

Resolution: Get Real

Scripture: Psalm 146; James 2:1-9,14-18

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for what the selection committee described as “his graphic, deeply reported columns that, at personal risk, focused attention on genocide in Darfur and that gave voice to the voiceless in other parts of the world.”ⁱ Mr. Kristof continues to report on Darfur and other places where violence is ever-present, and on the ways that government leaders, faith organizations, and individuals have responded – or not responded – to the continuing atrocities in that region. He has written that, “Genocide may be the worst of crimes, but historically it has also brought out the best in some people.”ⁱⁱ World leaders, he says, have “dropped the ball,” but “that vacuum of moral leadership has been filled by university students, churches and temples, celebrities like George Clooney . . . , and armies of schoolchildren.”ⁱⁱⁱ George Clooney brings his tools of celebrity and filmmaking to the effort, as well as the Satellite Sentinel Project, a network of private spy satellites and analysts he has organized in partnership with the U.N., Harvard University, the Enough Project, and his own posse of Hollywood funders. “We are the antigenocide paparazzi,” Clooney told TIME magazine.^{iv} But most of the folks Kristof commends have used such tools as phone calls to the White House, bake sales, and lawn signs. “How,” Mr. Kristof asks, can a “lawn sign in Peoria intimidate government-backed raiders who throw babies into bonfires?”^v Is it possible to fight genocide with car washes and moral outrage?

We are at week three in our series on “Resolutions.” The first week, we heard the good news that, every single day, God offers you and me the opportunity to begin our lives anew. You and I can have a clean slate every day, because for all time and for all people God through Christ has granted us pardon and mercy. Our second week, we heard God’s plea for you and me to consciously, actively, eagerly respond “Yes!” to his offer of new life — for us to choose to accept God’s love and follow the ways of Christ. We also recognized that the choice to say “Yes” to God does not confront us only once, but every day we remain on this earth. Throughout every day, you and I must decide whether our next action will be according to the will of God, or according to our own will or the will of the people around us. For today, we think about “what happens next” if we do choose to accept God’s love and follow his will. We begin by reading a New Testament passage that addresses what it means to get real about following Christ. This passage comes to us from the book of James, a book that “preaches to the choir.” The author of James was not presenting the Gospel to non-Christians. He was writing to people who already professed faith in Christ and challenging them to make their life consistent with that profession.^{vi} As we read our Second Lesson, please listen for that challenge and watch for the word “really.”

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. . . . What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks

daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Did you find the word “really”? It appears twice. The first time, it is part of a question: “Do you with your acts of favoritism *really* believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The second time, we hear it as an admonition: “You do well if you *really* . . . love your neighbor as yourself.” The word “really” in this passage highlights the two-part challenge the author is making. There is a challenge for us to consider whether we *really* believe in Christ, and a challenge for us to consider what it means for us to *really* live our faith day by day. We look first at the challenge on belief.

If we are going to talk about believing in Christ, we must define our terms. What does it mean to say, “I believe in Jesus Christ?” Does it mean that we believe a man named Jesus once walked the earth? Does it mean we believe that this man Jesus was born of a virgin, or that he performed amazing acts of power, or that he was resurrected after his death and then ascended into heaven? In other words, if we say, “I believe in Jesus Christ,” do we mean that we accept certain things as fact? That is one way to define belief, and over the past 2,000 years many people have devoted many hours to debating and researching and delineating every conceivable fact about Jesus’ life. Their efforts have greatly expanded what we know about Jesus and about the context of his life and work. But, a knowledge of the facts about Jesus will take us only so far. As the writer of James will go on to point out, even the demons knew and accepted the facts about Jesus and God.^{vii} Surely Jesus had something else in mind — something beyond the mere agreement on a set of facts — when he declared that the way God showed his love to the world was by giving his only Son, “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”^{viii}

That something else Jesus had in mind — maybe it involves having an emotional response to Christ, having a visceral reaction when we think about Jesus and his life. Perhaps “really” believing in Christ requires us to feel something. We can have some very strong emotions when we consider the love and compassion of Jesus, or when we picture the brutality of his death upon the cross. Every time the choir sings an anthem or Janice plays a hymn, they offer us an opportunity to be moved and transported as we ponder the glory of God. But if our belief in Christ extends no further than feelings and emotion, we once again find ourselves no more spiritually advanced than a demon. The demons that Jesus drove out of people definitely had a visceral reaction to him: they shuddered at the sight of Jesus and were terrified to find themselves in the presence of the Son of God. And so, what James describes as “really believing” in Christ must go beyond accepting a set of facts, and also go beyond feeling a strong pull on our heart and emotions. Then, what is *real* belief? What does it mean for you and me to “really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”?

When the writer of James answers that question, he begins by describing a scene. He describes two very different men walking in among a group of worshipers and getting two very different reactions, based upon how they are dressed. According to James, if you and I want to know what it means to “really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” we have to understand what is wrong with such a scene. We have to understand what is wrong about reacting one way to one person, and reacting quite differently to another. David Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, tells the story of an elderly, dignified deacon in a large, downtown church in the 1960s. One Sunday, the church was packed and the service well along when a long-haired, bell-bottomed, barefooted hippie walked in. Finding nowhere to sit, the young man sauntered down the middle aisle before an usher could get to him. This hippie fellow went all the way to the front of the sanctuary, then sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the pulpit. Soon after, the dignified senior deacon walked purposefully toward him. The people in the congregation just knew that the impeccably dressed pillar of their church was about to confront the flower-child hippie. As everyone held their collective breath, the deacon came alongside the hippie and . . . sat down. For the rest of

the service, the two men sat together cross-legged on the floor — one man in his frayed jeans, and the other in his 3-piece suit.^{ix} According to the author of James, if you and I want to know what it means to “really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” we have to understand what is right with such a scene.

Faith, for James, is not merely an intellectual process, and it is not merely an emotional reaction. Faith includes knowledge, and faith engages our emotions, but faith reveals itself in action. Theologian Ronald Goetz put it this way: “For James, ‘faith’ is being so touched by God’s love ... that the believer longs, heart and soul, to show God his or her gratitude by living a life consistent with that love.”^x Faith, then, expresses itself in a life that is consistent with the love we receive from God. A life that is consistent with the love we see demonstrated in Jesus’ life and work. And, as soon as we start talking about that kind of love, we are talking about something that is radical and extravagant and way beyond fair. The love we have from God — the love we see enacted in Jesus’ life — that love is radical and extravagant and way beyond fair. But James tells us that is what God wants our faith to demonstrate to the world.

According to James, when you and I merely say that we have faith, that is no indication that faith is, indeed, present. There is a short story about this, entitled *Whom Should You Ask?* In that story, an enthusiastic young evangelist asks an Amish farmer whether he had been saved and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. The Amish man replied, “Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I have been saved.” If the faith you and I claim is not visible, James tells us — if the faith you and I claim does not express itself in acts of love that are radical and extravagant and way beyond fair — then it might be faith in something, but it cannot be faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is consistent with what Jesus said near the conclusion of his Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Every good tree bears good fruit A good tree cannot bear bad fruit.”^{xi} Then, Jesus delivered the startling word that, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”^{xii} When Jesus later was asked to sum up the will of his Father in heaven, he said “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”^{xiii}

We love the Lord our God by loving our neighbor. Our passage from James calls that the “royal law” — the ultimate truth that is meant to underlie everything you and I do. And we deny that truth, James tells us, whenever we “show partiality” — whenever we treat anyone as though he or she was less worthy or less honorable than any of the other people in our lives. God does not care whether you and I fawn over people who have power or fame or wealth — so long as we fawn over everybody else we meet, as well. God does not care whether you and I dote upon our family and friends and the people we most enjoy — so long as we dote upon everybody else we meet, as well. God has repeatedly declared that the way you and I love him is by loving our neighbor, and, to paraphrase something Christian journalist Dorothy Day was famous for saying, “You and I really love God only as much as we love the people we love the least.”

“You and I really love God only as much as we love the people we love the least.” There is that word “really” again, challenging us to get real about how we answer God’s call upon our lives — whether we *really* believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and *really* express that belief by practical acts of love toward our neighbors — all of our neighbors. We cannot meet this challenge all on our own, but by the grace of God we *can* meet it. By the grace and mercy of God, you and I can carry out acts of love that are radical and extravagant and way beyond fair — and that can help us and everyone around us come to know the Kingdom of Heaven. Which brings us again to the question columnist Nicholas Kristof has posed about the efforts to end genocide. “How,” Mr. Kristof asks, can a “lawn sign in Peoria intimidate government-backed raiders who throw babies into bonfires?” Is it possible to fight genocide with car washes and moral outrage? The renowned anthropologist

Margaret Mead offered part of the answer to that question when she said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” The rest of the answer — whether there will be a successful ending to the tragic story of genocide in Darfur and South Sudan, or just a continuation of the apathy and horror — God has left that part of the answer up to us. Amen.

ⁱ Source: <http://www.pulitzer.org/>

ⁱⁱ Nicholas Kristof, *Car washes vs. genocide*, New York Times, reprinted in The Charlotte Observer, January 18, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Mark Benjamin, *Clooney’s ‘Antigenocide Paparazzi’ Watching Sudan*, TIME, December 28, 2010.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} John B. Polhill, *Prejudice, Partiality, and Faith: James 2*, Review & Expositor (1986) p. 395.

^{vii} James 2:19; see also Matthew 8:28-34, Mark 1:29-39, Luke 4:31-44, and Luke 8:22-39.

^{viii} John 3:16

^{ix} David M. Hughes, *The Best Seat in the House*, Review & Expositor 97 (2000), p. 227.

^x Ronald Goetz, *Evangelism by Works Alone*, The Christian Century, March 13, 1985, p. 261.

^{xi} Matthew 7:17-18

^{xii} Matthew 7:21

^{xiii} Matthew 22:37-39