

Hespeler, 2 February, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Micah 6:1-8, Psalm 15:1-5, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

**M**y friends, my brothers and sisters, I have some dire news for you this morning. The Christian faith, the Christian church and everything associated with the name of Jesus Christ is under attack. What is worse, the forces that are attacking it are likely to succeed in destroying it because they are unlike any other foe that we have ever faced.

So, what is this enemy? What is this foe unlike any other? I know that some of you think that you know what I am going to say. You think that I might be warning of the dangers of secularism. You may be thinking that the greatest danger facing us has to do with the rising tide of people who are pleased to orient everything in their lives without any reference to God, without any reference to divine authority or writ. You may be thinking of the tendency of society itself to make every decision without giving any consideration at all to questions about God or religion.

Now, I will grant you that there are certain difficulties that the general secularization of society has created for the church in our times. Things were definitely easier for the church when the society deferred to it and when it reserved certain days of the week for the almost exclusive use of the church, for example. Things were easier when society and government listened when the church spoke simply because it was the church speaking. It was easier when being a Christian, in name at least, was the natural default for just about everyone. Oh yes it was easier! But surely the lack of ease is not possibly something that could bring about the destruction and end of Christianity. If it were as fragile as all that, Christianity would have passed away long ago. So, no, I do not think but the forces of secularization could possibly be the thing that is bringing about the demise of Christianity.

Ah, but some of you might say that the real threat that is destroying the faith today is the reality of pluralism. Pluralism is the name we give to the phenomenon of what we find ourselves in today: a society in which there is a plurality of religions and faiths. Where once, in North America, there was only Christianity in its various forms and almost nobody who belonged to another faith. I mean, there were a few Jews here and there but that's about it. But today, it seems, it is far more likely that your new neighbours will turn out to be Sikhs or Muslims or Hindus than that they turn out to be Baptists or Catholics or Presbyterians. The mere fact that people who are followers of non-Christian faiths (or even no faith at all) are all over the place in our society means that Christianity no longer has that first place and the privileges that go with it.



So, is that the foe that will destroy our Christian faith? Is pluralism going to be what brings us down? No, that is not the danger I am talking about. I realize that the loss of privilege and a first place within society is hard. Sometimes it even feels like persecution. But actually, the simple fact that Christianity has to deal with some competition in the spiritual marketplace today should not worry us. Surely the Christian faith is strong enough that it can endure in the face of a bit of competition for the hearts and minds of people.

So, if it's not secularism or pluralism, what is it? The true threat does not come from atheism or science or even from changes in societal morality. No, the true threats, the ones that are attacking the faith head on, are Christians. And it's not even that they are bad Christians – at least I don't think most of them are – they are just frightened Christians. You see, they feel as if Christianity is under attack from all of those things that I've mentioned – the secularism, pluralism and other various trends that we see in the world. They feel as if they must fight against these things, must engage in what is called cultural warfare. The ironic thing is that by doing that, they are attacking the very essence of the Christian faith itself.

Let me show you what I mean. Just recently, Liberty University, probably the most important Evangelical Christian Education Institution in the United States created a new thinktank called the Falkirk Center for Faith and Liberty. It is a way to bring together Christian intellectuals to set the theoretical basis for the church's interaction with the outside world.

Here is a part of Falkirk's mission statement: *“Bemoaning the rise of leftism is no longer enough and turning the other cheek in our personal relationships with our neighbors as Jesus taught while abdicating our responsibilities on the cultural battlefield is no longer sufficient. There is too much at stake in the battle for the soul of our nation.”* Now think, for a moment, about what it is they are saying there. They are saying that in order to defend the faith against the things that are attacking it, things that they collectively call “leftism” (which I think is a very unhelpful term) but which includes things like secularism and pluralism – that, because these things are attacking Christianity in their view, we basically have to abandon the very teachings of Christ in order to fight back.

Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek; they're saying that that's foolishness and we ain't going to do that. So, what is the real threat here? Is it the forces of secularization or “liberalism” if you prefer, or is it the people who are abandoning the very teachings of Christ and teaching people that they must abandon them because they feel threatened by these things?

The Apostle Paul predicted that this would happen, as he wrote to the church in Corinth: **“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”** The simple truth is that the message of Jesus Christ is seen to be ultimate foolishness as far as the world is concerned. The message of the world is that the only way to defeat what is evil in the world is through strength, power and

violence. It is the oldest story ever told but it is also the story that we keep telling all the time.

It is the plot of about half of the movies that are made. When there is something wrong, some evil that is being done, somebody is called upon to make it right. And whether that hero is James Bond or Iron Man or the Mandalorian, how do they make everything right again? Generally, they come in with guns blazing and start blasting away until all of the enemies have been destroyed. That is the wisdom of this world: only violence can answer violence, only power defeats the power of evil and the only way to win is by fighting back.

And, you know what, if that is how you see the world then, I'm sorry, but the message of Jesus *is* complete and utter foolishness. I'm not surprised that Christians who feel that they're on some sort of battlefield have decided that they need to abandon everything he stood for.

But that is the very thing that threatens the foundation of the Christian faith, not only because it is a denial of everything that Jesus stood for, but even more because it robs us of the true power and wisdom that should be ours. For the kingdom of God will never be realized until we learn to live up to what Jesus called us to be.

We read one of the most famous passages in the Gospel of Matthew this morning: the beatitudes of Jesus, part of the Sermon on the Mount. The ideal of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus presents here is another example of the approach to the faith that some Christians are rejecting because they feel that they cannot afford it because the faith is under attack. But it is also more than that. What we have in this passage is the antidote to the line of thinking that led us into this problem in the first place. In many ways, the beatitudes represent the height of foolishness.

The key word, "blessed," is a translation of the Greek word *Μακάριοι*. It is a word that indicates a state not only of blessedness but also of happiness and good fortune. Many years ago, when the Good News translation of the Bible first came out, they actually translated the beatitudes like this: "**How happy are the poor in spirit...**" People reacted to that translation at the time and said that they didn't like it. I was just a kid at the time, but I still remember someone reacting to that translation and saying, "That doesn't make any sense; being 'poor in spirit' means that you are unhappy! How can you be happy to be unhappy!"

But since that time, I grew up and studied Greek and biblical translation and I can absolutely tell you that "**How happy are the poor in spirit**" is actually a pretty good translation. It *is* what Jesus meant to say. He was congratulating these people. And he also meant for people to react in exactly the same way that that man from my church did; he wanted them to say, "this doesn't make any sense." That was the point of all of these teachings; none of it made sense according to the philosophy of the world.

But, by telling people to be happy because they were poor and meek and hungry and thirsty and despised, what Jesus was doing was redefining victory; he was redefining winning. You see, the mistake that defenders of the faith are making today is that they are defining the success of the Christian faith in the way that the world defines it. They are defining it in terms of power, in terms of dominance and in terms of influence. Jesus taught the opposite. He taught that the victory that mattered would come through service, through submission and through vulnerable weakness. When he said, **“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”** What else could he have meant?

That is also what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, **“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”** But think about what that means, it means that every time we think of the church getting ahead in terms of exercising power and influence within society and the world, we are actually self-defeating. Every time we try to win in the way that the world works, we move farther away from the success that God actually wants us to have. And the reason why this is so hard for us is because for something like the last sixteen centuries, that has been exactly what the church has been doing in Western society.

And, what’s more, the church was pretty successful at it as far as the world was concerned. We had the power and we had the influence and it was great! We even actually did do some good with all of that power and influence. The church created some of the best education systems, health systems, some of the most beautiful music and art the world has ever seen, just to name a few things. We should not be overly critical of that legacy, but that was never how Jesus defined success for his church.

Today it seems as if that has all changed and the church struggles with that loss of power and prestige. Of course, it does create some hardships, but it also creates a great promise. For the first time in over a thousand years it would seem as if the church has an opportunity to seek the kind of victory and strength that Jesus had in mind all along.

There are places in the world where Christians are under attack or facing persecution. Of course, we should do what we can to support them and help them and pray for them. But, generally speaking, North America is not one of those places where the faith is being threatened. It is not under attack except by those who would betray who Jesus was and what he stood for because they feel threatened by some of the ways in which the world has changed. The church is and always been in the hands of its only King and head, Jesus who is God’s anointed one. To suggest that Jesus cannot preserve his church despite some changes that may be occurring is the failure of faith on our part. And if we renounce the message of Jesus because of our fear and failure of faith, that will be the greatest failure of all.