

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 25, 2014**

WHAT IN THE WORLD?

John 15:18-25

This Memorial Day weekend we pause to remember those men and women who gave their last full measure of devotion in the service of our country. We honor them for giving their lives to protect, preserve, and defend the freedoms we cherish. It is altogether fitting and proper for us to remember, honor, and give thanks to God for all the brave Americans who have put themselves in harm's way and made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of liberty. To make and keep America free. And to make it possible for this to be "one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all." Their sacrifice has been for our benefit. And we are richly blessed.

In thinking about the cause(s) for which so many in our history have died, I can't help but observe that America today is a much different place than it was when I was a child. What I mean is that the cultural environment in which we live today has changed dramatically from the cultural ethos and values that characterized American life in the 1950s. In some ways, of course, the change has been for the good, most notably with respect to the transformed landscape of civil rights for African-Americans and other minorities. Racial prejudice may always be with us; it may never be completely eradicated. We do not yet live in a color-blind society. But we should never, ever want to go back to the days of segregation, Jim Crow, or slavery.

In other respects, though, many of the changes that have taken place in the cultural climate of America in the last 50 years or more, some that seem to have taken place almost overnight, particularly in matters of morality and religious liberty, are terribly troubling to my soul. For example, until the 1960s, at least, there was a cultural consensus in America that homosexual relations are sinful, contrary to nature, and contrary to the will of God for men and women created in His image. Nearly everyone was in agreement about it. Fast forward to today, and what do you see? Homosexuality is a cause celebre. Athletes and entertainers who come "out" as gay are hailed as heroes and celebrated for their courage in going public with their sexual orientation – by, among others, the President and First Lady of the United States. In little more than a "twinkling of an eye," it seems, we have gone from recognizing its wrongness to tolerance, from tolerance to open acceptance, and from acceptance to celebration and the punishment of people who dare to express a dissenting viewpoint. What in the world has happened to us?

The traditional definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of love and fidelity has also come under fierce attack. Fifty years ago, even a decade ago, one could not have imagined that we would be where we are in America today. "Same-sex marriage" is now legal in 19 of the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia. In three of those 19 states, it was approved by voters. In another eight of the 19 states, it was legalized by state legislatures. In the other eight states, bans on "same-sex marriage" were struck down in the courts, including Pennsylvania, where a federal judge just this past week

ruled the state's gay marriage ban unconstitutional. Of the remaining 30 states in the U. S., courts in ten states, including Virginia, have ruled state laws banning "same-sex marriage" unconstitutional, with appeals currently pending. Laws against "same-sex marriage" are being challenged in 20 of the remaining 21 states.

As the campaign to make "same-sex marriage" continues to gather momentum, I can't help but think of what God said through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 5:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
 who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
 who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.
 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
 and clever in their own sight.
 (Isaiah 5:20-21)

Several years ago theologian Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. wrote a book on the theology of sin entitled *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be.* It is intuitively obvious that the world is not the way it is supposed to be, and not the way it was meant to be, and our sin – our rebellion against God, our defiance of His kingly rule and authority, our desire to be the masters of our own destiny, our idolatrous worship of our own pleasures, addictions, and earth-bound "wisdom" – is the reason the world is not the way it is supposed to be.

America has never been a "holy nation." Though G. K. Chesterton famously described the United States as "a nation with the soul of a church," it is a stretch to suggest that this has ever been a distinctively Christian nation. The history of slavery and racism in America is enough to put that myth to rest. Still, a cultural shift of enormous significance has taken place in America since the 1950s, pushing us further and further from the religious beliefs and values that once dominated American public life. As early as 1972, Yale historian Sydney Ahlstrom, in his monumental book, *A Religious History of the American People*, asserted that the turbulent decade of the 1960s signaled the eclipse of what he called the "Puritan epoch" in American life, the end of the "Protestant Establishment" extending all the way back to the founding of the British colonies in America more than 300 years earlier, and the rise of a "post-Puritan" or, more accurately, a post-Christian pluralism in America.

Many factors converged in the 1960s, not least among them the development of the birth control pill, the movement to strike down laws against abortion, the whole sexual revolution with its gospel of sex without consequences and its idolization of sexual fulfillment, leading to the sexual confusion, delusion, anarchy, addiction, pain, and brokenness that characterize the lives of so many people today.

For some "gay right advocates," winning the legal right to marry a person of the same sex is not enough. Some want punitive measures against anyone who happens to disagree with them. Not long ago, Brendan Eich, the CEO of Mozilla Firefox, stepped down under pressure after it was disclosed that in 2008 he had made a contribution in support of California Proposition 8, which defined marriage as the union of a man and a woman. More recently, brothers David and Jason Benham had their house-flipping TV show canceled by HGTV

because of their traditional Christian beliefs on marriage and abortion. A week later, Sun Trust Bank suddenly dropped the Benhams from its property listings, only to reinstate their listings a day later after receiving thousands of complaints from customers.

The Benhams' experience, unfortunately, is no longer unique. We now live in a time when people who hold traditional Christian beliefs and values may feel pressured to abandon our beliefs and values or face legal, economic, or social consequences. In addition, it seems, the freedom of religion guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution faces the constant threat of erosion as our culture becomes increasingly secular and seeks to remove the influence of religion in general and Christianity in particular from the public realm.

I hope this doesn't sound like an angry rant. Please forgive me if it does. I don't mean it to be a rant. And I am more sad than angry. I love this country, but I grieve for it. I grieve for all who call evil good and good evil. I do not like the direction our country is headed. And, from my point of view as a Christian pastor, I think it may get much worse before it gets better. It may get a lot worse. I do think it can get better. I do believe there is hope for revival. I do believe another "surprising work of God" in our land is possible. I pray for it to come. Soon. I pray for a fresh, powerful, gracious, redemptive outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a new Great Awakening in this land "from the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam."

Until it comes, however, like the men of Issachar in David's day, "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chronicles 12:32), we need to understand the times in which we live and how to conduct ourselves as the followers of Christ in a culture that either doesn't want to be bothered with God, or wants to remake God in its own image to suit its own purposes. The words of Jesus to His disciples in John 15 may be more relevant to us in America today than ever before.

Here in America we don't really know what it means to suffer for our faith. We don't know what persecution is like in our own experience. Saeed Abedini knows what it is like, though. He is the Iranian-American pastor imprisoned, mistreated, even tortured in a prison in Iran for the past two years. Meriam Ibrahim knows, too. Now eight months pregnant with her second child, she and her 20-month-old son have been locked up in a prison in Sudan on death row for the last three months because of her marriage to a Christian man (a U. S. citizen) and her refusal to recant her Christian faith.

I'm not suggesting that anything like that will happen here in America. I pray not. Persecution may take many different forms, ranging from public disapproval, ridicule, pressure to conform, the loss of educational opportunities or employment or property, to physical abuse, mob violence, harassment, forced labor, imprisonment, torture, and ultimately murder or execution.

Jesus spoke clearly to His disciples about what to expect as His followers in this world. He used strong words like "hate" to describe the attitude of the world of unbelievers toward Him. Rejecting His message, "the world" – understood here as the vast array of people who are either indifferent or hostile to God – rejects Jesus. And rejecting Jesus, the world rejects His

followers who bear His name. Reminding His disciples of what He had told them previously, that a servant is not greater than his or her master (John 15:20; cf. John 13:16; Matthew 10:24), Jesus told them to expect trouble. He told them to anticipate opposition. He warned them not to be surprised when the going got tough.

Speaking to His disciples on another occasion, in Luke 12, Jesus said: “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more” (Luke 12:4). Here is how it reads in *The Message*: “Don’t be bluffed into silence or insincerity by the threats of religious bullies. True, they can kill you, but *then* what can they do? There’s nothing they can do to your soul.”

Death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian. It is good to remember that.

I believe this message of Jesus is one that we in America and right here in northern Virginia, in the shadow of our nation’s capital, need to hear and take to heart. The cultural and religious climate in which we live has changed. It is not the same as it was when I was growing up in the hinterlands of northwestern Pennsylvania. Rough days lie ahead for people who are serious about living as faithful followers of the Lord Jesus. Jesus wants us to be ready for it. He doesn’t want us to be surprised or caught off guard.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about his own experience of persecution, urging them not to be unsettled by his trials and troubles, for, he says, “we were destined for them” (1 Thessalonians 3:3). In his final letter to Timothy, reflecting on the cost of discipleship in the 1st century Roman world, Paul goes so far as to say that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Peter echoes the same message in 1 Peter, which is written primarily to give hope and encouragement to 1st-century Christians who were experiencing persecution in one form or another, or facing the imminent threat of persecution because of their faith in Christ. He says in chapter 2: “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps*” (1 Peter 2:20-21, emphasis added). Suffering for the sake of Christ, suffering that comes as a result of our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ, is part of our calling.

In chapter 3 Peter says that following Christ may be hazardous to our health. Listen to verse 14: “Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.” Then, quoting from Isaiah 8:12, Peter adds: “Do not fear what others fear; do not be frightened.” If you are mistreated because of your faith, says Peter, consider yourself blessed by God. (I think this is a blessing most of us would prefer to skip.) But when it happens, consider yourself blessed, and don’t give in to panic or fear. Then, in verse 17, he says: “It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” There is nothing virtuous in suffering the consequences of doing evil. That is justice. But undeserved suffering is another matter. When you suffer as a result of your faithfulness and obedience to God, there is a blessing in it. Even if it is not evident at the time. It is an opportunity to trust God and to leave the results to Him.

Peter comes back to the theme of suffering in chapter 4, urging his readers – and us – not to be surprised when we go through hard times because of our allegiance to Christ (4:12). Instead, he says, rejoice in your participation in the sufferings of Christ (4:13). Echoing the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, Peter says: “If you are insulted [or suffer in any way] because of the name of Christ, you are blessed” (4:14). So, “if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (4:16).

That had been Peter’s own experience when, in Acts 5, he and the other apostles were hauled before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council in Jerusalem, flogged, and ordered to stop speaking about Jesus. Acts 5:41 says that “the apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus].” They were “overjoyed,” it says in *The Message*, “that they had been given the honor of being dishonored on account of the Name [of Jesus].” *The honor of being dishonored*. It may be, in one way or another, that you and I will be given the honor of being dishonored for the name of Jesus. Did the flogging and warning from the Jewish elders stop the apostles? No way! Acts 5:42 tells what they did: “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Christians are to be good, trustworthy, law-abiding citizens. But when push comes to shove, when the state mandates disobedience to God in some way, our response must be like that of Peter and the other apostles, who said: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

If you are called in some way to suffer as a Christian, don’t be surprised by it. Don’t go looking for it. But don’t live in fear of it. And don’t be surprised by it. Even here in America. Jesus said it would happen. Don’t be ashamed, but glorify God that it is in the name of Jesus. Then what? Peter wraps up his teaching on suffering with this in 1 Peter 4:19: “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

What to do when you get in trouble of some kind because of your faith in the Lord Jesus? Commit yourself to God who is faithful. Continue to trust Him. And keep on doing good. Keep on living as a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What in the world is going on? What has happened to our country? It is not always easy to discern. Whatever may come, first, last, and always, you and I are to be winsome and unwavering in our faith, hope, and love in allegiance to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.