

BEING REAL WITH YOUR FAITH (Part 1)

June 14, 2009

Pastor Craig Watson

Kalamazoo Free Methodist Church

The Amazing Race... Fear Factor... American Idol... Survivor... what do we call of these? “Reality” shows! But, how “real” are they? So-called “reality shows” have captured the airwaves and replaced the apparently “less real” sitcoms and dramas that once dominated television.

I know it may seem strange, but maybe this phenomenon is because people crave “reality.” To be sure, what they are getting on television is not, for the most part, “real,” but the producers seem to have latched on to a desire that the viewers have, even if the result is skewed.

What’s it mean when someone says, “Be real”? Doesn’t it mean that they don’t want to be fed a line or led astray? They want the truth! “Give it to me straight,” they might say. Well, the desire for “reality” – the desire for someone else to “be real” with us – is never greater than when we are talking about the important things in life. When it comes to the important things, nothing is more important than spiritual “reality.”

If you are a follower of Jesus, *you* know the Author of spiritual reality. You have experienced what it means to really live! What’s more, the One who has opened your eyes to this reality has called for us to share our faith with others who haven’t yet discovered this reality.

So, today and next Sunday, we’re going to consider how we can be real with our faith. Now, that entails more than just having the Truth and memorizing Scripture and being able to spout off umpteen-million verses from the Bible. It means more than having our testimony scripted so we are ready to “share our story” at moment’s notice. It means, for better or worse, letting people see me for who I *really* am, yet still being able to share my Lord and Savior with those who see and know the “real” me! I know this is not always easy.

Perhaps one of the ways to make it a *little* easier is to clarify “real” from “ideal.” What, in your opinion, would be the “ideal” Christian? I mean, if you were to describe the perfect Christian witness, what qualities and characteristics would he or she have? (*pause*) Now, if that is the *ideal* Christian witness, from your own experience, how would you describe the *real* Christian witness? In other words, how would the everyday Christian differ from what we described as “ideal”? (*pause*) It is interesting how we differentiate between “ideal” and “real” and also how the two cross-over in certain ways.

I think we all can agree, though, that *being real* is very important, but not always easy to do or easy to detect. One reason for this is because, while we recognize the importance of being real, we still desire the ideal.

Take a look at this picture. [*Slide 2: “Mr. Wonderful”*] How many of you have ever seen this doll? He’s called “Mr. Wonderful” and you can still buy him for about \$140. He represents the ideal man. Besides his dashing good looks and perfect posture, Mr. Wonderful always knows just what to say. All you have to do, ladies, is squeeze his hand and Mr. Wonderful will say things like this:

- You take the remote. As long as I'm with you, I don't care what we watch.
- You've been on my mind all day. That's why I bought you these flowers.
- Why don't we go the mall, didn't you want some shoes.
- You know honey, why don't you just relax and let me make dinner tonight.
- The ball game is not that important, I'd rather spend time with you.
- You know, I think it's really important that we talk about our relationship.

I know, many of you are now adding “Mr. Wonderful” to next year’s Christmas list, aren’t you? And, guys, I hear there is also a “Ms. Wonderful” doll, too, if you are interested! Ah, the ideal verses the real! There are many of us who want to “be ideal.” We want to play roles that don’t

come naturally to us – whether it’s Mr. or Ms. Wonderful, or someone else’s “image” of what we should be. We just have a propensity to play roles.

John Ortberg tells a story about a man who was desperate for a job. He had been searching for some time when he read about an opening at the local zoo. During the interview, the zoo director explains that they only have one job available and he’s not sure that the man would be interested. The man explains that he’s desperate and will take whatever they have.

“What do I have to do,” the man asked.

“You put on a gorilla suit, and you crawl in the cage and you pretend to be a gorilla.”

“That doesn’t sound possible,” the man said, “but I’m desperate. I’ll do it.”

So, the man gets the gorilla suit and begins “training.” He practices on the trapeze and works on his gorilla grunt and all the other things associated with being a gorilla. The man works so hard at it, in fact, that when he enters the gorilla cage, he actually makes the people think that he’s a real gorilla!

Things are going really well for the man until one day when he’s swinging on the trapeze, he accidentally goes too high and swings over the top of his cage, landing in the lion’s cage next door. All of a sudden there he is lying face to face with the lion. The man is petrified! He begins yelling, “Get me out of here! Get me out of here,” immediately revealing that he’s really a man and not a gorilla. Then, all of sudden, he hears the lion whisper, “Shut up or we’ll all lose our jobs!” What the man discovered was that he was not the only imposter in the zoo!

Not everyone takes too well to being “real.” How many of you are familiar with the story of Frank Abagnale, Jr.? Talk about struggling with being real! Before he was 21, Frank Abagnale, Jr. had successfully played the role of a pilot, a lawyer, and a doctor. The people he worked with and for never suspected that all of his credentials were phony and hundreds if not

thousands of people entrusted their lives to him as he assumed these various roles and occupations. When he was finally captured in France, besides the U.S. there were 12 other countries that wanted him because of his fraud. If this true story sounds familiar, you may have seen Leonardo DiCaprio portray Abagnale in the hit movie, *Catch Me If You Can*.

Be real! We've become experts it seems to being anything *but* being real. As I've heard one person say, "Rather than tell the truth about ourselves we have become experts in dodging, hiding, pretending, covering, running, protecting, eluding, and evading the real us." But, that's not how it has to be. That's not how it is suppose to be. In Colossians 3:9, Paul tells us we are not to *lie* to each other." In the entire third chapter of Colossians, Paul seems to be telling us not to lie to ourselves, either. Instead, he shares how we can be real in our lives, be real in our faith.

Listen as I read for you Colossians 3:1-17[*slides 3-7*] :

¹Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the Christian ideal that, over time as we walk with Christ, becomes more and more our Christian reality. Paul is saying here that *this* is how we should live. He is *instructing* the Colossian believers in how they are to conduct themselves. He lays it all out there in strong language like, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (verse 5) and, “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (verse 12). He’s telling them that they do *not* have to remain the way they were, living ungodly lives, but that it is possible and expected that they will change.

Does this mean that once we accept Christ as our Savior and Lord that *all* of these positive and powerful characteristics and attributes will immediately be experienced by us and seen in us by others? Excuse me for the cliché, but “Be Real!” Yes, there is a definite change in heart when we decide to accept Christ and there *is* a change in how we live that people will notice, but there are other things in our lives that change *over a period of time* and not immediately.

“But, Pastor, what do you do with the scripture in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that says, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come?*” We are a new

creation when we accept Christ. He takes our spirit which was dead in trespasses and sins and He breathes new life into us! We are spiritually *re-born!* But, just as a newborn baby – a new creation – must learn how to talk, walk, use his or her hands, and basically interact with his or her world, so a new follower of Jesus must learn *how* to live the way God wants them to live. Also, just as we grow physically through various stages of life – childhood, teen years, young adults, etc. – and we never stop learning and growing, so spiritually we are on a constant growth curve. *[Slide 8]* We are constantly *becoming* what Paul describes in Colossians 3, and, at whatever “stage” we are in our Christian walk, we are to be *real*.

This reality is not only for our own good, but for the good of those who have not yet taken the step of faith and trusted Jesus as their Lord. I agree completely with this quote by John Davies: *[Slide 9]* “What the world is longing to see in the Church is not moral *purity* as much as moral reality. The world wants to see a Church full of people who are not afraid of their blemishes, because their blemishes only point to the unblemished character of Jesus.” All I would add to Davies’ comments is that the world also wants to see, in addition to our being “real” – blemishes and all – that we *are* still becoming like the unblemished Savior we are proclaiming. So, for the remainder of our time today and continuing next Sunday, I’d like to consider how we as followers of Jesus Christ can be real with our faith in such a way that encourages others to want to know our Lord Jesus. We will consider how to **Be Bold, Be Real, and Trust Him.**

BEING BOLD

What was the last thing that Jesus told His disciples before ascending to Heaven? Look with me at Acts 1:8. *[Slide 10]*

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ~ Acts 1:8 [NIV]

Notice that Jesus does not say that we are to be his lawyer sent to *defend* the truth, or his salesman trying to get people to *buy* into the message. It says that you and I are to be His *witnesses*. What is a witness? Isn't it someone who simply tells what they've seen and experienced? *That's* what Jesus has called us to be. You don't have to be the Bible Answer Man or Woman. You don't have to be an expert on the entire Bible. You simply have to witness to what Jesus has done in *your* life and, after all, you're the greatest expert on *your* life. Learning what the Bible teaches helps you to explain some of what has happened in you and it will help you to grow in your faith, but again, don't let a lack of “Bible knowledge” make you think that you cannot be a good witness for the Lord.

Now, some people say that they simply let their actions be their witness. After all, don't actions speak louder than words? But if we don't know what “language” those actions are in, how are we going to be able to translate them? What I'm saying is this: if you don't explain why you are doing what you do, who gets the credit? - You? - Your parents? How will those around you know that your behavior is in any way connected to Jesus? That is why you need to speak up as well as live out your faith. Otherwise, God will not get the “credit.” Doing so, we know, requires *boldness*.

It's true that some people tend to be bolder than others. I heard of a Christian optometrist who actually replaced his old eye chart with the four spiritual laws...

“Read the top line.”

“God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.”

“Now, read the next line.”

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Now, I don't know how true this story is, but you'd have to admit that it would be pretty bold!

To be witnesses *does* mean that we need to talk about Jesus. We cannot just talk about spiritual stuff in general. We must talk about Jesus, even if sometimes it takes a while for our listeners to "get it." That reminds me of a little girl who went to Sunday school and when she came home her mother asked her who her teacher was. The little girl said, "Well, I don't know her name, but she must have been Jesus' grandmother because he's all she could talk about!"

How, though, can we find a way to be bold? How can we possibly talk about Jesus in a *real* way that won't turn people off? How can we share our faith in a way that others *want* to hear about it?

One way to begin boldly and authentically share your faith is by using questions. *[Slide 11]* Jesus was the master of asking questions. In fact, it was not unusual for him to answer a question *with* a question! Asking questions is a great way to both find out more about what others are thinking as well as open the door to share with them. There is a Christian group on campus at Towson University that has been very successful at sharing their faith using questions. They have developed surveys and go around campus asking students if they would be interested in answering a few questions. If you know anything about college students, you know that they like to express their opinions! So, the survey usually includes four questions that go something like this: *[Slide 12]*

- What three words would you use to describe your life these days?
- What is one thing you think you would like to do before your life ends?
- What do you think happens when life ends?
- Would you like to know what I have come to believe about that question - about what happens after life ends?

Now, the first two questions are engaging questions. They get the person with whom you are talking to think about life in general. The third question is the pivotal question. It will tell you right away if you are going to engage in any kind of spiritual conversation. Remember, your job is not to beat the door down. It is simply to knock and see if the other person will open to door. If they do, then you can safely ask the fourth question which is not so much a survey question as it is a question of permission to share.

The Towson students often use these questions with complete strangers, but they can also be questions we could ask those with whom we already have a relationship. It's also important to note that we are not restricted to these questions. You may want to develop your own questions that you store in the back of your mind for when the opportunity arises to share your faith. Sometimes it may be in combination with something that you *do*, a “good deed” that allows you to share with someone.

Jesus shares an interesting word picture with us in Matthew 5:14-16. In it, he compares us – our lives – with being light. Read with me what he says: *[Slide 13]*

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

For travelers in the hills of Judea, a city on a hill would be a welcome sight at night. Even from a distance, the glow of the lamps in the various homes would beckon the travelers. Likewise, to the people within the homes, the lamps served to light their way. As Jesus pointed out, if you lit a lamp, you wouldn't cover it up with a bowl, but you would put it on a stand where it would shine brightly. *[Slide 14]* Therefore, Jesus reminds us, *we* are to be light to those

around us – not hiding it, but boldly shining the light that God has given us, drawing the weary traveler home and providing light to those around us to help keep them from stumbling in the dark.

This reminds me of many times that I have been traveling at night. Driving late at night on a country road, a couple of things often happen to me. First, the darkness makes me drowsy. It makes me want to give in to the darkness and sleep. Second, the driving in the dark quietness creates a sense of loneliness in me. I can easily drift into a melancholic mood and let sadness overtake me if I am not careful.

What will often help me at these times are the homes dotting the countryside. I will be driving along a particularly dark stretch and, turning a corner in the road, come upon a house with a lamp in the front window spreading a warm glow through the clear glass into the yard beyond. I can't explain why, but the melancholy leaves me and a smile creeps across my face when I see these homes. There is a renewed sense of "home" in that light that dissolves the loneliness I was feeling a short time before. My mind turns from dark memories to wonderment. I begin wondering who may live there and what the family is doing. I imagine them gathered together in the living room, talking about their day, perhaps over the accompanying sound of the television set. I recall the security I feel when my family is gathered together and the warmth it brings to my heart. There may not be another home with a beacon in the front window for another several miles on that road, but the ongoing affects of this one often carry me on to the next.

A lot of people journey through life like I travel down those country roads. They find themselves surrounded by a darkness that tires them, drains them and beckons them to give in to

the darkness and sleep. They also experience the sadness and loneliness as they feel they are traveling alone.

Perhaps what they need is a light in the window; a lamp shining through a clean pane of glass; a life that is glowing with the reality of what it means to be a child of God; someone who is not afraid to let them see Jesus living in them in a clear, unobstructed way. This is why we are called to be bold in our faith.

How bold are you in your faith? How real are you with other people? Do they see a living, though perhaps imperfect, faith in you? Does the Light of Christ shine through you and attract others to Him? Remember the words of our Lord in Matthew 5:16 – *[Slide 15]*

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Let's take some time to ask the Lord's help to "be real" with our faith – being bolder and shining the light of Christ in what we say and do.