

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 10, 2016**

**LIFE IN THE SPIRIT (1)**

**Romans 12:9-21**

I feel burdened this morning to say something about the terrible events of this past week in Louisiana, Minnesota, and Dallas. Our hearts go out to the families and friends of the two black men shot and killed by police officers earlier in the week, and the police officers killed or wounded by a sniper in Dallas on Thursday night. One commentary I read this week describes it all as “a demonically insidious string of events, hitting our nation like a series of pounding waves” (John Stonestreet, *Breakpoint*). All of it coming immediately after the celebration of our nation’s 240<sup>th</sup> birthday on July 4.

The shootings that took place in Louisiana and Minnesota are tragic to the core, and our hearts grieve for everyone involved and everyone affected by these events. On all sides. I want to be careful not to pre-judge the officers involved in these shootings without knowing why they felt it necessary to shoot. Whatever their reasons, we have to admit that African-Americans have been and still are often treated differently by our criminal justice system than are whites.

When racial prejudice influences our criminal justice system, it is an indictment against that system of justice. When it influences the way we think and act, it is an indictment against us. Harboring racial prejudice in your heart, or acting on the basis of racial prejudice, is not the way Jesus wants His followers to live

How we respond to events like these – both the deaths of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, LA, and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, MN, at the hands of police officers, and the shooting deaths of five Dallas police officers and the wounding of several others – reveals something about the condition of our hearts. The appropriate response, it seems to me, is one of great grief, compassion for all who have suffered loss, a commitment to seek justice for all Americans, a sense of our brokenness as a people, and our radical need for mercy and healing that only God can give.

African-American pastor H. B. Charles reminds us that “the Bible exhorts us to weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). He goes on to say: “It doesn’t tell us to judge whether they should be weeping.” African-Americans are weeping. The law enforcement community is weeping. We should all be weeping. And praying. And building bridges of love and respect to overcome divisions caused by racial prejudice and distrust, and any other divisions that needlessly separate and weaken us as a people.

I love America. I trust that we all love this country and the qualities that have made America great. But not all is well with America. We are not okay as a nation. We are experiencing the truth of the biblical principle that you reap what you sow (Galatians 6:7). In a myriad of ways, we are reaping the consequences of what we have sown as a nation – by rejecting the Judeo-Christian principles of the Bible, by failing to properly honor God and give Him first place in our life, and by failing to love our neighbors of different races, ethnic backgrounds,

languages, cultures, religions, politics, and lifestyles. One thing we should be absolutely clear on is that to love one another as Jesus loved us (John 13:34), and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39), does not mean approving of everything our neighbor does or says or believes. You can love someone without giving your seal of approval to what they say or how they live.

We are far from okay as a nation. The state of our union is so not good. We are on a crash-course with self-destruction. There is more to it than race, of course, and the divisions among us seem to be getting bigger by the day. Electing a new President or House or Senate will not resolve our differences or fix what is wrong with us. Politicians and elected officials can play a role, of course, but if we expect any of them, or all of them together, to heal our nation, we will be sorely disappointed. The healing we need must ultimately come from the hand of God. It will take a work of God to heal our divisions and turn us back to Him as a people. What we need is a new, great spiritual awakening to spread across our land from sea to shining sea. I believe President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was right when he said: “I doubt if there is a problem – political or economic” (or social) – “that will not melt before the fire of a spiritual awakening.”

### **THE GROUNDWORK FOR REVIVAL**

True revival, of course, is not something that can be manufactured by following a prescribed set of steps. It doesn't work that way. True revival is a God-thing. It is a sovereign work of God. While we cannot bring it about by our most concerted efforts, there are things we can do to lay the groundwork for revival, should God be pleased to send it. What can we do?

### **SELF-EXAMINATION AND REPENTANCE**

First, we can examine our own hearts before God and repent of any and every sin we find there. In particular, if there is even a vestige of racial prejudice or racial superiority or any other form of racism in us, we must renounce it. We must repent of it. We must turn away from it and commit ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live lives that reflect the love of Jesus for all people, regardless of the color of their skin. We must repent of anything we have done and any attitudes we may harbor in our hearts that promote or perpetuate a climate in which racism is permitted to exist. It is a matter of justice and human dignity.

Whatever our sins may be, we must honestly face them, confess them to the Lord, and repent of them, so that the Lord may bring revival to our own lives and, through us, God willing, to our church and community and nation. The first thing we can do personally and as a church is to examine ourselves and repent of our sins.

### **PRAYER**

Second, we can pray. We can pray continually and passionately, with perseverance and fervor, asking God to once more send revival to His church and a new great awakening to our land. We can pray for hearts to be open to the message of the gospel. We can pray for hearts and lives to be changed, to be transformed, by the power of the gospel. We can pray for

spiritually lethargic or slumbering believers to be awakened and renewed in their devotion to Christ. We can pray for the church – not just Faith and not just the EPC, but the Christian church everywhere in America and the world, for that matter – to be true to its calling, faithful in proclaiming the message of the Bible, and consistent in demonstrating the love of Jesus in both word and action. We can pray for the Lord to send revival and renewal to the church and to our land once more.

### **OUR MISSION**

Third, we can devote ourselves fully to the mission God has given us in this world. For the church as a whole, and for pastors and teachers in particular, this means faithfully preaching and teaching the gospel message. You can't divorce revival from the preaching of God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. This places a particular burden of responsibility on pastors and teachers in the church. But with this responsibility comes a tremendous privilege – to speak on God's behalf and to share with people who need to hear it the message of the gospel and its implications for life in this world.

In a wider sense, this devotion to the mission God has given the church applies to all of us. Here at Faith we summarize our mission in these words: *To know Christ and to make Him known*. This is *our* mission. It is *your* mission. It is not just a bunch of words on paper. It is our mission as followers of Jesus Christ. We want you to know Christ more and more, and better and better. *God* wants you to know Christ more and more intimately. *God* wants you to love Him more deeply, to trust Him more completely, to follow Him more fully. And *God* wants you to do your part to make Him known. How? By living a gospel-centered life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And by bearing witness to the saving love of Jesus in both your words and actions. Who knows but that God may use your verbal witness, your incarnation of His love, or your efforts to help bring about racial reconciliation, as a catalyst for revival in our time?

We can devote ourselves, as sinners saved by grace and saved for service, as ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), to help in healing the wounds afflicting our nation by actively engaging our culture in a spirit of humility and love. We can devote ourselves to the work of loving real people near and far, wherever God gives us opportunity and influence, in the name and with the love of Jesus Himself.

I know we're supposed to be in Romans 8 today, but Paul speaks to this so directly and powerfully in Romans 12:9-21. Listen to his message and take it to heart today:

### **ROMANS 12:9-21**

Love must be sincere. (You must) hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:35). On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."  
(Proverbs 25:21-22)

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### **LIFE IN THE SPIRIT**

This, my friends, is how God wants us to treat one another in the fellowship of His church, regardless of our differences of race or nationality or language or politics or our views on any of the non-essentials of the faith in which the Lord has given us liberty. And this is how God wants us to treat our neighbors. This is how God wants us, as members of His family and representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ, to get along with people outside the church, regardless of the issues that divide us. We must not allow evil to overcome us. We must overcome evil with good.

Passing new laws will not fix what is wrong with us. We have too many laws already that are not being enforced. Posturing by politicians is not the answer. What we need is common courtesy and respect for every person. What we need is a rebirth of unity and community in America. What we need is love for one another. What we need is the love of Jesus.

It is our job as the church, it is our job as the body of Christ, it is our job as members of God's family, to be the agents and instruments of His love. It is our job not only to love one another in the fellowship of the church, but to love our community. To love and serve our neighbors. To pray for our neighbors in northern Virginia, in Louisiana and Minnesota and Dallas and Orlando and wherever. And to seek true justice, mercy, compassion, and dignity for all.

I don't know exactly what this may look like for you personally or for us as a church. I don't have an agenda. But I do believe it is of supreme importance for us as followers of the Lord Jesus to live out our faith in accordance with Jesus' teachings on love and the message of Paul in Romans 12. We cannot sit on the sidelines. We need to be engaged. We need to let God use us. We need to love sincerely. And in action. So, then, as it says in 1 John 3:18, "Let us love not with words or tongue only, but with actions and in truth."

To do so, with our hearts surrendered to Jesus and devoted to His kingdom, it seems to me, is the essence of what "life in the Spirit" is all about. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.