

Who Said It Would Be Easy?

John 15:18-27

10/28/17

Bonnie and I did our undergraduate work at Wheaton College, a Christian college outside of Chicago. One of the benefits of a school like Wheaton was interacting with many kinds of Christians from all around the world. Bonnie's roommate was Tamara Kuzmenkov, known as Timmy. Timmy's family had emigrated with other persecuted believers from Russia to Sacramento, California at the height of the cold war. Their small Russian Baptist church was still preoccupied with Bible passages encouraging persecuted Christians to persevere in the face of suffering. In fact, it seemed perfectly natural to them to require their kindergarteners to memorize the entire book of I Peter, which has suffering as its major theme! They would have loved today's passage from John, but I'm pretty sure the disciples didn't care as much for it!

18 'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world— therefore the world hates you.²⁰ 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.²¹ But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.²² If I had not come and spoken to them,

they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³*Whoever hates me hates my Father also.* ²⁴*If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.* ²⁵*It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause."* (John 15:18-25)

Jesus tells his followers that the world is going to hate them just like it hated him. And it did. The book of Acts tells of the persecution of Jesus' followers from the very first days. It didn't take long until Stephen was stoned to death as the first martyr of the church. Peter and John were beaten and jailed and Peter was later executed. The Christian convert Paul was beaten and jailed numerous times, mocked, threatened, run out of synagogues and whole towns, and eventually executed by Nero in Rome. In fact, all the remaining 11 disciples of Jesus were put to death for their faith, except for John, the author of this gospel. And he was exiled to the island of Patmos. We'll talk more about why these Christians were so hated by the world, but first we need to talk about what Jesus and John meant when they talked about "the world."

When Jesus talks about the world in this way, he is not talking about God's good creation and all the wonders of that creation. Rather, Jesus is talking about human society that organizes itself apart from God. It includes all aspects of our world that are set against God and God's ways.

In pagan culture, the world regarded Caesar as the ultimate authority, and worshiped many other gods. It was and is a fallen world, captive to the powers of sin and darkness. As John noted earlier, when Judas went out to betray Jesus, “It was night.” The world, apart from its Creator, is a dark and dangerous place.

And that world was often hostile to followers of Jesus, and today’s world is no different. In general, the world and virtually all groups within it, desire conformity. It suspects people and groups who are different. As the old saying goes, “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” And Christians are different. We pledge our allegiance to Jesus, not to the prized values of this world. In the years after Jesus left earth, being loyal to Jesus got Christians in deep trouble.

Now the Roman Empire was fairly tolerant when it came to religion. People were free to worship whichever gods they wished. But once a year, every person in the empire was required to give a pinch of incense as an offering to the emperor and declare their allegiance to Caesar. “Caesar is Lord,” was how the Romans put it.

Even though they were good citizens in most ways, Christians refused to do this. They couldn’t say or act like “Caesar was Lord,” when they believed that “Jesus is Lord.” And for this refusal they were branded as anti-society traitors and disloyal citizens. As a consequence, some were

excluded from the marketplaces, some lost their jobs, some were put in jail, and some were put to death in horrible ways. This persecution of Christians continued sporadically throughout the Roman Empire for several hundred years! It only ended when Emperor Constantine became a Christian himself. But the persecution of Christians wasn't over.

On this Reformation Sunday, we remember that the Reformers suffered persecution as they attempted to reform the church. John Hus was burned at the stake in 1415 for his attempts at reformation. William Tyndale was strangled and burned in 1536. Why? One of the major charges against him was that he dared to translate the Bible into English! Martin Luther himself was tried for heresy. He was held captive for his own protection after his conviction in his later years. He cited today's passage from John 15 as being fulfilled in the experience of the Reformers. And persecution of Protestants continues today in some heavily Roman Catholic countries. I have spoken to Presbyterians in Mexico and the Philippines who have witnessed or personally experienced persecution in those countries.

The persecution of Christians is far more widespread than most of us understand. Our own State Dept. lists 60 countries where the persecution and harassment of Christians is condoned by the government. In many of these countries Christianity is banned because of fears that it could be

destabilizing to dictatorial regimes. Think about North Korea, where Christianity is seen as a threat to the personality cult of Kim Jong-Un. Christianity is strictly forbidden and ruthlessly suppressed. There, converts are often turned in to the secret police by their own family members.

The few Christians in Saudi Arabia fare little better, as the radical Islam that dominates that country is extremely hostile to Christianity. Anyone converting to Christianity will be shunned by their own family and community, and be subject to legal action.

The estimated 100 million Christians in China face a different kind of challenge. Christian churches are permitted in China, but they must be registered with the government. In theory, Christians in government-registered churches are free to practice their faith, but the degree of actual freedom varies greatly throughout the country. And many Christians refuse to be registered, meeting in vast networks of house churches, because they believe that aligning themselves with the state will lead to inevitable compromises of their faith. Recent government crackdowns on all Christians resulted in over 7000 crosses on church buildings being destroyed in just one province. Many Chinese Christians are tortured and jailed under false pretenses or sent to re-education camps.

When people want to join our church we ask them a question, "Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" In one Southeast Asian

country, a potential converts are asked some different questions. Here are a few of them. “Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father? Are you willing to lose your job? Are you willing to go to the people who persecute you, forgive them, and share the love of Christ with them? Are you willing to go to prison? Are you willing to die for Jesus?”

Christians all around the world face real persecution, just as Jesus said they would. In this country, in spite of some inflammatory comments to the contrary, Christians are not persecuted for their faith. However, it can still be costly to follow Jesus. Imagine someone who refuses to go along with a less-than-honest sales pitch at their business. Their integrity will cost the company real money, and that employee may lose their job. How about a police officer who refuses to cooperate in a cover-up of police misconduct? Or a consulting firm worker who refuses to participate in padding the expenses on a project. Or an oil or gas company employee who refuses to cooperate in hiding environmental damage caused by the company. The justification for such dishonest actions often comes down to “everybody does it.” Jesus wouldn’t disagree! He would say that such actions are indeed the way of the world, but he calls his followers to a different way. A way that may be personally costly to us. Have you ever experienced such a dilemma? How did you do in following Jesus in such a situation?

After warning his disciples about the cost of following him, Jesus says two more things. *“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.”* (John 15:26-27)

Jesus knew that his followers would suffer on his account. He wanted to make sure that they weren't surprised by this. And, he reminded them that they would not be alone as they suffered, because his Spirit, the Advocate, the Counselor, the Comforter would be right there with them. And yet, his command to them was to continue to testify on his behalf in spite of the persecution. And that's exactly what they and countless Christians have done ever since. And that's what Jesus expects of us.

Here in the USA, where we enjoy legal protections to worship and practice our faith in peace, we must always remember those who do not enjoy those protections. We do that by praying for them. There are many websites that talk about the conditions of Christians in other countries. Visit one of those sites and pray for persecuted Christians in one of those countries. But our responsibility doesn't end there.

By virtue of our position in the world, the US has always advocated for human rights in oppressive countries, including the right to worship freely. We have used both the carrot and the stick in such countries,

sometimes to great effect. I fear that these efforts are now declining and are sometimes non-existent as we adopt a more nationalistic, self-centered philosophy. I believe that is an abdication of our responsibility, forgetting that we have been given great blessings in order to be a blessing to others. In addition to praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters, I encourage you to communicate with our government leaders, insisting that we use our influence to further the cause of religious freedom around the world.

In the early 1930's, Nazism attempted to take over every institution in Germany, including using its churches to proclaim pro-Nazi and anti-Jewish views. Sadly, many clergy and their churches went along. But in 1934, a group of Reformed and Lutheran clergy gathered in Barmen, Germany in opposition. They crafted a statement, rooted in scripture and Christian theology, that opposed the so-called "German Christian" movement. This statement was used to encourage like-minded Christians throughout the Nazi regime's time in power. It is now a part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions, and I thought we would conclude this sermon by reading a few sentences of it together.

The Declaration of Barmen

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. The Church acknowledges the benefit of

this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, would and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.

Prayer: Almighty God who created us in your own image: Grant us grace to contend fearlessly against evil and to make no peace with oppression; And, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.