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“Real World Faith”

Galatians 2:15-21

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When I learned Friday morning that Ben needed me to preach, I decided to draw on something I had been working on for two weeks. I didn't mean to, but I have given many hours to preparing a bibliography for this year's *Trent Symposium for Newly Ordained Ministers*. I gave so much time because it became for me a very personal project. I chose books that *shaped my mind and ministry*, and with each one I wrote a paragraph of why the book was so influential to me. Sometimes it felt like I was explaining me to myself..., and sometimes it felt like I was explaining me to you.

The bibliography made clear that I have a perspective that has, for better or worse, guided me in my Christian witness. Here it is, Confirmation Sunday, and I wonder what will guide the Confirmands' Christian witness. What will guide us all?

Listen for direction in this reading from Galatians, and listen for God's Word:

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷ But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who



loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

The direction of my father's ministry was not set until after he graduated from seminary and was a working pastor. Dad is a big supporter of Columbia Theological Seminary, but the seminary he admires today is not the seminary he graduated from. Back then, Columbia gave him an approach to theology that was close to being fundamentalistic and not helpful when he began serving congregations. He says his true theological education began after seminary, with good books, common sense, other pastors, and members in his church guiding him.

That is not my story. My theology and the direction of my ministry was set when I was a seminary student. That is an over-simplification because

- I was raised in healthy churches,
- I had good professors at Union Presbyterian Seminary with several having had significant experience in the church,
- and I had internships with supervising pastors who were good mentors.

That said, I can point to one "moment" in which the theological direction of my ministry was set. That "moment" was a semester in which I took a class on Reinhold Niebuhr and read his book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

It was a two-volume book actually. The book came of Gifford Lectures that Niebuhr gave at the University of Edinburgh over the course of three weeks in 1939. The audience listened to the lectures knowing that more and more of Europe was coming under the shadow of the swastika, and the shadow was threatening to cross the channel and cover the British Isles as well. It would have been easy to lose one's faith... if not in God at least in the capacity of human beings for good. On the other hand, Niebuhr could have been tempted to proclaim the evil of the Nazis and the virtue of the Allies so as to drum up self-righteous passion for a fight where good would finally triumph over evil.

What Niebuhr did was strike a remarkable balance. He drummed up passion to resist Nazi Germany, but he also helped set the stage for reconciliation after the war was through. His lectures were a brilliant analysis of human nature and history. He drew on many sources to illustrate the wisdom of ancient truths of the Christian faith: we are *inevitably* sinners who never will work our way out of sin, and yet, because we have within us the image of God, we have the capacity to bear an imperfect and tarnished witness to the justice, mercy, reconciliation, and peace of God's realm. Knowing our nature, we should not be surprised by evil. But we also should not be surprised by human capacity to achieve some measure of justice and peace. Remember, though, the good we achieve always will be tarnished..., imperfect..., incomplete.

His lectures and book so shined with common sense and was so helpful to world leaders, that he became the most famous public theologian of the 20th century. He was named Time Magazine's *Man of the Year* in 1948. And, if you can believe this, he became a favorite of Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals. Much of the political realism of the late 20th century came as much as anything as a result of the practical perspective of Reinhold Niebuhr.



The theologian who helped justify the necessary evil of going to war with Germany was the theologian who helped justify the peace plans that led to the restoration of Germany and Japan.

But I did not single out Niebuhr's book in the bibliography because of his influence on the world. I singled out his book because of his influence on me—the kind of ministry I have had. Niebuhr helped me surrender the naïve idealism I had as a college student which, if unchecked, could well have set me up to be

- disappointed by the church,
- disillusioned in my faith
- and unsuccessful in ministry.

He helped me to see the world, the church, its members, *and myself* with grace. I realized that if I was going to have a long ministry, I needed to come to grips with

- my being an imperfect pastor of imperfect people,
- who are members of imperfect churches,
- seeking to make an imperfect witness to an imperfect world.

I needed to become comfortable

- with *negotiated* settlements,
- with *flawed* solutions
- and with *partial* victories.

Niebuhr helped prepare me not to be disillusioned when I saw that motives can be mixed. In fact, he made me suspicious of *my* own notions of what is right and wrong and my certainties of God's will.

Niebuhr said something about democracy that has always stuck with me as true about ministry and being followers of Jesus: *that the best we can hope for in life are "proximate solutions to insolvable problems."*

Oh boy, do I wish for the wisdom of this statement to be better known in this age of virtue signaling where so often only one side of an issue can be right, where those who disagree are demonized, and where only absolute victory is thought to be acceptable.

After reading *The Nature and Destiny of Man* I began to think of myself as a "Christian Realist." That remains the case. I remain convinced that any faith that does not help one live in the real world can't be faith in anything that is true. Any Christian faith—any faith in a God among us as the Word made flesh—fleshed in life and in history—has to be a faith about *life as it is lived* in the *world as it is*. See the world as it is, and then love the world as it is because God loves the world as it is. Then work for the causes of the kingdom in ways that are possible and can actually make a difference.



Niebuhr prepared me to love the churches and people I serve as they are. Because he helped me see that Christianity is not about being right or winning, but about being a part of a body that finds a way together to witness to

- the God who heals—
- the God who reconciles—
- the God who saves sinners like ourselves,

I was given theological eyes to see faults and failings, but also see people and churches capable of shocking displays of goodness and kindness.

- Yes, we're imperfect,
- yes, with motives not completely pure,
- yes, in hindsight we always could have done better;

but praise God for what is possible by grace.

Niebuhr's insights were fresh but not new. His Christian realism comes of the New Testament and is so well expressed by the Apostle Paul.

- Jews and Gentiles are both saved by grace, Paul says,
 - so he undercuts any divides justified because of race, or nationality, or class, or political party.
- We are not justified by the Law, he says,
 - so he undercuts any demand of perfection or any pretention of self-righteousness.
- Paul admits to his own sin and need for grace,
 - and thus undercuts the pride, snark, and sarcasm of those who have to be right and won't admit a wrong, and who pretend to have captured the truth.
- He expresses no hope that we can on our own achieve perfection,
 - and thus undercuts any utopian ideal that we can create a perfect world where life is fair.
- And he declares that by God's grace, good can come,
 - and thus celebrates that we can in some way make a witness to God's justice and peace.

Niebuhr's book was the first one I put in the bibliography I prepared because it is the most influential work I've read. Then, when I thought about other books since then that have shaped my mind and ministry, it struck me how Christian Realism is a thread that runs through them all.

- There is a book by Jonathan Haidt which convincingly describes how both liberal and conservative values have helped us survive as a human race.¹

¹ *The Righteous Mind; Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*



- There is Dan Airely’s book that explains why we are not, and never will be, primarily rational creatures, and we need to come to terms with the fact that more powerful forces than reason guide us and human history.²
- There is the book by Fred Craddock that shaped my preaching more than any other and which helped create my aversion to what would later be called *virtue signaling*—that good sermons aren’t just spitting truths out there in the wind that do no good but good sermons meet people where they are and go on a journey with them.³
- There are those books on biblical studies that take seriously both the witness of scripture and the witness of the modern world in thinking about race, sexuality, the environment, and the universe.⁴

Being a Christian Realist opened my eyes to the glory of the churches I have served. I see and hear so many Christian ministers and members out there in the larger world who have been given this idea that a church has to become something that earns them the right to be loved, as if churches somehow have the ability to be perfect and deserve condemnation for falling short. Niebuhr has helped me greatly admire and deeply love each imperfect and flawed congregation I have served, and to love and appreciate those in them who see the world differently than I do.

So, Christian Realism has given me the eyes and heart to see and love Second Presbyterian Church. Despite the flaws and biases of this church and its members, I can celebrate what by grace this church has meant to the valley. I see

- a church that never closed its doors to anyone based on race,
- a church that made the decision to remain downtown where it best can serve,
- a church that has taken the lead in establishing and supporting most of the significant ministries that address poverty in the area,
- a church that has been generous in providing quality facilities and programs for the members it serves while at the same time providing strong support for outreach ministries,
- a church that has shown special care for its children, its Confirmands, its youth, its older adults, and its flawed ministers.

And because we have made a witness that by grace we can be thankful for, we can make a wonderful and beautiful witness now because we have before, and can continue to do so in the future.

The conclusion of my sermon will be my charge to the Confirmands.

Charge to the Confirmands:

Today symbolically marks the beginning of your life as Christian adults.

² *Irrationality*

³ *Overhearing the Gospel*

⁴ Such as *The Bible, Gender and Sexuality*



- You can choose to think of religion as superstition and faith as belief in things that don't make sense.
- You can choose to believe that being a follower of Jesus means you have to be perfect like Jesus or you will fail.
- You can choose out of pride in your faith to look down on others as less than you, or out of shame look up to others as better than you.
- You can be the type that always finds fault and thus offers no grace for
 - good efforts that fail,
 - victories that are partial,
 - progress that comes of compromise,
 - and motives that are mixed.

I would not advise any of that. My hope for you—my prayer for you—is the same prayer and hope that I have for myself: that you can recognize

- the limits of being human,
- the inevitability of our messing up,
- and the amazing grace of a God who would live as one of us and makes it possible for us to make a witness that brings some goodness, kindness, and justice in this world.

You will see how God's love and life can shine through and among us in imperfect but amazing ways. I pray for you a faith that is all about living in the world as it is bearing witness to the world to come.

