

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News for Those Who are Persecuted
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Ecclesiastes 7:15-18; Matthew 5:10-12

It might have been better if I had just kept my mouth shut. Things had been going really well during my internship year at First Church Houston. I was learning a great deal and there was talk of me returning after seminary graduation as an Associate Pastor. This would have been wonderful because all of my family lived in Houston, and to be honest, the church paid its associate pastors well and even gave them loans to buy homes. All in all it would have been wonderful. But then I opened my mouth. I was part of a meeting of staff. A new janitorial company that had been hired to take over cleaning the church. The plan outlined by the company representative was that the day before they were to take over, the existing staff who were employees of the church would be told that they must sign up with the new company or be let go. The representative said that this way the church would probably not lose any of its employees. At that point I asked if that was fair...telling employees either sign up or be without a job. The representative said it was an acceptable business practice. I asked again if it was ethical. The response this time came from the senior pastor who informed me that this decision was none of my business and to keep my mouth shut. And though the church was fair and even generous to me for the rest of my tenure, it became clear from that moment on that I would have no future at First Church.

Over the years I have occasionally wondered if perhaps I should have listened to the writer of Ecclesiastes and been a Goldilocks. We all remember Goldilocks, right? She was the girl who was guilty of breaking and entering and didn't like things that were too hot or too cold, too hard or too soft. In other words, she was the kind of person who lived life in the middle of the road...not making life too hard or too soft; too hot or too cold. These are the kinds of people the writer of Ecclesiastes encourages us all to be; those who are not too righteous or too wise, but at the same time are not too wicked or too foolish. They are those who take hold of both good and bad in order to go along to get along, keeping their heads down and their mouths shut. And why would this be a good way to live? It would be good because systems punish those who are either too good or too bad. When I say systems, I mean everything from families to schools to businesses to churches to societies. All these systems are in some way dysfunctional...some more and some less. And all these systems live with a bell curve of behavior. Everyone is supposed to live in the middle being somewhat good and somewhat bad. What happens to those who live on the far ends of the bell curve? Whether it be on the good or the bad end, they are punished. They are unacceptable outliers.

I realize that this might seem odd. We understand why those on the bad end get punished, but why would those on the good end be persecuted as well? The answer is that those who are "too good" are those who ask uncomfortable questions and point out uncomfortable truths. They are those who try to hold the system accountable to what it is supposed to be. They are those who ask why the system is not living up to its own supposed norms, and then acts to bring the system into alignment. Systems do not like this kind of person because it upsets the moral equilibrium of the middle of the bell curve. I know this to be true, not because of my time in Houston, but because of stories that many of you have told me of your own situations. I have heard stories of people being harassed, persecuted or fired because they have stood up for a co-worker, or reminded people of the rules, or reported wrong doing, or because they refused to engage in behavior and activities they believed to be morally wrong. In each of these cases it would have been easier to be a Goldilocks and simply follow the middle way. But, for better or worse, you all chose the way of Jesus, the way of righteousness and not the way of Goldilocks. You chose the way of the beatitude.

The idea of choosing the way of righteousness rather than the way of Goldilocks is at the heart of this beatitude. “There is wonderful news for those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...and...when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account.” In other words, there is wonderful news for those who are willing to be “too good.” There is wonderful news for those who are willing to stand up like the prophets did. To be clear, righteousness in this context is not about being a perfectly legalistic religious person. Being righteous is about being like the prophets; being those who speak up and act up for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the powerless, the marginalized and the forgotten. It means speaking up and acting up when we see others doing harm and violating rules intended to protect the vulnerable or even the system itself from harm. And it means to do these things even in the face of reprisal and persecution. This was the example set by Jesus who spoke truth to power and rocked the system. This was what the prophets did when they confronted kings, queens and priests in order to protect God’s people. This is what God’s people have done across history. It is what the church is called to be and to do. Unfortunately, far too often, we in the church have chosen the way of Goldilocks, rather than the way of righteousness.

One of the most powerful indictments of the church following the way of Goldilocks versus the way of righteousness can be found in the Letter from the Birmingham Jail, penned by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King had come to Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 to help lead non-violent actions intended to help bring about an end to segregation and unequal treatment of Birmingham’s black citizens. In the process he was jailed and while in jail read an open letter from white clergy criticizing his presence and his actions. Here is a small part of his response. *“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the...the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection...”* Just as Jesus did, King reminded people of faith that they, that we, are called to the way of righteousness and not the way of Goldilocks.

What then is the wonderful news if being righteous gets us into trouble? The wonderful news is that we get to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. “There is wonderful news for those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Once again as a reminder, the kingdom of heaven is not a place in the afterlife, meaning we only get into heaven if we are the righteous. The Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus uses it, describes the new world, the new community, the new creation in which all people find their value and worth; in which all people share in the bounty of God’s creation; in which all people come to know that they are loved by the God who made them. This is so because those who follow the way of righteousness help to create this new world. They become those who help to reshape systems so that they more closely mirror heaven here on earth. They get to become part of something amazing that will outlast the systems of which they are a part. This is the wonderful news into which we are invited.

The challenge then for us is to ask ourselves this question: Where am I on the bell curve? Am I in the middle as a Goldilocks, or am I on the edges of the curve, striving for righteousness that I might help create a new world, a new heaven on earth?