

A sermon for PW on The Beatitudes delivered by The Rev. Margaret Aymer on the occasion of the 104th Gathering of PW in Cherokee Presbytery

“You When”

Sisters, as we turn to the proclamation of the word, let us once again turn our hearts and minds to prayer. God of our mothers, of Hagar the desert wanderer and God namer, of Deborah the judge, and Miriam the prophet, speak to us now using the words of our Savior Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, that we might be guided to live our lives as Christ's disciples. Amen.

The Beatitudes, especially the version recorded in the gospel according to Matthew, is one of the great poems or hymns of the Christian church. We learn to recite it as children, print it on T-shirts and signs and coffee mugs, stitch it into samplers and banners for the church, and hold it up as a primary example of the life of discipleship. And yet, friends, there is are two words we often overlook in this great poem, words that turns the poem from a lovely vision of what it means to “be a good person” into a pointed reminder of the cost of discipleship. Today, as we prepare to leave the study of Revelation to John and begin our study of the Beatitudes, I invite you to focus on those two words that make all the difference. The words, my sisters, are You When.

Listen again to the way these words are used in Matthew's gospel: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Friends, the first thing we must notice is that in this passage, Jesus does not say “Blessed are YOU IF people revile you, persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” Jesus doesn't say YOU IF. Jesus says “you when.” There is an expectation in this teaching, an expectation that the

path Jesus is calling us to is a path that comes with some risks, risks of being reviled, risks of being persecuted, risks of being slandered. It is tempting to wonder, after such beautiful words, if Jesus could just have been making a mistake; if “you when” is just too strong for this call to discipleship called the beatitudes. However, if you keep reading Matthew's gospel, you'll find that Jesus is completely consistent. Later in the 5th chapter, he commands us to pray for those who persecute us. In the 10th chapter, he instructs disciples who are persecuted in one town to flee to another town, and in the 13th chapter, he compares those who cannot handle persecution to seeds thrown on rocky soil that have no root. Sisters, I'm afraid, it's quite certain that Jesus intended to use “you when” in Matthew's Beatitudes.

Further, Jesus teaches that this “you when” of persecution, revulsion and slander is going to take place on his account. Hear me. Jesus says, the “you when” of persecution comes BECAUSE we are his faithful disciples. Too often, these days, I hear brothers and sisters of the faith preaching that discipleship of Jesus Christ will get you OUT of trouble, that it will take away your problems and your trials and will lead to a life of quiet prosperity. While I understand the wish for those things, particularly among those who come from families of poverty, I'm afraid that is not what Jesus teaches. Jesus doesn't teach that the gospel will get you OUT of trouble. Jesus teaches that living lives as his disciple will get you INTO trouble. For, the YOU WHEN in the Beatitudes teaches us that as followers of Jesus we will be *reviled*, not praised; *persecuted*, not protected; and *slandered*, not saluted. And these things will happen to us BECAUSE we are Christ's disciples, not in spite of that fact.

Hear what Jesus is saying, sisters. Jesus is saying that WHEN YOU live in a way that heaven honors, this world might cause you problems. For, this world holds up the

richest and most famous among us as those we should honor, the Steve Jobs' and Bill Gates, the Oprah Winfreys and Suze Ormans, the Fortune 500 and those whom Donald Trump hires. These are the ones that we are called to honor in this world. So WHEN YOU, as disciples of Jesus Christ turn to these icons of our society and say, "Shame on you, for you already have your reward," some will call you names. WHEN YOU, in the name of Jesus Christ, honor the destitute, those left to beg on our streets or wander through our deserts because they have no other way to make a living for themselves or their families, some will be revolted by you or seek to persecute you. And yet, Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes that this is the path of discipleship.

In the same way, this world holds up the Don Imuses and Glen Becks as models of civic virtue, and professional humorists, as they mock those who stand in the place of professional mourners, and while they cause others to laugh at those crying out and refusing to be silenced on behalf of those who are hurting. Church, WHEN YOU, in the name of Jesus Christ, call for their silence; WHEN YOU honor those who are crying out in pain or in anger, and who like Rachel who have lost their children, refuse to be comforted, some will slander and revile and persecute you. And yet, Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes that this is the path of discipleship.

The world expects us to honor those who, out of hard work or luck, election or inheritance, have reached places of status in the society because of their status alone. Sisters, WHEN YOU, instead, as disciples of Jesus Christ, honor those whom life and its living have humbled, those who are losing their jobs and their homes, their pensions and their sense of security, those who have become migrants and refugees, orphans and widows because of the evils of this world, some will slander you and revile you and persecute you.

And yet, Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes that this is the path of discipleship.

The world expects us to honor those who frequent Food Network, surrounded by a bounty of food and drink; and those who, because of who they are, receive help when they face trouble and leniency when they face hard times. Believers, WHEN YOU, instead, as disciples of Jesus Christ, honor those who are starving and dying from thirst, calling for food and water justice both locally and globally, some will slander you, and revile you and persecute you. And yet, Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes that this is the path of discipleship.

And whenever you honor those who live their lives in covenant loyalty to their sisters and brothers and to God, showing them compassion and feeling for them in your hearts, those whom our world calls weak and soft.... Whenever you honor those whose inner lives and outer actions match, and who don't play the game of saying what everyone wants to hear, even if it is not true, those whom our world calls strange and foolish...

Whenever you honor those who live their lives seeking the fullness of shalom, peace as well as wholeness and healing, for all God's children, those whom the world calls peaceniks and dismisses as idealists... Whenever you honor those who allow themselves to be arrested and put on watch lists and maligned in the press because they refuse to be silenced in the face of injustice, those whom the world calls troublemakers... Presbyterian Women, whenever you, as disciples of Jesus Christ honor these people, these children of God who are trying to live out their lives in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ, some people will revile you, some people will slander you, and some people will persecute you. Not if. When.

For you see, the old fable they used to tell us is not true. Being Christian is not at all the same as being a respectable woman from a decent family. Ask the martyr Perpetua who was thrown to the lions, relinquishing both her respectability and her decent family

because she refused to deny Christ Jesus as her Lord and Savior. Or, if you do not want to go back that far, ask Dorothy Day and Mary McLeod Bethune, Sojourner Truth and the Philadelphia 8. Ask Margaret Towner and Peggy Howland and Katie Geneva Cannon, for that matter. Being a Christian woman, a disciple of the one who first appeared to Mary of Magdala and whom Martha of Bethany called “the Christ, the son of God who has come into the world,” being a Christian woman means being standing where Jesus stood, with the outcasts and the voiceless, and with those who are already standing with them. In Georgia, it means standing with the migrants—with and without papers—and with the working class that are being taught to blame the migrants for the injustices that the corporations are perpetrating on them. In this nation, it means standing with those for whom this great recession has been and continues to be a great depression. In this world, it means standing with those nations that are at war over the minerals we need for our cell phones, and with those women and men who are still in refugee camps months and years after earthquake or fire or war or tsunami. Being a Christian woman, being a PRESBYTERIAN woman means lifting up your voice with prophets and peacemakers, truth-tellers and troublemakers of every generation, putting all on the line for the sake of the God whom Hagar called El-roi, the God who sees. Being a Christian woman means today what it meant so many years ago, when Jesus said if anyone would come after me, let her deny herself, take up her cross and follow me. Being a Christian woman means acknowledging that the crux of the Beatitudes, for us as Christ's disciples are those two troubling words: YOU WHEN.

And yet, “you when” comes with a command to rejoice, not to weep. You when comes with a command to celebrate not to shrink in fear. You when comes with a command

to leap and dance, not to lie awake worrying about the consequences of discipleship. For, as disciples, we are called to remember that our hope is not in the expectations of this world. Our hope is not in the honor of this world or the respect of this world. Our hope is not in the admiration of this world, but in a greater reality, a greater source of authority even than the empires of this world.

For all who live as disciples of Christ in this world are the concern of heaven, greatly beloved and rewarded. And the same God who honors the destitute and the mourners, the humbled and the famished, also honors those who stand with them in Jesus name. And, even as we are called to covenant loyalty, our God is faithful beyond our human understanding.

This is the promise of the prophets, the promise that even when you, even when we are sent into a world that will not hear and might even attack, nevertheless we are doing the work of God and will in no way lose our heavenly reward. Like so many of the promises of the beatitudes, this promise points to another age, an age when God's will is done on earth as in heaven. It is a promise that, in the end, God is ultimately in charge and that God's reign will ultimately prevail. However, this is not just a promise about the hereafter, a trust in the God of the not yet, of the unseen future. For, the promise is that, even in the midst of persecution, the Triune God is concerned with and is, in ways seen and unseen, standing with Christ's faithful disciples. God is with us, and since God is with us we can dare to take the step of discipleship, even in the face of persecution. For truly, if we live as disciples, in life, in death, and in life after death, we belong to God.

Sisters in Christ, the words "you when" in the Beatitudes are not a warning. They are a call to fearless Christianity, Christianity lived knowing that when we honor those

whom heaven honors, and when we live as disciples of the Christ, we will be charged with meddling. Let it be so, and let us rejoice in it. For going before us is the one who calls us to be overjoyed, to leap and dance, the one who calls himself the Lord of the Dance, the one who has promised to be with us even until the end of the age.

Then let us celebrate, not because of the “you when” but because of the call to discipleship. For WHEN YOU, when *we* dare to live as disciples of the one we call Savior and Lord, heaven itself echoes with Christ's words: “Greatly honored are they.”