

**“Beatitudes: Peacemakers, Persecuted and Gladness”**

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Most of you remember the words of Tevye in the wonderful musical “Fiddler on the Roof.” For those of you who are younger and haven’t had that experience or haven’t seen that musical, it is about a Jewish family in Russia during the early 1900’s - about 1905. The Russian government told this Jewish community that since they were Jewish, they had to leave or be destroyed within three days.

Imagine how awful that would have been. So Tevye and his group of people got together and they said, “What are we going to do?” One of his [Tevye’s] Jewish friends cried out in anger against the injustice, “We should defend ourselves. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” To which Tevye, who was a daring man, replied, “Very good. And that way if we insist on fighting one another, the whole world will soon be blind and toothless.” [Laughter.] And that is what happened.

But, in our time, with all of our sophisticated weapons, with the fighting that is taking place right now, Tevye was right – pretty soon the whole world will be blind and toothless. We will be lifeless. Because in 1905 they had no idea what it could be like to totally destroy our world with nuclear weapons. Injustice is everywhere.

One of the reasons I like that musical so much [is that] it doesn’t have easy answers. You have Tevye, who talked about the eye-for-an-eye mentality, but what was missed in the story was not just the religious prejudice taking place during that time, but also the underlying injustice of economics.

Now if you remember the movie, he sings, “If I Were a Rich Man.” Well, what he was talking about was if he had power; if he had the economic power he could change the world in a better way than those darn Russians were. And that way they wouldn’t have to flee all the way to Poland and look at Perchik - his soon to be son-in-law - that he wasn’t real sure he liked. I mean none of us dads like our sons-in-law all that much. [Laughter] But Perchick was a communist sympathizer. He was fighting a revolutionary battle which was economic.

Even in this cute, little, Russian story and musical, you have these battles for injustice. What it meant to be a peacemaker who was facing economic injustice.

The story ends in a helpless way. It is the saddest musical that I have ever registered with, because it ended in such a helpless way: They just go off to Poland. And, yet, there was God’s hope that maybe someday they would receive the help and hope that they needed. Amidst all of that laughter and dancing there was really a sad tone. Nobody that day was there to help them with a peacemaker; but they truly hoped that one day God would bring a peacemaker to their lives.

Like I said, at first glance this seemed like religious persecution. But groups have often used religion or race-blaming to cover up what the real issue is - and that is economic disparity. It is prevalent in our country today.

So, I thought about talking today about North Korea and Russia, and all of those peacekeeping things that those people are doing which are bad. I thought rather than talking about “those people,” maybe we should talk about what we need to do, as Americans, in the world right now to be peacemakers.

Because, when you look in this passage, Jesus isn't talking about peacemaking as something that happens in your heart; “I want to be at peace with myself.” Not this time. Jesus is talking about an action; peacemaking in which we make a difference in this world and help bring peace to our entire world - not some inner being within ourselves, but *in* the world. If Jesus demands it of us, then there must be a way that we can do it. But, first we have to name the problem, and rather than pointing at others and saying, “Boy, you guys in North Korea have a problem; or “You terrible Russians, Putin is horrible; you guys have a problem” - before we can point a finger at anyone else, we need to begin by pointing and looking at ourselves, because we are not doing it perfectly either. The first way to bring peacekeeping into our lives, is to begin to reflect on what we are doing and not doing. I will say that it starts within our own hearts. You can't be a peacekeeper for others, until you have a peacekeeping spirit within yourself.

I know this person - knew her for a number of years - and she was at war with her family and with any institution. She was just a bitter person, and yet she gave money to every peacekeeping situation. She was very generous in handing out money to peaceful organizations to this caring thing. But this poor dear didn't have a peacekeeping heart, and she created chaos in every part of her life. As much as she wanted to have peace, she created conflict. So, to bring a conflictual person into a peacekeeping environment only creates more chaos.

Just about all of us, at one time or another, because of our circumstances and our own frustrations, have come bitter and cynical and angry to a situation where there should have been peace - and we make conflict. So, if we are going to be the peacekeepers that God has called us to be, the first thing we have to do is have a non-violent attitude toward the people we are relating to. I'm as guilty at this as anybody.

How do we bring peace to a conflictual situation? That is the key that starts to turn the tide and none of us do it perfectly. We all need to constantly work at it and ask for the Spirit to help us. Once we have gotten to that place where there is peace within us enough to reach out to others, the next step in the peacekeeping process is beginning to look at the situation around us. It can't always be about “me.” At some point, it has to be about other people. In the United States we have a lot to work on to become a peaceful, peacekeeping country.

The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other western country in the world, and that isn't because we have more citizens than other countries, that is percentage-wise. So we put all of these people in jail - rightly, wrongly or indifferently - and they come out of prison hardened - worse than when they went in. There must be a better way for non-violent criminals to receive the benefit of being helped and supported, so that they can come back healthier people. But we haven't done a very good job of that. Drug addiction and the lack of mental health facilities are peacemaking issues. Drugs are big business in this country, and it brings violence to our streets and destroys families. A huge number of our citizens are adversely affected. We haven't even begun to see the opioids epidemic in the rest of this country yet. That is a peacemaking issue because it destroys lives.

Now I can go on and on with all of the different ones [peacemaking issues] but I want to focus a little bit closer on one particular one today. I want to address the peacemaking issue that relates to economic disparity, because in our world we have a large segment - and it is growing by the day - with people who are so desperate, because they don't have the ability to make any kind of wealth. They act out by tearing up streets. They get frustrated and act out, because they don't care about their lives and are willing to take those opioids, because [they think] their life isn't worth anything anyway. That is a peacemaking issue.

So let's look for a moment at our United States and the economic disparity that continues to grow: The top 1% share of the global economy is 15.7% of all income in our world - that 1% of people. Now I have been told, in books that I have read by scholars, that if you peeled away all of the hidden money - in off-shore havens in the Caribbean and elsewhere - that the 1% actual wealth comes close to 30% of all the wealth in our world, by the top 1% of the people. That is a very small pie left for the rest of the United States, to say nothing of Europe, South America, Asia or Africa. There is very little left to share.

Then to split this down even further, the world's wealthiest sub-set owns even most of that 1%. There are right now 1645 billionaires in the world, and the top 1426 individuals are families in this world which have a net worth of \$5.4 trillion. They have more than 2 ½ times the entire GDP of Great Britain. They have more money than the bottom 250 million Americans, in that 1/10 of 1% of the world's money.

Now to try to explain this in a way that makes some sense, I would like to try and explain the difference between a millionaire and a billionaire. I remember growing up that you were one of the wealthiest people in the world if you had a million dollars: you were a *millionaire*. Now, if you spent \$1000 a day, every day, you could blow through a million dollars in less than three years. OK. A million dollars doesn't sound like that much when you can blow through it at \$1000 a day in less than three years. But if you are a *billionaire* - and there are almost 2000 of them around the globe - it would take you (spending \$1000 a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year) 2,700 years to blow through a billion dollars. That is the length of time from Homer's "Iliad" to today. That is the time of Jesus to today, plus 700 years. And there are almost 2000 [people] who could never blow through the amount of money that they have. Their children, their grandchildren, their great-grandchildren, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> generations of their family, could never blow through all of the money they have; and, yet, half of Americans have so little wealth that they do not have \$500 saved for their retirement.

While you have people who couldn't blow through their money in 2000-and-some years, you have others who cannot survive a week when they retire. That disparity is amazing to try to come to terms with. Now there is enough blame to go around (I mean the generation, and I'm a part of it) that in getting ready for it [retirement] in the next 15 years (hopefully), [laughter] has made more than enough mistakes: spent poorly, saved rottenly. We have deserved part of what we get; but there is also the struggle that it has been harder to do that, because our piece of the pie keeps getting taken away. I'm trying to figure out how to explain that in a way that will help.

In the year 2000 - it doesn't sound like that far away, it's this century - at the beginning of 2000, only 1 in 7 people considered themselves poor in this country. By 2015 half of

Americans consider themselves poor. In another 15 years - at the same rate - 75% of our country will consider themselves poor. Now whether they are poor or not doesn't matter, but the fact that they consider themselves poor means that they will make poor decisions, because they consider themselves poor.

People who consider themselves poor don't save; they make decisions based on survival, and that pain will continue to trickle down. The bad decisions will bring desperation and depression that serves drug habits and other things that [cause] abusiveness, and all of the other things that happen with poverty - and it is growing in our midst.

To try and explain it in a way that I can get my own head around this economic disparity, I heard a scholar talk about how we've lived the last 100 years in a U-shaped pattern: wealth concentration in a U-shaped pattern in the last 100 years. It was high in the beginning of the U-shaped pattern in the 1920's - in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1920. 1929 had the most wealth disparity that we have ever had in this country. In 1929 the difference between the small number of rich and everyone else, was at its greatest disparity.

What happened in 1929? The stock market crashed and the Great Depression. Then, through the Great Depression, with [President] Roosevelt and the New Deal, and a number of other things that happened, it evened out a little bit. A great deal of the money went back, and it became a little bit more equal, somehow. You still had your very rich, you had your very poor, but the middle class was a larger segment of wealth of this country. That had a balance between the 1930s and 1940s, through 1978 and even 1979. But, since 1980, we have not had a year where that disparity has not continued to widen again. Now, in 2017, we are so close to having the level of disparity between the rich and the poor - the same shrunken middle class that we faced in 1929.

Now, I don't know if that means there is going to be a depression, but the struggle is we are going to have the same despair. Not just disparity, but despair of the largest segment of our country who feel poor and dispossessed. When you feel poor and dispossessed, you act out violently; you act out hurting others and yourself - and that requires peacemakers. That is why I'm talking about this today, as part of the blessing of the peacemakers.

What are we going to do about it? I think there are some things. The first is, we need to study, so rather than listen to your minister (who can't barely add subtract or multiply, and can't do fractions). [Laughter] Read a couple of the books that he has read, and then look at some other things to find out if I'm right or if I'm blowing smoke up here.

[Here are] A couple of the books, and I will put them on the web site this week: One of them is "Retreat of the Western Liberalism" by Edward Luce. Another good book is called "Toxic and Equality" by Thomas Shaprio. It helps to see what is happening right now, and whether we can have conversations while remaining peaceful with each other, about whether there is anything to be concerned about or not. Talking about this helps make a difference. We can disagree if we can do it in such a way that is peaceful, and find out what we can agree on to help make change for the better.

Now I'm not talking about this as a Republican problem or Democrat problem. I'm blaming both parties, because this didn't start with one or the other. This was happening in the 1990s with Clinton. The disparity was continued with Bush; then it continued with Obama; and

now, it's continuing with the Trump administration. It isn't a Republican or Democrat problem - it's *all* of our problem. So, we need to read about it and study. Then, when we know something - or think we do - talk and argue agreeably to figure out what we do next.

And, we never stop praying about it, because alone we are never going to figure this thing out, and it is going to go from bad to worse. But, with the power of the Holy Spirit in us, through us and guiding us, we can help and reach out to those who are in desperate need right now, while we still have some influence, before we are desperate, right along with everyone else.

And, if we don't, I fear we are going to be wandering around like Tevye and his wife in 1905, with little Perchick popping up and talking about revolution, when we could still do something about it today.

May that be our prayer, and may God give us the wisdom and guidance to proceed in Jesus name. Amen.