

Sermon: "The Real World"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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REALITY TV

Have you watched TV lately? I hope not, but if you have, you know that "reality" shows are all the rage. Apparently, "reality" varies according to the producer of each show.

Some see reality as a race around the globe. Other programs see reality as a cutthroat competition between men and women stranded on an island or some other wilderness setting. Maybe reality is facing your fears, if your fears revolve around underwater stunts, high places and eating really weird stuff!

We all know why these shows are so popular with the networks. They're cheap to make. And, yet, despite our complaints about these shows, I bet there's at least one of the new reality shows that you like.

I have to admit that there is one that I like. I would have never watched it, but wife said this was what she wanted to watch so being the good husband that I am ... I watched it.

It had two strikes against it as far as I was concerned. It was on ABC, and it had the title "Extreme Home Makeover." Please. If I wanted to watch a home show, I would watch a real carpenter like Norm Abram on "This Old House" running the latest heavy duty table saw or router. Now that's entertainment!

In contrast, this show has a bunch of loose cannon designers with all sorts of bizarre ideas about home décor. And to top it off, they're led by a remodeling expert who runs around yelling at people with his bullhorn. This kid is definitely afflicted with some sort of attention deficit disorder!

The first shows were what I expected, fake conflict and stupid stunts. It was sort of fun to see the before and after pictures of the house, and I figured that as long as I had plenty of Doritos and dip, I could stand anything.

But, over the weeks, the show began to change. It got ... well ... more real. They began to build homes for people who had experienced real tragedies in their life, tragedies like death or serious illness. Some of the homes had to be modified to fit the needs of those who were afflicted in some way, and that story became a big part of the show.

You never can be sure when its TV, but sometimes I could swear that the people on that show were expressing real feelings, feelings like gratitude and compassion.

The fake conflict and stupid stunts were played down, and they were replaced with stories of courage and faith. And you know what? As most of the other reality shows are dropping in popularity, this one is gaining.

I think I know why. People want the world to be different from the one they see every night on the evening news. They don't want a world that is characterized by cutthroat competition and fear mongering.

They hunger for a world in which the poor in spirit are lifted up. They hunger for a world in which those who mourn are comforted. They hunger for a world in which peace does indeed have a chance.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO JESUS

This morning I have good news for those of you who have this hunger. This is the world according to Jesus. This is the new reality show that Jesus brought to his audience long ago, and the world has never been the same since.

One of the greatest charges leveled against the Christian faith is that it is unrealistic. You can understand why. After all, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount goes against conventional wisdom. The world according to Jesus certainly does not fit reality, as we know it.

For example, in today's lesson we read, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Matthew 5:11 (NRSV)

What kind of blessing is that? That doesn't seem real. I want people to like me, not persecute me. I want to be popular, not reviled.

In today's lesson we also read, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Tell that to Donald "you're fired" Trump.

Meekness, no matter how you define it, does not seem to be a desirable characteristic. The meek inherit nothing. The ambitious, they are the ones who have it all. That's reality. Right?

Some preaching down through the ages has attempted to lessen the impact of this sermon by suggesting that yes, the Sermon on the Mount this is the "ideal" behavior but none of us can hope to live up to that ideal. It is an impossible ideal. It is not based in reality.

So, these interpreters tell us that we have to be "practical" and "realistic" in our dealings with the world. They say that the Christian faith is a private and personal matter. They say that faith is something between you and God, not something to actually be tried in the rough and tumble world of politics or daily living.

DIFFERING WORLD VIEWS

Instead of looking at the world according to Jesus, we are encouraged to look at the world as defined by Wall Street. What is their motto? "Money makes the world go around"?

Others seem to think that the old philosopher, Thomas Hobbs best defined the world. In fact, I think his definition of life seems to form the basis for many of the reality shows on TV today. According to Hobbs, life is "solitary, hard, brutish and short."

Not many people would admit to believing that but many people live like they believe that. What we really believe about the world determines our ethics. If we believe that you "only go around once in life so you have to grab for all the gusto you can get" (as the old beer commercial

put it), then we're going to live like that. We are going to place self interest over every other consideration, and we will say,

"That's just reality. You just have to accept that it's a dog eat dog world."

SALT AND LIGHT

But, the Christian cannot allow "reality" to be defined by anyone other than Christ. When we become disciples of Jesus Christ, we enter a whole new world in which the rules are different.

Jesus said that we are called to be "salt" and "light" in the world. Even a little bit of salt can change the taste of food dramatically, and even a little bit of light can change how a whole room looks. Light one candle and the darkness cannot stand up to it.

In the same way, one Christian living by the rules of the kingdom lights up the world. One Christian living by the rules of the kingdom can make things "taste" different.

I refuse to believe in and play by the rules of those who want to limit the possibilities.

I am a Christian, and the only reality I recognize is that reality defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The only policy I follow is that of a Savior who lifted up those who were poor in Spirit, who comforted those who mourned and suggested that making peace instead of war was a better course of action.

WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE WANTED

This past Friday on Good Morning America Diane Sawyer interviewed a young man. A robber had attacked him and his fiancée in New York City.

Initially, the young man was knocked to his knees, as he was pistol whipped about the eyes. A friend who was with the couple helped the young man to his feet and started to drag him away.

He assumed that his fiancée was following behind them, but she was still in the clutches of the robber.

That's when he heard the shot. He and his friend went back to the place where his beautiful wife to be lay dieing. He held her and begged her to hold on, but her injuries were too great. She died in his arms.

There was a moment of silence, and then Sawyer asked the young man what he thought should be done to the man who did this. Perhaps she expected the typical reply, that this brute, if he were caught should be treated brutally. But, that's not what he said.

The young man, with his eyes still swollen from the attack, said that he was angry but he was trying to get beyond his anger. He hoped his assailant would be caught so that no one else would be hurt. And he said he hoped the man would receive a prison sentence so that he could think about what he had done and perhaps change and one day be able to be a productive member of society again.

I could almost hear Diane choking on her coffee as she struggled for something to say. His reply certainly didn't fit in to a world where

retribution seems to be the highest goal. Finally, after a long pause she said, "You know most people wouldn't react this way."

And, with tears in his eyes he replied softly, "Yes, but that's what she would have wanted. This is the only way that I can honor her memory, by trying to do what she would have done."

The young man didn't say anything about his faith or whether he had faith, but I was impressed by his great love. And that great love gave him a different way of evaluating reality.

I have to think that he will be comforted. He will be lifted up. With that kind of forgiveness in his heart, he is not far from the kingdom of God.

REPLY TO A LETTER

A preacher tells about a man whose beloved daughter was on her first job, the first day of work. A friend had graciously provided the job. She was at her desk on the 80th floor of the World Trade Center on September 11.

When the preacher heard about it, he wrote what he called a "feeble letter of condolence." He didn't know the father well, and he didn't really know what to say.

The father replied to the preacher's letter with these words, "My grief is great, deeper than can be imagined. But, I've also learned that I'm nobody special. There are thousands like me, not just in the events of September 11 but throughout the whole world.

Lots of parents before me have been in grief at the loss of a child. Now it's my turn. Our Christian faith teaches us that even God the Father Almighty knows what it is to lose a child to the violence and hatred of other people.

Speaking of the Christian faith, I want you to know that I now know a lot more about the Christian faith than the last time you saw me. I've learned how to be a Christian, the hard way."

"Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."

A GREATER REALITY

It occurs to me that the Beatitudes are more real than any other teaching. The Beatitudes take into account the reality of conflict and sorrow and depression and betrayal.

But, in these sayings that comprise the essence of Jesus' teaching, we learn the good news that conflict and sorrow and depression and betrayal will not have the last word.

In the Beatitudes we don't learn how God is going to take us out of this cold cruel world but how God is going to save us in spite of this cold cruel world.

And the Beatitudes teach us how that salvation will be the sign and seal of a greater kingdom, how the kingdom can (as the Lord's Prayer puts it) come on earth as well as in heaven.

The Beatitudes are all about a blessing, the blessing of God's peace in the midst of a warring world, the blessing of comfort in a time of sorrow, the blessing of support in a time when our spirits are broken.

If we believe in that world, if we believe that the blessings of God are stronger than the pain that comes our way or the evil that seeks to destroy us, then we will indeed be what God in Christ has called us to be.

We will be the salt of the earth. We will give the world a whole new flavor because we believe in a new heaven and a new earth. We believe in a world where nothing and no one is beyond the redemption of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

REALITY THERAPY

A chaplain told of training in a healthcare center for the seriously ill. Most of the patients in his ward had memory problems and some had delusions. The chaplains were trained to help these patients using something called "Reality Therapy" that was developed by William Glassier.

In the practice of this therapy, the chaplain said that they tried to "drag" these demented, deluded and confused persons back to reality. Every interaction with the hospital staff was an opportunity to do this therapy.

So, whether the person was the Food Services employee bringing lunch, a nurse bringing a pill or a chaplain bringing a verse of Scripture, all communication began with an attempt to bring the patients back to reality.

They would enter the room saying something like, "Good morning Mrs. Jones. Can you tell me what day it is? Who is the president of the United States? Where are we located now?"

In some ways the reality therapy was quite effective, especially with some of the elderly patients. Some well meaning family members had simply gone along with their ill family member's confusion instead of correcting them. This often made them even more confused.

But, the young chaplain said, "We were different. We were dedicated to reality."

One day the budding counselor entered the room of an elderly woman with the usual banter. "How many children do you have? What's your room number? Who's the governor of Georgia?"

The old woman replied, "You've got to be at least 20 years old. If you're so interested in who is the governor of Georgia, why don't you find out for yourself and quit bothering me?"

I'm 92 years old. I don't feel well. The location of this building, the name of this state, and even the day of the week are completely irrelevant to me."

The young chaplain realized she had a point. Reality depended upon what was important to a person. It wasn't that she was living in a perpetual state of unreality. Her world, her reality was different from his. She had different concerns and different needs.

The chaplain concluded, "Our reality therapy assumed that we knew what was real, that reality was fixed, final and an uncontested fact. Now, as I get closer to those dreaded years myself, I'm not so sure."

THERAPY WITH JESUS

I would suggest that the world all of us live in is, to a certain extent, unreal. That is, our assumptions and limited experience always cause us to have a skewed view of how things are. In order to understand what is really real we need therapy, a new kind of reality therapy.

This therapy wasn't developed by William Glassier. It was developed by Jesus. And as our therapist and teacher Jesus sits down and asks us, "What day is it?" And we are taught to answer,

"Today is Sunday, the first day of the week.

On this day, long ago everything changed. A new creation was begun. The old began to pass away and the new came.

In this new world, the poor and the poor in Spirit are lifted up. In this new world those who mourn are comforted by the hope of life eternal.

In this new world peacemakers have the courage to dream about and put into practice nonviolent ways of changing what needs to be changed."

Then he asks us,
"And who are you?"

And we answer,
"I am a sinner, but I am a forgiven sinner. I have been redeemed. I am a child of God. And day by day, little by little, through the power of God's Spirit, I am being changed into the person God wants me to be."

That's reality therapy 101 according to Jesus.
And, as his disciples, that's what we believe most deeply.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN