with you and keep things in perspective. The sinful mind is hostile to God. The devil is at work. We must understand that the world will always be opposed to God. True Christianity is countercultural because culture is opposed to Christ. Jesus said,

“My kingdom is not of this world.” We do not look for America to be Christ’s kingdom on earth. We should also remember that this battle will rage until Jesus comes back.

But "yes" there are things we can do to help ease this tension in our country. A very simple thing Jesus taught us that none of us have even come close to mastering. Jesus said, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:29-31).*

Peter said, 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

In other words, be such a loving Christian, such a good witness for Christ, that the world cannot slander you without slandering itself. Love your neighbors. Love your neighbors here first and foremost so that people know Christ is here. But then from this place, let your love shine brightly into this world mired by unloving attitudes.

There is much tension in our country and on this 4th of July weekend, I can't think of another time when we have been more divided. That's a frightening thing for us. For me, it's not really about who is president or which political party is in power. All that tension which leads to persecution is all about faith. How do we get through this? It's all about faith, dear friends. Jesus told us, "Do not be afraid." How do we help ease these tensions? It's all about faith. Go put yours into action. Amen.