

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Epiphany

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Last week, I had a sad experience...

As an only child, I was responsible for selling my parent’s house and property, bringing an end to an era.

In the process, I spent several days disposing of personal possessions, tossing decades of personal cards and letters and photographs and memories into the trash heap, ultimately destroying or walking away from everything that was familiar

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everything that had once anchored me to a life and a place and a community and past in this world.

As I drove down the gravel drive for the last time, taking one last look at the house in my rear-view mirror, a tear naturally welled up in my eye.

And I know... many of you have been through this...

So you know how sad this is.

But in the midst of that sadness, the beatitudes we heard last Sunday came to mind,

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh...” (Luke 6:21).

Indeed, we shall ALL rejoice!

For we are *blessed* - *Ours* is the kingdom of God!

We are in spectacularly good hands, and this all ends well!

True, our families, our homes, our lives in this world are gifts of God to be treasured, and there is great sadness in seeing them perish.

But we do not weep as those who have no hope,

for our hope is in the heavenly glory that St. Paul speaks of again today (1Cor 15) - not some wishful thinking, pie-in-the-sky dream,

but the sure and certain promise of life everlasting in God's kingdom, sealed and delivered for us in the blood of Christ.

For "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1Cor 15:22)!

So begins the Sermon on the Plain -

It begins with those blessings we heard last week: Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep -

blessings that sustain us as we continue putting one foot in front of the other on our difficult and often painful pilgrimage through this fallen world.

But today as we move into the second part of Jesus' sermon,

we are reminded that not only do we bear such loss, pain, and grief along the way,

but that we do so as enemies of this world...

Many of you have read Rod Dreher's book "The Benedict Option."

He was among the first to point out that, “a time is near when it will be impossible to be a Christian and an American...”

And what he meant was, our Christian worldview is no longer tolerated in our land, and is in fact is being increasingly persecuted.

Just this week I read about signs being put up in storefronts and restaurants and neighborhood front yards saying, “No Vacancy for Hate” -

“Hate is Not Welcome Here,” -

“Hate is Not a Family Value.”

And by “Hate,” they mean any belief that now crosses the prevailing, progressive party line.

If you defend a biblical concept of marriage and the sanctity of life, you may be a hater.

If you uphold the role of authority and a basic hierarchy for good order in the home or the work-place, you are probably a hater.

And if you are the least bit skeptical that a man can occupy a woman’s body, you are definitely a hater.

For whatever reason you may bear this label, not only are you unwelcome,

but you are despised!

In fact, Christianity is probably the only religion in America that can be openly hated.

The sad fact is, you now have enemies, and depending on how far things go,

you will be persecuted, perhaps sooner than later.

Your employers, your co-workers, your government, perhaps even your own families will hate you for

your beliefs, and they will strike out against you.

They will curse you and abuse you.

They will run you out of their restaurants and businesses.

They will limit your opportunities and end your careers.

They will bar you from getting jobs and sue you for everything you've got, "taking your cloak," as it were.

I mean, these things are already happening, right?

I'm sure you've all read about people being harassed and run out of restaurants -

You're no-doubt familiar with people being fired for something as simple as making a charitable donation to a pro-life organization.

And most recently, you have probably heard about those children from the Catholic high school who were slandered and reviled by the media for events that took place at the recent March for Life in Washington, D.C...

Of course, there are no surprises here, for as Jesus said,

people will "hate you and exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22)!

And I guess the question is, what would Jesus have you do in these situations?

How would He have you (or the church for that matter) respond to such hateful, malicious persecution?

Well, it just so happens that He not only *tells* us how to respond, but goes on to demonstrate exactly what He's talking about in

today's Gospel reading.

After all, what *did* Jesus do when
He was struck on the cheek?

How *did* He respond when He
was stripped of *His* cloak before
being taken to the cross?

How did He act toward those who hated Him, cursed Him, and abused Him,
even to death?

Answer: He loved
them and gave His life for them, that they might have life in Him.

He blessed them and prayed for them, "Father, forgive them, for they
know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

He loved His enemies and did good, expecting
nothing in return.

And in this
peculiar, counter-intuitive, humble, hidden, and utterly foolish way, He won
the victory.

He saved the world.

He made all things new.

And because of *your* Baptism into Christ -

because of *your* union with
Him through the Holy Spirit,

you now participate in this peculiar,
counter-intuitive, humble, hidden, and foolish victory through your own
suffering.

As you "love your
enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, and
praying for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28) for your faith,

you actually serve as a means of grace – a living icon of God’s love and Christ’s sacrifice!

Of course, the world and the demons will laugh and rejoice and remain utterly confident that they are systematically destroying the haters and making this world a better place.

But you know better.

For it is in this testimony that we share with Jesus, this faithful obedience, trust, and adherence to the truth of God’s Word over against the idolatry of this fallen world, that God’s kingdom actually comes.

In this way, the devil and this world are overcome,

and we actually share with Christ in *His* victory for the life of the world.

So what would Jesus have you do in the midst of such peril and persecution that will come to you as believers?

He would have you continue doing what He has already done for you.

He would have you pouring out His grace, mercy, and peace for the life of the world.

He would have you “being merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36), forgiving as you have been forgiven,

loving as you have been loved,

doing good to your enemies without expectation of gain (v35).

Using sixteen emphatic, present tense imperative commands, Jesus basically says,

“Here is what you are to do as my disciples, as my representatives on earth, as part of the solution and not part of the problem in this world:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you -

Always bless those who curse you, *always* pray for those who abuse you.

Give your cheek, your tunic, and all that you have to those who would take them from you because of your beliefs.

Judge not. Condemn not... forgive always."

In other words, share the very gifts you have received.

Dial back the social-media warfare, and do for others what you would have done for you...

Forgive them. Pray for them. Do good to them. Why?

Because the *Most High* is kind to the ungrateful and the evil... (Luke 6:35)

and YOU are the children of the most High (v35) -

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon text: *Luke 6:27-38*