

Sermon All Saints' Day 2018

November 4, 2018

Rev. 7:9-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the First Reading from Revelation.

As we heard the words of that hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation,” we hear the verse that describes how the world views the Church. And how is that? With “a scornful wonder,” that is with weakness, isn’t it? And that’s exactly what our Lord Jesus spoke about. In what way?

Well, think about His words from the Sermon on the Mount: “**Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.**” Blessed are you when others persecute you. Is persecution a position of strength? In our world it’s not is it? And as we think about this persecution, there are a couple of things we should consider. The first is that this is something that happens in our day, and with some regularity. We often don’t think of it because in our nation we are fairly well protected—at least for the time being—but there are other parts of the world where the Church is held in great disdain by those who rule over them. For example, I just was given two articles this week about the Church in persecution. The first described persecution of a woman in Pakistan. She had been arrested under their blasphemy laws; blasphemy against the rule of Islam there. The other was written by a Christian who had served as a pastor in Africa, also the victim of violent Muslims there. Now both these cases are at the hands of Muslims, but it’s not as though the Church only suffers persecution at the hand of that faith, there are militant members of others faiths elsewhere in the world: militant Hindus in India; militant Buddhists in Southeast Asia; or even the Communist rule in China which attacks her there. In other words the Church is certainly persecuted, and the Lord even calls the Church into such places that the Gospel would be preached there. That’s first.

The second is just what this weakness means. While I just described the Church as persecuted in those places and we see the weakness in that alone, there’s more, isn’t there? There is the weakness to which our Lord calls us in the midst of persecution. Think about that. Think about what Jesus says for us to do to our enemies. What does He say? Turn the other cheek, right? And the Apostle Paul, victim of great persecution and attack himself—as those of you who have been to our study on the book of Acts know—what does he say? Bless those who persecute you, bless do not curse them... Do not repay evil for evil. Think about that, it’s hard enough when

someone hurts us for us to want good for them, let alone how horrendous persecution often is. But that is to what our Lord calls the Church: that weakness in the eyes of the world that is willing to suffer at the hands of others, and just what He Himself showed in His own life as He was persecuted and prayed, **“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”** And in the eyes of the world what is that but weakness?

So the world sees the weakness of the Church persecuted. But it also sees the weakness of the Church filled with sinners. Think about that. How often have you heard the Church criticized for the weakness of the people within it? That “they are hypocrites and if the message of the Church really had power there wouldn’t be so many of them there.” Have you ever heard that? I can’t tell you how many times I have heard as a pastor of someone who used to go to church, but stopped because of all of those hypocrites in the pews next to them. Now on the one hand, what actually motivates that? If someone thinks that the people around them are too great of sinners to be associated with, what does that say about their view of themselves? Well, it sounds like they must think they aren’t such sinners, right? And if they think they aren’t sinners, then they are actually the ones who are self-righteous, aren’t they? And self-righteousness is the default of the sinful nature.

But on the other hand, it tells us just how the world views the Church as weak. If the joy and blessings of the Gospel don’t make more of a difference in the lives of those people, it must be pure fodder, right? It must be weak and of little worth. Now, I’m not justifying our sinfulness as Christians, I’m not giving us license to not even try. I am, however, acknowledging that even the most faithful among us have the greatest of need for the forgiveness of our Lord. But that looks weak.

Of course, there are also the other ways the Church looks weak, aren’t there? There is not only the hypocrisy, but how often people perceive judgmental-ness in the Church. “I can’t handle the Church saying that this is wrong, or saying that is wrong. Jesus told us not to judge.” That’s a common refrain in our day—one that obviously sees a great weakness in the Church.

Or there’s the weakness of the Church perceived as prudes because she isn’t comfortable with certain sins, or there’s the weakness of division. Like the hymn says, “By schism rent asunder and heresies distressed.” All of this is great weakness. Weak and not the way the Church should operate from the perspective of the world, right?

But you know what? As we feel weak, as we make ourselves weak even to be trampled upon by those who sin against us, we have a word of comfort. Look at what

St. Paul says in his great monologue on the resurrection: **“So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”** Now, that is specifically about the resurrection, about the fact that our weak and frail bodies—bodies that break down, that get sick, that die; bodies whose needs draw us to self-preservation—but it’s true for the Church too. What is sown in weakness is raised power. We are weak—we try to pretend we are strong, but we aren’t—we are weak, but in our Lord Jesus we, the Church, we will be raised in power. Not in our own power, but the power of the resurrection of our Lord.

As we look at our First Reading this morning that’s exactly what we see. We see the power that is given to the Church in the resurrection of Jesus, the power of His victory over sin, over death, over the devil himself. You see, as we see this assembly around the throne of this Lamb, this is the Church in glory. This is the promise given to us, and look at what we see there. How do we see them? **“Clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.”** Those palm branches, what do they mean? Do you know? They are a symbol of two things. One is that they are a symbol of righteousness. Just as a palm tree stands upright in the desert amidst the trials of wind and sand beating upon it, so also the righteousness which stands upright in the midst of temptation. Second is that it symbolizes victory and strength. For the same reason it can symbolize righteousness, it can symbolize victory. And that victory is given to the Church as she holds these branches. She is given the victory of Jesus.

In fact, she is given the victory of Jesus to be cleansed in His blood. I mentioned this righteousness symbolized by the palm branch, but this righteousness is not the Church’s own. No, it’s given to her by her Lord. It’s given to her as He is the One who stood firm in the midst of temptation, of trial, of persecution, of hatred and suffering. He stood faithful in that and did not waiver. Now the white and pure righteousness that He earned by His uprightness, won by His blood shed, that is given to the Church, washing away her sins.

As we celebrate All Saints’ Day this morning, what we are celebrating is that those who have gone before us in the faith are enjoying the fruit of this righteousness now. You know, if we look just before this chapter in the 6th chapter of Revelation, what we see is great turmoil. We see the seals being opened and the tribulation, as the elder in this reading describes it. Yet we see this picture of the Church in the midst of that. The Church protected under the Lord’s promises. This weak Church under the protection of her Lord. And as we think of those we’ve lost this year, this is what we see that they

enjoy now. They enjoy this protection and this strength. Look at the words that describe that bliss: **“Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

That’s what they enjoy now, but Christians, this is yours. As you see that white robe, the robe of Christ’s righteousness, that’s yours in baptism. This washing of the robes, the washing which is the cause of their ability to stand there, that’s yours by faith. This is the promise that Jesus makes to you, and He gives you a foretaste of that feast while you feast on His body and blood now, giving you that forgiveness of sins. That forgiveness you don’t deserve, you could never deserve, but that is completely by His grace. He places that on your very tongue and as He does, He strengthens you in His love and tender caring for you. He begins that promise of wiping away your every tear.

Christians, as we look at this weak Church, to which we ourselves contribute only weakness, it’s in that promise that we see strength. It’s in that promise, that life and resurrection of Jesus, that we have the power to continue day by day. It’s in the assurance that our only hope in the midst of our hypocrisy and judgmental-ness is in that blood of Jesus, that hope that our weak division will be healed in the unity of His body, that hope that the way the world views us as prudes will be shown as light under the eternal light of God’s will. And as we consider this persecution of the Church, the weakness the Church feels under the oppression of her enemies, we see that our strength isn’t in the approval of the world, in her ways of strength, of harming those who have harmed us, but truly in the power to turn another cheek to them. Why? Because our justice isn’t found in our vengeance, it’s found in our Lord; in the promise that He will exact justice for His people, and all the more that Jesus has taken the just retribution of every sin ever committed by us, against us, and outside of us.

And because of this, the world views the Church as weak. And in human eyes, she is weak. She is oppressed, divided, corrupted. But before the throne of the Lamb, she lives under the shelter of His absolute power and majesty. Uncorrupted and eternally righteous and cared for. This is the promise we have by faith, and the promise those Saints before us have in fact. Thanks be to God, Amen.