

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 20, 2017**

THE GREATEST CLUB ON EARTH

2 Timothy 1:1-7

We will read the Scripture passage from 2 Timothy 1 shortly, but first I want to share with you some reflections on the events in Charlottesville that have dominated the news and social media for the last week. Years ago, when I was in seminary, an older pastor told a group of students of which I was a part that, as a pastor, “sometimes you have something to say, and sometimes you have to say something.” This is one of those occasions when I have to say something. My hope, of course, is that whenever I stand before you, I have something to say to you from God’s Word; and that whenever I have to say something, I have something to say that communicates the truth and grace of God in a way that speaks to your life.

Last Sunday, while Mary Sue and I were in New York City to meet our new granddaughter Nora, who was born two days earlier, on Friday, August 11, Mike felt impressed by the Holy Spirit that he had to say something about the events that had just taken place in Charlottesville the day before. He spoke with passion, conviction, and biblical authority. I know this because I watched and listened to his message on Facebook this week. I am so glad we can use the technology of the web and Facebook to share our worship service every Sunday with members of our church family who can’t be here, as well as others who choose to “tune in.”

I appreciate Mike’s willingness to follow the Spirit’s leading, even when it is uncomfortable. It was an example, I think, of what Paul meant when he wrote to Timothy that “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7). And I affirm the message Mike preached from God’s Word last Sunday.

I feel the prompting of the Holy Spirit to add my voice to Mike’s, so there will be no doubt about where we stand. And I want to be clear, as Mike said last week, that this is not about politics. It is not about liberal or conservative. It is really about the gospel. It is about the mission of the church and our witness to the world.

The context of what I say is what happened last weekend in Charlottesville, though Charlottesville is hardly the only place where evil rears its ugly head. But what took place in Charlottesville was a frightening display of white supremacist racism and anti-Semitism.

Simply put, we must declare as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and members of His church that racism in all its forms is sin that must be repented and renounced. Every racist ideology, including the one on display in Charlottesville, is evil. It is antithetical to the gospel and must be condemned by all Christians.

Every person of every race and nation is made in the image of God, created equal in God’s sight with inherent dignity and worth. The Bible puts to rest the myth of racial superiority (or inferiority) when it says in Acts 17:26 that “from one man God made every nation of mankind

to live on all the face of the earth, having determined the times set for them and the places where they should live.”

What racist groups like the KKK, neo-Nazis, and other white supremacists stand for is antithetical to the gospel and the teaching of the Bible. It is the complete antithesis of the mission and saving love of Jesus, who came to die for both Jews and non-Jews, for sinners of every race, nation, and ethnicity; and who will be glorified in heaven when the vision of Revelation 7 is fulfilled, when “a great multitude” – “a crowd too huge to count” (*MSG*) – “from every nation, tribe, people, and language (stands) before the throne” of God, in the presence of Jesus, the Lamb of God, singing a song of salvation and praise to God (Revelation 7:9-10).

The gospel, with its message of the saving love of God for sinners of all colors and sexes and languages and backgrounds, destroys the racial barriers that separate people, making it possible to be part of a church family, like this one, which, as we noted a few weeks ago, consists of at least 18 different nationalities, in addition to the United States and the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico.

What we must say clearly is that people or groups who promote a racist ideology of white supremacy and anti-Semitism, or any ideology that demeans and devalues people of color or other national origin – in other words, people who are judged to be “different” in some way – are not living as followers of the Lord Jesus. Their racist ideology, bigotry, prejudice, and message of hate have nothing to do with the gospel and stand in total opposition to it. To the extent that anyone claims to be Christian and embraces such attitudes or beliefs, they are living in contradiction to the faith they profess, and their racist attitudes are an evil, ugly perversion of the gospel.

There is no place in this church for racism, bigotry, prejudice, and hatred toward any group of people. We may and must hate sin and all its effects or consequences, but not people.

There is no place for these ugly values in my life, in your life, or in our life together as a church. I hope you already know that. I’m confident you do. I just felt it was something I needed to say today.

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Now, let’s look together at God’s Word as it comes to us in 2 Timothy 1:1-7. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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I chose this passage for today because in it the apostle Paul mentions both Timothy’s mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois (1:5), and, as you know, Mary Sue and I have just entered the realm of grandparenthood, with two grandbabies born less than 72 hours apart less than two weeks ago. We want to share our news and our joy with you this morning.

Both of our daughters, Erin and Lindsay, were due to give birth in September, but the Lord had other plans for them. Erin's delivery date was moved up because of ongoing pregnancy-related blood pressure issues, while Lindsay's was moved up due to concerns about her baby's lack of growth and movement.

Erin gave birth to our first grandchild, a 4-pound baby boy named Grant Benjamin Stonecipher, in Charlottesville, where she and her husband David live, on Tuesday morning, August 8, bringing great joy to baby Grant's parents and grandparents and all our family. Three days later, on Friday morning, August 11, Lindsay gave birth to our second grandchild, Nora Hayden Anderson, in New York City, where she and her husband Dan live, doubling our joy and thankfulness. Nora's birth weight was also 4 pounds. Both babies spent their first days and nights in the NICU. Lindsay was able to take Nora home with her when she was discharged from the hospital a week ago yesterday – on the day of all the trouble in Charlottesville – but little Grant is still in the NICU as he needs a little more time to grow and develop before he can go home. We do not know how much longer Grant will have to remain in the NICU.

Mary Sue and I went to Charlottesville the day before Grant was born. So we got to meet him right after his birth. Then we drove to New York the day Nora was born and were there until last Monday. Mary Sue returned to Charlottesville this week on Thursday and came home yesterday.

It has been a whirlwind for us, a whirlwind of emotion and joy and praise and thanksgiving to God for His mercies and grace to us, to our daughters and their husbands, and to these two precious babies who, as you can imagine, have stolen our hearts.

I like the sentiment of the renowned 20th-century American poet Carl Sandburg, who said: “A baby is God's opinion that life should go on. Never will a time come when the most marvelous recent invention is as marvelous as a newborn baby. The finest of our precision watches, the most supercolossal of our super cargo airplanes, don't compare with a newborn baby in the number and ingenuity of coils and spring, in the flow and change of chemical solutions, in timing devices and interrelated parts that are irreplaceable. The baby here is very modern. Strictly. Yet it is also the oldest of the ancients.” Sandburg died in 1967, before the invention of the PC or the Internet or the iPhone. But his point is still valid. What David says in Psalm 139:14 is true of the tiniest baby: Each one is “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

I think I also agree with the person (Don Herold) who said: “Babies are such a nice way to start people.”

Right after baby Grant was born, I texted the happy news to members of our extended family, and soon got a congratulatory reply back from my brother Gary, who has four grandchildren of his own, as well as six step-grandchildren. In his text he said: “Welcome to the greatest club on earth!”

Some of you are already members of this club of grandparenthood. God willing, others of you will someday join the club. And, God willing, you will bless your grandchildren and their parents.

It is interesting in 2 Timothy 1 that Paul, while mentioning Timothy's mother and grandmother by name, makes no reference to Timothy's father or grandfather. We know from Acts 16:1 that, while Timothy's father was a Gentile and, as far as we know, not a follower of Jesus. About Timothy's maternal grandfather, the husband of his grandmother Lois, and his paternal grandparents, we know nothing at all. What we do know is that Timothy was blessed to have a godly mother and grandmother who, from his infancy, taught him "the holy Scriptures, which are able to make (us) wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

If you were – or are – blessed with parents or grandparents who modeled the Christian life for you, who pointed you to the Savior, and who taught you the Scriptures and the great articles of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have a godly heritage of great value for which to be extremely grateful. Not all of us are so blessed.

Regardless of your spiritual heritage, please understand that the faith of a parent or grandparent can never save the next generation. Being born into a Christian home is no guarantee that a child will become a true follower of Jesus. I don't know who said it first, but you may have heard it said: "Being born into a Christian home doesn't make one a Christian any more than being born in a garage makes one an automobile."

And, if you think about it, though Mary Sue and I are now grandparents, spiritually speaking, God has no grandchildren. Which is to say, no one is saved by the faith of another person. The faith of your parents or grandparents or spouse or children or siblings or the family member who is a pastor or a missionary will not – cannot – save you. Nor can your faith save your children or grandchildren. Or anyone else. Which is why the church's mission of sharing the gospel and making disciples of each new generation is so incredibly important.

God is always ready to welcome whosoever will come to Him by faith into His family. You can't get in because of the faith of one of His children. God has no grandchildren. But His children are as numerous as the grains of sand at the edge of the ocean. And He delights to wrap His arms of love and grace around anyone and everyone who comes to Him, trusting in the sufficiency of the saving work of Jesus His Son.

It gives Mary Sue and me great joy that all three of our kids and their spouses are walking with the Lord. But our grandchildren will never be saved by virtue of the faith of their parents or grandparents. What we desire for these precious little ones most of all is that they will come to know and believe the gospel, that they will come to trust and follow and serve the Lord Jesus Christ with everything they are and everything they have. Which is my desire and prayer for all of us.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.