



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**
Presbyterian (USA)

Giving Thanks for Young Adults

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 19:
16-22

Nov. 5, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Get real. That’s what he said to me. I was speaking at a conference for college students for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Some of these churches left the Southern Baptist Convention. Others of them were trying to be both Southern Baptist and Cooperative Baptist. There were about 800 college students there. We were meeting at a conference center outside of Huntsville, Alabama. Two other two preachers and I were part of a Q&A session where students were invited to ask us questions. A young woman asked all three of us to tell us about our faith stories—how we came to be preachers and speakers at the conference.

I was telling my own story of faith in Jesus Christ and a young man named Otis, who was a junior at Auburn University, blurted out, “Wait! You mean to tell me you actually believe all of this?” I smiled and said, “Yes. I have staked my life upon it.” He said, “Get real.” And I said, “I’m trying my best to be as real as possible.”

Later, Otis came up to talk with me. He said some of the other students and his campus pastor said he should apologize to me. I asked him what for and he said the other students thought he was being disrespectful to me. I told him I was not offended. I told him I thought he was being the best possible college student he could be. When he asked what I meant by that, I told him I thought he was searching for what is real, what is authentic, what is meaningful. He nodded and agreed.

Whether Otis knew it or not, he was a multi-generational descendent of a young man who appears in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew says there was a young man who came up to Jesus and said, “Teacher (Rabbi), what good deed

must I do to have eternal life?” Now right away we know that this young man was an outsider because everyone who knows Jesus in Matthew’s gospel—the disciples, his friends—they all call Jesus “Lord.” This young man calls him, “Rabbi.” He asks Jesus, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus first says, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good (referring to God and actually, then, to himself). Jesus tells him to keep the commandments—meaning the ten commandments.

Then the young man asks, “Which ones?” which is an odd question so Jesus recites the commandments: Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, honor your parents and love your neighbor as yourself (which, by the way, are not all of the ten commandments and Jesus adds his own—about the loving your neighbor as yourself). Interestingly, Jesus only cites the commandments that have to do with how we relate to one another.

The young man says he has kept all these. “What do I still lack?” So, he knows he is missing something. He has played by the rules. But he knows he is not there. He is searching for meaning. He wants a meaningful life. He wants what is true. What is authentic. What is real.

Then Jesus tells the young man to sell all he has and give the money to the poor, then you will find out what is real—what your life is for. Then, “Follow me.” When the young man hears this from Jesus, he goes away grieving because he had many possessions.

This young man is never mentioned again in the Bible. But I have to believe that the encounter with Jesus changed him. I hunch he went home sad and then after some time, he realized that all these things he owned, they could not

save him—they could not provide meaning for his life. He was meant for something greater. And I believe he then heard that the Rabbi from Nazareth whom he talked with years ago, he had started a whole new way of seeing the world. A way of meaning and purpose. A way that was authentic and real. And he followed that way.

The search for meaning; for what is real. That is one of the gifts that young adults offer us and how they challenge us.

Several years ago I received a grant to study why so few young adults (persons in their 20s and 30s) are staying with the church. These are young people we baptized and many of whom we confirmed.

I had a focus group of young adults in Sunnyvale, California—the heart of Silicon Valley. Nearly all of them grew up in a Presbyterian church and none of them were currently attending any church. One young man told me he was dating a woman who was a United Methodist. He said in this congregation, this woman’s name appeared in the worship bulletin but she never stood up or anything and he asked if I knew anything about it. I was confused and asked about the woman’s name. He said it was “Gloria Patri.” We do not sing that here, but a lot of churches do. It’s a song that says, “Glory be to the father and to the son and to the holy ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now and forever shall be, world without end, Amen. Amen.”

He said, “Hey, they sang that.” I explained that Gloria Patri is Latin for the first line in the song, “Glory be to the father.” He said, “Okay.” Then he asked the great question: “Why?” I took his question to be, “Why does the church sing that?” And I explained that worship is praise to God and this song praises God. He said he understood that part. He wanted to know why we used the Latin term “Gloria Patri.” So help me, I was at a loss. And I am ashamed to say the only thing I could come up with was, “I guess because we’ve always done it that way.” Embarrassing, I know. I found out later that he worked

for Google and I thought, “Really? You couldn’t have googled that? Hello?”

The very question “why?” is a question about meaning. About a life worth living. About authenticity. About being real.

In my research I also found a correlation between authenticity and spontaneity. Young adults said when the church acted without a lot of planning, it seemed more authentic, more real. I shared this in a lecture and sermon I gave at the Old Stone Presbyterian Church in the heart of Cleveland. Later, the pastor sent me a note along with the worship bulletin. After my visit, they decided to add a new item in worship, after the sermon and before the hymn. It read: “A moment for spontaneity.” I thought to myself, “Oh, Lord Jesus, only we Presbyterians would try to schedule spontaneity.” So I wrote back to him and asked what happened during that moment and so far, he said, everyone just sits looking at each other.

In his book published last year titled “Nonverts; The Making of Ex-Christian America,” theologian and sociologist Stephen Bullivant, writes that most young adults don’t hate the church. They just don’t think we matter. They see our form of belief as a “Christianity of convenience.” He says we are “so careful not to offend that our very blandness has become an affront.” He goes on, “In the eyes of many American young adults, mainline Christianity has come to stand for nothing at all aside from some vague (albeit noble) pieties like peace, justice, and inclusiveness.”¹

The young man has the nerve to ask Jesus what really matters? What is my life for? Jesus says: Go, sell everything you have and give the money you make to the poor and then come follow me. Then I will show you what is real.

The truth is we are all on that search every day. And you, young adults, you are helping lead the way. Come on, church. We were not created for convenience. We are not the church of Quik Trip. We were not created to be the church of

1 Stephen Bullivant. *Nonverts; The Making of Ex-Christian America* (2022), p. 91.

the bland. All of the saints are not cheering us on and saying, “That’s right, Village Church. Be the safe, comfortable, convenient, bland church we know and love.” We did not get to these 74 years by being safe and convenient and bland. We were created to change the world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So tomorrow night, your Session, the elected leaders of this congregation, will be gathering at Village Church on Antioch and we will envi-

sion and imagine what God is calling us to do and be in these next years. I invite you to share your dreams with us. Send them to me or to any of the elders and pastors and staff. Together, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, it’s time Village Presbyterian Church, yet once again, for us to get real.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.