

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 28, 2015**

**THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US (5):
A PASTORAL RESPONSE
TO THE SUPREME COURT DECISION
ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

Colossians 4:2-6

I want to read again this same passage of Scripture we looked at a few weeks ago. And I hope today's message will be in some sense an illustration of the kind of life to which God calls us in the world right here and right now – a life that is marked by prayerful dependence upon God, by wisdom in the way we act toward outsiders, and by grace in the way we speak. Reading from Colossians 4:2-6, let's give our full and reverent attention to God's holy Word.

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May the God who inspired these words incline our hearts and minds to their understanding.
Amen.

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This sermon will not be a travelogue. I promise. A travelogue, however interesting, is not a sermon. That said, I hope you won't mind if I take a moment or two to make a comment or two about the trip to Israel from which Mary Sue and I just returned on Friday.

Travel can be tiring. Extremely tiring. Many of you know it better than I do. Lots of other things may be said about travel – many good and wonderful things. But it remains true that travel can be and often is tiring. Even the trip of a lifetime to the land of Israel can leave one weary both physically and emotionally. Mary Sue and I have not yet recovered from the effects of the jet lag. So, if I fall asleep during the sermon, I hope you will be as charitable toward me as I try to be to those of you who occasionally nod off while I'm preaching!

Mary Sue and I both feel that there has not been sufficient opportunity yet for us to fully process all that we saw and heard and experienced on our trip. It is going to take some time for it all to sink in.

It is also intuitively obvious that spending ten days in Israel does not make one an expert on the land and its history, on the history of the Jewish people, the unfolding of God's plan of redemption in history, or the places where so much of biblical history – *salvation history* – took place. I'm sure not an expert. Others of you who have been there may have more knowledge and insight about the Holy Land than I have. Mary Sue and I would love to tell you about some of our experiences there and the blessing it was to experience it all with some longtime friends from earlier seasons in our lives, and with new friends, too, with whom we share a common bond of faith, hope, and love in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It was an amazing group of people. An amazing place. An amazing trip. From the Dead Sea and the desert of Judea to the Jordan River. From Jericho to Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed on the night of His betrayal and arrest. The Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem – built on Mount Moriah, where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, and where Solomon’s Temple and later Herod’s Temple were built. The Muslim Dome of the Rock now stands where the Jewish temple had previously stood, and devout Jews flock to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount to pray day and night. We saw the pool of Bethesda, where Jesus healed a man who had been crippled for 38 years (John 5:1-15). We sang in the acoustically magnificent St. Anne’s Church beside the pool. We visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the traditional site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, along with an alternative location for Golgotha, the place of Jesus’ crucifixion, and the Garden Tomb, which may have been the place of Jesus’ burial and resurrection.

Then Galilee. Beautiful Galilee. We went to the Mount of Beatitudes, where many believe Jesus preached the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7). To Capernaum, the village that was home to fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who all left their boats and nets to follow Jesus. To Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. To Mount Carmel, site of the contest between the Old Testament prophet Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal, where Elijah made his impassioned plea to the people of Israel to stop wavering “between two opinions. If the LORD is God,” he said, “follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). If you don’t know or don’t recall what happened on that occasion, you can read about it in 1 Kings 18.

I could keep going. But, as I have already said, this message is not intended to be a travelogue. And there are other things to get to. Shortly after Mary Sue and I arrived home from the airport on Friday morning, we learned of the Supreme Court’s announcement of its landmark ruling on same-sex marriage. By a 5-4 vote, the Court ruled state bans on same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional, along with state bans on official recognition of such marriages performed in another state. These bans, the Court said, violate the 14th Amendment’s guarantees of due process and equal protection. With this Court decision, same-sex marriage is now permitted and protected by the Constitution everywhere in our nation.

In a public statement following the announcement, Focus on the Family President Jim Daly noted that “the action of the Court is startling in its rejection of a societal understanding of marriage that goes back to the dawn of civilization.

Writing at www.washingtonpost.com, Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said that “the Court now has disregarded thousands of years of definition of the most foundational unit of society.”

In addition to the witness and weight of history, the legalization and affirmation of same-sex marriage also requires a rejection of the clear teachings of the Bible regarding human sexuality and the institution of marriage, which, as Jesus said in Matthew 19:4-6, go back to the beginning of creation. Not only is it in defiance of God’s revelation in the Bible, it is also an attempt to overrule biology, which plainly shows that man and woman are made for each

other in marriage, sexual union, and procreation. If you want to know what God thinks about what the Court has done and what our culture joyfully embraces, read Romans 1. Especially verses 18-27.

On Friday, during our denomination's annual General Assembly, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) released a statement which read in part: "The EPC grieves today's ruling of the Supreme Court, which illustrates the continued disregard for the biblical, traditional, Judeo-Christian values upon which the foundation of our nation was established."

Not everyone is grieving the Court decision, of course. Many Americans are celebrating what they believe to be a huge step forward only for those who identify as gays and lesbians, for those who have long sought societal recognition and approval, as well as the legal rights and privileges of marriage for their same-sex relationships, but a momentous step forward for America as a whole. President Obama expressed the sentiments of many when he called the Supreme Court decision a "victory for America" that has "made our union a little more perfect. America," the President said, "should be very proud." (Sources: www.npr.org and www.washingtonpost.com)

My reaction to the news of the Supreme Court ruling was not one of pride or joy or the celebration of a great victory, but sadness. Sadness for the Court. Sadness for America. Sadness for those who have embraced a lie and for all who will be led astray by the action of the Court to give its seal of approval to the marriage of a man to another man or a woman to another woman. Sadness for those who have been or will be deceived by our culture's infatuation with the false gospel of sexual autonomy and our worship of the idol of sexual fulfillment. Sadness for our children. Sadness for those who are celebrating in the Court's decision what John Piper calls "the massive institutionalization of sin." Sadness for a culture that has become so de-sensitized to sin that we do not recognize it for what it is. Or we don't care.

Permit me to share some wise words I've read just since the Court's decision was announced on Friday. I am with Russell Moore and many other evangelical Christians in confessing that I am a conscientious dissenter from the Court's ruling that redefines marriage. Though saddened and troubled by it, Moore insists that the church – which is us – "should neither cave nor panic about the [Court's] decision." While "the Supreme Court can do many things," he writes, it "cannot (put) Jesus back in (the) tomb. Jesus of Nazareth is still alive." Do you hear that? He is alive. He is Lord. I've been there. Very recently. The tomb is empty. And Jesus "is still calling the universe toward His kingdom." Do you believe that? As followers of Christ, we are heirs, the Bible says (Hebrews 12:28) of "a kingdom that cannot be shaken."

Moore also points out that "the church often thrives when it is in sharp contrast to the cultures around it. That was the case in Ephesus and Philippi and Corinth and Rome" in the time of the New Testament, and has been so in many times and places in the history of the church.

What must we do in the years ahead as the church is pushed more and more to the margins of society? We will need, as Moore says, "to articulate what we believe about marriage. We cannot assume that people agree with us, or even understand us." We will need to "talk about

marriage the way Jesus and the apostles taught us to – as bound up with the gospel itself, a picture of the union of Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:32). As we do so,” he continues, “we must not just articulate our views of marriage, we must embody a gospel marriage culture” – a culture or way of life that faithfully demonstrates the grace and power of the gospel in our marriages. Sadly, Moore is right in saying that the church “(has) done a poor job of that in the past. Too many of our marriages have been ravaged by divorce.” The marital track record of professing Christians here in America is nothing to boast about. “We must repent of our failings,” says Moore, “and picture to the world what marriage is meant to be.” I say this, fully understanding that some of us have experienced or may experience the pain and brokenness of divorce against our will.

This new situation in which we find ourselves, Moore says, gives the church “an opportunity to do what Jesus called us to do with our marriages [and our lives as a whole] in the first place: to serve as a light in a dark place. Permanent, stable marriages with families with both a mother and a father may well make us seem freakish in 21st-century culture.” We shouldn’t let that bother us. Our faith in Christ itself may make us seem more and more freakish. We shouldn’t let that embarrass or intimidate us. We should accept it. We should embrace it. If following Christ faithfully causes us to be discriminated against or treated as outcasts in some way, we should learn to rejoice, like the apostles in the church at Jerusalem, in being given “the honor of being dishonored” – the honor of suffering disgrace – for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41, MSG).

We must be faithful to the gospel and the biblical teaching on marriage regardless of the cultural shift taking place all around us. (From *Here We Stand: An Evangelical Declaration on Marriage*, June 26, 2015. www.christianitytoday.com)

“Let’s also recognize,” says Moore, “that if we’re right about marriage, and I believe we are, many people will be disappointed in getting what they want. The church,” he says, “must prepare for the refugees from the sexual revolution.” In one way or another, many of us here today may be refugees from the sexual revolution. “We must prepare for those, like the sexually wayward woman at the well in Samaria, who will be thirsting for water” they do not even know about (see John 4).

Listen closely to this: “There are two sorts of churches that will not be able to reach the sexual revolution’s refugees.” One is “(a) church that has given up on the truth of the Scriptures, including [its teachings] on marriage and sexuality, and [thus] has nothing to say to a fallen world.” In other words, a church that caves to the culture and changes its beliefs and message in order to fit in. The other is “a church that screams with outrage at those who disagree.” This kind of church “will have nothing to say to those who are looking for a new birth” that comes only by grace that is given free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. People like us.

If all some people hear from the church is anger and hate and judgment and condemnation, how can we expect them to be interested in Jesus and the life-giving, life-changing power of His love?

“We must stand with conviction and with kindness, with truth and with grace. We must hold to our views and love those who hate us for them. We must not only speak Christian truths; we must speak with a Christian accent. We must say what Jesus has revealed, and we must say those things the way Jesus does – with mercy and with an invitation to new life.”

Speaking with “a Christian accent” is what Paul is talking about when he says that our conversation should be “always full of grace” (Colossians 4:6). By the way, when Paul says our conversations should be “seasoned with salt,” he is not suggesting that we talk (or cuss) like a “salty sailor.” He means that we should never bore people when we’re talking about Jesus or the gospel or sex and the will of God, or whatever the pressing issue of the day may be. When we are given the opportunity, we should make every effort not to spout out answers to questions that aren’t being asked, but rather to engage people in a conversation that is lively, interesting, respectful, and meets people where they are. That is what it means to season your conversation with salt. It is a sin to make the gospel boring or dull.

“Some Christians,” writes Moore, “will be tempted to anger, lashing out at the world around us with a narrative of decline.” It *is* tempting to go down that road. Nevertheless, says Moore, “that temptation is wrong. God decided when we would be born, and when we would be born again. We have the Spirit and the gospel.” Though it increasingly seems that the message and values of the Bible are losing their hold on our culture, it is still true, as Paul wrote to Timothy, that “God’s word is not chained” (2 Timothy 2:9). As Moore put it, “To think that we deserve to live in different times is to tell God we deserve a better mission field than the one He has given us.” That is worth remembering.

“This is no time for fear or outrage or politicizing. We see that we are strangers and exiles in American culture,” as Peter wrote of 1st century Christians in the Roman world (1 Peter 2:11). “We are,” as champions of gay marriage want to say, “on the wrong side of history,” which is just where the church started two thousand years ago. It is better to be on the wrong side of history than on the wrong side of God.

How must we respond to the Court’s ruling and the continuing cultural shift? Not with outrage or anger or resentment or panic or despair. “These are not the responses of (people who are) confident in the promises of a reigning Christ Jesus” (*Here We Stand*). How then? With wisdom in the way we live. With grace and compassion and charity and clarity in the way we speak. With grief and sadness for the sins of our nation and this brave new step to institutionalize what the Bible calls sin. With repentance for our own sins and the sins in which we in the church have been complicit. But also with confidence and courage and hope and humble trust in our sovereign and all-sufficient Savior and God.

Paul’s charge to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16 applies to us today. He said: “Be on your guard.” (In other words, stay alert.) “Stand firm in the faith.” (Which means, as Margaret Thatcher famously said to President Bush 41: “Don’t go wobbly.”) “Be men [and women] of courage. Be strong [in the Lord]. Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).
Everything

We can also devote ourselves, more than ever, to prayer (Colossians 4:2). Ed Stetzer says it is his ‘conviction that [we] Christians don’t pray enough, especially about difficult issues such as (how to engage our culture in these new circumstances). We pray before we eat, and we pray before we sleep, but we don’t pray enough in between. Especially in the West, where everything is ‘do do do,’ we often act before praying and asking God for wisdom, strength, and the like. Seriously,” he says, before you engage in conversations about marriage or the gospel on social media, at church, or in the community, “take some time and devote it to prayer.”

Speaking of social media, here is some wise counsel from James Emery White to take to heart:

- Don’t post anything that could potentially undermine your reputation or the church’s reputation for Christ-like character.
- Don’t post anything that could potentially undermine your leadership role, your witness or influence in the lives of others.
- Don’t retweet, repost, or link to any person or source you are not 100% willing to endorse.
- Play well with others. Which is to say, don’t be harsh or mean or holier-than-thou. “Be the aroma of Christ in whatever you post. Period. Be gracious.”

How should we as Christians respond to the Court’s ruling on gay marriage? With tears of sadness. With renewed appreciation for and devotion to the gospel of grace, which remains “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16) – for homosexual sinners and heterosexual sinners and every kind of sinner there is.

How to respond? By loving our neighbors and our nation, even (especially) when we disagree with them and they with us. And by carrying out our Great Commission on the mission field where God has placed us. Right here in northern Virginia and the Capital region.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Here in America and to the ends of the earth. Amen.