

Risk and Reward

Stanton Reformed Church

November 10, 2019

Focus: The harassed and insulted are in good company.

Function: The kingdom of heaven is filled with people who are harassed and insulted; are we with them?

Do/Think: Look for the harassed and insulted; there will be the kingdom of heaven.

Here we are at the end... the last of the blessings recounted by Jesus.

This week I realized the crowd gathered in the hillside was a cross section of the world the disciples would encounter as they followed Jesus.

It says the crowd gathered but then Jesus took the disciples to the side and began to teach them... the crowd... they were a visual.

All the blessings, the disciples just needed to look over at the crowd to see who Jesus was talking about.

Jesus was a loving figure, always with arms outstretched, always ready to heal.

And the thing is people come to Jesus with their ailments.

There was a vulnerability to the crowds that followed Jesus. They came to Jesus with

their insides showing. They needed healing and didn't hide it.

They were what these blessings addressed.

hopeless

grieving

Humble

Hungry

Merciful

Pure

And peaceable

All the while they were harassed and insulted.

During Jesus' life the Judeans were an occupied people.

God's chosen people had been invaded and defeated by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans.

The people of God were not only being taxed by one super power, they were often managing the egos and corruption of the families who were in power.

Whatever freedoms they had to worship and conduct their way of life were granted to them by someone who held a spear or who taxed them harshly while holding a spear.

They were harassed.

And so that day on the hillside, it was the harassed who got the last blessing.

What do we know here in the states of religious persecution? We who are of the majority religion?

For example, did we know that there are 245million counts of what is considered high levels of Christian persecution in the world today?

That's 1 in 9 Christians face severe persecution because of their beliefs.

5 years ago, there was only one country listed as a high level persecutor of Christians; it was North Korea.

Now, five years later, there are 10 more..

This past Easter Sunday, 300 Christians died while in worship in Sri Lanka.

In Iran, did we know it is illegal to conduct Christian services in Farsi and illegal to publish a Bible in Farsi?

In the Sudan, ranked #6 on the 2019 World Watch List, Christians are often subject to brutal treatment from the surrounding culture and from authorities; conversion from Islam to Christianity is punishable by death.

During the brutal attacks of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, hundreds of thousands of Christians were killed, enslaved and forced to flee from their homes.

This is one face of a Syrian refugee. A harassed and insulted Christian.

20% of the Middle East used to be Christian; now it is only 5%.

Yet, these harassed brothers and sisters in Christ have defied the odds.

They continue to return to their villages when possible. They rebuild their communities—schools, churches, medical centers and homes.

We forget here in the states that Christianity has always been a religion for the minority voice, the powerless.

Christianity is a belief that builds hope. Why? Christians believe we do not live in the

kingdom of this world; we are citizens of the kingdom of God.

For those on the hillside that day, Jesus was preaching a counter cultural message... God is our King, our only Lord and Master.

we belong to ?God. Not Carsar. Not the romans... not the so,died who is harming us. No. we belong to God.

This is a citizenship with great reward... but also great risk.

We see this in Stephens story.

The story says that the Hellenists were critical of how the believers were caring for their widows.

Their concern was not over doctrine or over worship style or who was in or not... their beef was with the needy widows.

Caring for widows is at the foundation of our faith tradition. Widows and orphans.

Our faith tradition instructs us to care for the weakest members, those who need the most, who are vulnerable to the systems of the world that will oppress them, impoverish them, marginalize them, dismiss them.

The disciples were being called to task because they were not caring for their widows. And so they gathered the church together and they chose more leaders to get the work done.

Stephen was among the new leaders and his primary role was to distribute resources to those most in need.

Stephen was a soup kitchen manager, an affordable housing director.

Stephen heard story after story of people who could not make ends meet.

And when folks saw him doing his job, they made up lies about him.

But he was just doing good, right?

Well, I'll tell you what, I have a colleague who works primarily with the homeless population. He is beloved and vilified in equal measures.

You see he tells stories Of the hopeless, who are hurting and hungry, and it makes people uncomfortable.

I can't help but think Stephen might have been like my colleague.. He'd just seen too

much pain, too much need, too much hopelessness.

And when we see too much hopelessness, we can't help but begin to question why others don't care more about those who are hopeless.

Get this though... Stephen knew the hopeless, the sad, the hungry.

And he also knew that often the most hopeless, the most sad, the hungriest people are remarkably merciful and kind.

It is the least among us that often give the most.

So I imagine Stephen didn't mince words with community leaders, the religious elite, the powerful. I imagine he told them stories about folks and they were uncomfortable.

And so they spread lies about him.

And when they accused him, what does it say? He had the face of an angel.

What did Stephen know that I don't know because I'll tell you what, I don't have the face of an angel when people spread lies about me.

What did Stephen know that we don't know?

He knew these blessings of Jesus were true.

He knew that the kingdom of heaven belonged to the hopeless.

He knew that those who dared to show their grief were the ones who received comfort.

He knew that the little widow who came each day for soup was the most merciful human he'd ever known.

He knew the orphans who were neglected and abandoned were actually the children of God.

Stephen knew who the kingdom of heaven belonged to... and it wasn't the ones spreading lies.

He knew it wasn't the ones who wished him dead.

He knew what Jesus had taught them from the beginning... his citizenship was not of this world. He was a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Jesus had set up a foundation that enabled his followers to renounce their citizenship of the Roman occupation, or whoever else might dare to control them.

Jesus' followers were first and foremost citizens of the kingdom of God.

It's an intriguing message for us.

There is another realm where God is King, God is in charge, God holds the highest office. and we too can claim citizenship there.

It is the world of the blessed, the happy, the content... who are also hopeless and grieving... they are hungry for righteousness.

There is a realm where we can claim citizenship... with others who show their vulnerability, who come for help and healing.

It is risky. But the reward is certain citizenship in the realm of God.