



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 5TH PENTECOST

MATTHEW 5:13-20

FEBRUARY 5, 2023

“WE MULTIPLY WHEN YOU REAP US”

Nine days hence is St. Valentine's day – for those of you whose New Year's resolution was losing weight, there are storm clouds gathering. The day is synonymous with ...love...of chocolate macadamia clusters! But also, real honest to goodness love. Of that Saint Valentine was a model - not a concoction of the candy, floral or greeting card industries.

Valentinus was a 3rd century priest and bishop in Rome and ministered among Christians suffering persecution for their faith. He may have also been a physician, and in that capacity, may have been sent by the Roman Emperor Claudius II to find suitable soldiers to conscript into his army. It is alleged Claudius became enraged when Valentinus, who, coming upon a suitable conscript from among the Christians, would perform a marriage ceremony. In Rome newly married men could avoid, at least for a time, military service.

Whatever Claudius' real reason, Valentinus was imprisoned and eventually executed. A tragic story but one with a legendary component. Valentinus is said to have healed and befriended the daughter of his Roman jailer. Sensing his impending death, he wrote her a note signed ...*from your Valentine!* Bishop Valentinus was buried on February 14, in the year 270.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:11 *“blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”* We are not to go out looking for persecution. If it finds us it finds us - but it shouldn't have to look real hard either. Persecution “found” *“the holy innocents of Bethlehem”*, John the Baptist and Stephen, the Apostles James, Peter and Paul. Later Polycarp of Smyrna, Perpetua and Felicity and countless, nameless followers of Jesus. The organization “Open Doors” estimates 6000 Christians died in 2022 as a result of their faith, over 2100 churches were attacked or closed, and 125,000 were driven from their homes.

The 2nd century theologian Tertullian is famous for saying *“the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”*, a phrase in Latin that might also be translated *“we multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed.”* The church where persecuted has not been crushed however, in fact the opposite is true. The director of Open Doors said recently, *“what we have noticed not just an increase in persecution, but also an increase in the size and strength of the body of Christ. Yes, a lot of hardship, a lot of drama; at the same time a lot of church growth as well.”*

In our culture, faith, to say the least, is on the defensive. For starters, our affluence competes hard against it. In Deuteronomy chapter 8, the Lord warns Israel to be careful with the prosperity they will enjoy in the land He was placing them in. *“Take care lest you forget the Lord your God...and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied, then your heart will be lifted up and you will forget the Lord your God.”* But the media, academic, business, entertainment and military shapers of culture are no longer friends of faith.

Yet Lisa Pierce of Open Doors recently said, *“I would say to American Christians that relative to many, many places in the world – you have extraordinary freedom. Use it well.”* Have we used it well? Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia Father Charles Chaput said in the journal *“First Things”* – *“the America we now see emerging – ignorant or cynical toward religion in general and Christianity in particular, shouldn’t really surprise anyone. It’s a new America, made in America. Christians helped create it with our eagerness to fit in, our distractions, and our lukewarm faith.”* If Bishop Chaput is correct, we may not be using our Christian freedom well at all – maybe in a decidedly wrong way.

Today is our annual meeting. Most of what we talk about will be far removed from the issue of the persecuted church abroad or what many today perceive as “soft” persecution of faith domestically. Yet we should talk about our lesson today, in which Jesus elevates his followers by saying we are *“the salt of the earth”* and *“the light of the world”* – yet in the same breath exhorts us to be vigilant and remain what we were created to be. How salt loses its saltiness I cannot say – I’m not sure it’s chemically possible – but that’s not the point Jesus is trying to make. The point he makes is if salt is not used, it’s useless.

If the analogy of salt and light our Lord uses today be our guide, we are to *“seep into”* or culture. That is what we exist for, and annual meetings good times to reflect on if we are, and how. We cannot do that without being courageous on one hand – blessed are you if falsehoods are uttered – but kind, charitable and longsuffering on the other – blessed are those who are meek and who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Our congregation’s mission statement reads *“living and sharing the life changing message of Jesus Christ.”* Mission statements in churches abound – the Bible has dozens of good ones if it were not so much fun to make them up on our own.

One could snatch a few mission statements out of our lesson today – *“We are the salt of the earth...watch us spice things up”!* *“We are the light of the world...for Jesus we never burnout.”* Ok... maybe not! But then there is this one...*“In the same way let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* That’s our baptismal commission. It’s the first thing the church says to the newly baptized after joining them to the death and resurrection of Jesus. What the faith God creates in baptism will result in is virtually impossible to say at that moment in the newly baptized person’s life, but what it is intended to do is beyond doubt...glorify our Father in heaven.

The way some have been called upon to do that – the modern martyrs of North Korea, Nigeria, the Sudan, etc., the modern Valentines of this world, is extraordinary, but powerful. The world hates these Christians because of who they confess loves them – Jesus Christ. We ought to pray and take a full measure of gratitude for the witness they bear. Jim Elliot, a martyr of the faith of the 20th century famously said, *“he is no fool if he should choose, to give the thing he cannot keep, to gain what he can never lose.”* When you love Him who first loved you, you show that you know what that word love really means. I’m not sure there is any other reason the church exists. AMEN