

## Message Notes September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### The Good and Beautiful Community Week 1: Faith or Action?

(Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:14-17; 1 Corinthians 13:1-3; Galatians 5:6)

#### • Angel and April

- Today we start a new series called *The Good and Beautiful Community*: get yourself a copy of the book online or through our church office, and come join our small group either Tuesday morning at 10:30 or Thursday evening at 6:30—you can come in person in the Parlor or online via Zoom.
  - This is the end of a three-part series if you remember back to the first book, *The Good and Beautiful God*, which was about getting rid of our false narratives about God and understanding Him for who He really is, as Jesus reveals Him, in all His grace and truth. The second book, *The Good and Beautiful Life* is all about the *inward* transformation we can experience as followers of Jesus, with His grace working in our lives to give us freedom and make our character more like Christ's. This last book, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, is now about the *outward* lifestyle and actions we take as followers of Christ, and what it means to live out God's mission as the good and beautiful community known as the Body of Christ, the Church.
- Speaking of Church, have you noticed this common phenomenon in our times, where people say, "I like Jesus; but I don't like the Church." "I'm interested in Jesus; I'm not interested in Church." *Why is that?* I'm sure there are a mixture of legitimate and illegitimate reasons people have for saying things like this. But I really believe the number one reason people are prone to avoid the Church today is this: *so many churches don't look like Jesus*. We're our own worst enemies: we've created a system in which it's entirely possible—even *easy*—to do all the churchy things, to fill your life with religious activity, and never get any closer to *looking like Jesus, living like Jesus, loving like Jesus*.
  - Attending a church service roughly once a week doesn't guarantee your character will begin to look like Christ's. *But*, if you do want to grow to become more like Jesus, you are going to need the community of other Christians—and this is what we call, for better and for worse, the Church. This is, if functioning properly, *the Good and Beautiful Community* of God. We need this community if we're going to walk with Jesus. Let me share a story.
- Angel and April, a husband a wife I know from Halifax, are two of the most Christlike people I know. They both grew up in really rough circumstances and in adulthood, struggled with addictions, broken relationships, violence, and more. But they eventually came through a "Celebrate Recovery" program at a Church, where they met Jesus and each other—and their lives would never be the same.
  - They got married and as they settled into a new life together with their family, at some point they encountered Jesus' teaching on "the least of these" in a Bible study—you know, the passage where Christ says, "Whatever you did for the least of these, you have done for me... And whatever you neglected to do for them, you neglected to do for me..." (Matthew 25). They were so convicted and inspired by these words that they *had to act*.
  - So, just like that, they began to cook meals and drive from their home in Halifax to inner-city Harrisburg, where they would feed people on the streets right out of their family van. This began to be a regular activity: every week at the same time, rain or snow or shine, they would go into the city and serve free, home-cooked food out of their car and simply build relationships with the homeless community there. They had no "organization," no vision statement, no board, no staff, no budget, no master-plan—they just had the love of Christ (and some street smarts).
  - They soon became basically the pastors of people on the streets. Folks from all over the city would come every week to get food and other needs cared for. Everyone respected this couple who just gave of themselves with no agenda other than love.
- I had the privilege of getting to know Angel and April. By the time I came to Halifax, their ministry was well established: they eventually developed an organization and became a non-profit, they received a free 15-passenger van, and even were given a virtually free location where they could

house their ministry (that's a whole other story). They would do two meal outreaches a week, and people from churches all over the region signed up to meet them in Harrisburg to serve.

- They often invited me to join them “downtown,” and when I finally did, it was an experience I'll never forget. Even though I was the “resident pastor” of the group, as a middle-class white kid from the suburbs, I felt like the most comfortable thing for me to do would be to keep my head down this first night and just serve some casserole to the line. But as we got everything ready to with the crowd (probably close to 100 people), Angel did his usual opening with a welcome, a prayer, and an invitation to follow Christ. *“If you haven't accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, what are you waiting for man?! Follow Him today!”*
- Then he said, “And by the way, Pastor David Layser is here from Halifax United Methodist Church. He's here to talk and pray with anyone who needs it so come on over!” I took a breath and dove in. There were so many different people with so many stories: black, white, Asian, Hispanic; homeless, working poor, local residents just looking for fellowship; addicts, veterans, mentally ill; teenagers, senior citizens, and everything in between. I felt like such an outsider, but I just started to walk around and... *talk*.
- At some point, I got called over to talk with some people who were really struggling and asking for prayer. One gentleman was getting back on his feet, finding his way and trying to reconnect with God. Somehow, I got the crazy idea that I would help him remember his baptism right there in the street. I talked to him about what that meant: now was the time to reaffirm his faith and remember who he was. He was this big, solid guy with a perfectly shaved head. I laid my hand on him and prayed, then I grabbed one of the water bottles from the cooler and *dumped it all over his head*. I forgot how cold it would be and he stood there coughing and sputtering as I dumped this whole bottle of ice water on him!
- But it was an absolutely beautiful, messy, Spirit-filled Kingdom moment. Others saw and wanted to do the same; I think I went through half the cooler before it was over. Here I was, this young white kid from the suburbs with no idea what I was doing, in the streets of Harrisburg on a Tuesday night, dumping water bottles on peoples' heads and praying over them. It was a wild ride! And that's what the Spirit does when we just say “yes” to the adventure of His Kingdom.
- **The Good and Beautiful Community**
  - I got to serve with Angel and April many times. Whenever I was with them, I felt like *this is what the Body of Christ is meant to be*. It wasn't perfect; it was messy, it was crazy, but it was beautiful. They were some of the most tangible experiences of God's Kingdom I've witnessed.
  - One thing they said has stuck with me: early on when they were just starting out, the community on the street told them something like this: *“You guys are different from the other Christians. We were surprised when you kept coming back. Other church people come through here all the time, but they come once, give you a meal, and you never see them again. They just want to make themselves feel good. But you guys really care.”*
  - What made Angel and April different? It wasn't *what they were doing*—there are plenty of soup kitchens and food pantries and service projects in Harrisburg—it was *how they were loving*. They weren't just providing social services to appease their guilt (as important as those services can be). Rather, they were *loving others* because *they loved Jesus*. That's the real deal, that's the Jesus Way, that's the “Good and Beautiful Community.”
- **Activism vs. Pietism**
  - So often, the church is its own worst enemy, do you know what I mean? The very people who are supposed to be living like Jesus, loving like Jesus, walking like Jesus—are projecting the complete opposite to a world that desperately needs Good News.
  - People tend focus on different solutions to this problem. We tend to see emphasis on one of two options. You have those who emphasize *Activity* as the solution and then those who emphasize *Piety*. Social Activism and Personal Piety are *good things!* The problem is, we've made them into *either/or*, and we quickly turn it into *self-righteous, self-centered legalism*, when what we really need is the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus: His Gospel is not *me-centered* but *Christ-centered*, and it's not *either/or* but *both/and*.

- If I can exaggerate this to make a point: you have the Social Justice Warriors on the one side and the Super Spiritual Christians on the other. Your Social Justice Warrior Churches will say, “What good is it to preach the Gospel and hold Bible studies when people are starving in the world, children are being sold into slavery, people are experiencing injustice? It doesn’t matter *what* we say and *what* we believe if we’re not making the world a better place!”
- Then your Super Spiritual Churches will counter that with, “Hang on! The Church is not a Social Service Agency! What good does it do if you’re feeding and clothing people when they’re still on their way to hell? We’ve got to convert them to Christ, we’ve got to teach the Word, we’ve got to be living in the Spirit or none of this matters!”
- Here’s the thing: the Bible says that *both* are essential elements of the same Christian journey. Do you remember when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was? He gave *two* commandments, not one. He said the greatest commandment was to love God with *all* that we are, but another was just as important—to love your neighbor as yourself. They’re two sides of the same coin! You can’t claim to love God without loving your neighbor; and you can’t *really* love your neighbor unless you’re empowered by the love of God.
- The Bible makes it clear that the purpose of our faith is *Love: loving God and loving others*. Paul said to the Galatians, “... *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love,*” (Galatians 5:6). Anything else, no matter how impressive, how dynamic, is just *noise* if it’s not motivated and empowered by the Holy Love of God—remember 1 Corinthians 13: *If I have all these amazing spiritual gifts, but I don’t have love...I am just an abrasive noise...I am nothing...I gain nothing...without love.*
- Ephesians 2:8 is often quoted to emphasize the primacy of Faith and Grace in our salvation—we can’t earn it, not even close, and we can’t boast—it’s all a gift from God, end of story. “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*” We often stop there to prove a point, but the very next verse says, “*For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” That’s the proper balance: we are saved by *grace alone*, not by what we do—but we are created to *do good works*. We are saved by Grace, and by faith, that Grace begins to work *in and through our lives* in beautiful ways.
- James says faith without action is dead. Simple. The actions don’t save us, they are simply the evidence that our faith is *real*—and that God’s grace is really working in us. What would you think if I bragged all the time about how much I *loved* my wife—but you talked to her and she told you I never lifted a finger to serve her, never did anything kind for her, never spent time with her? You would say my love was *fake*.
- **No More Games**
  - We don’t want the counterfeit, we don’t want false religion, we don’t want to be part of the problem; we want the real thing. We want to thrive in Christ. No more religious games! I’m done with “country club Christianity,” I’m done with “consumer religion.” I want the church *alive* and on the move! I God’s *Mission*, not just the “maintenance” of some organization that happens to have a church logo. I want to live a life of faith that leads to a life that looks like Jesus—“faith working through love.”
  - Do you want that, Trinity Church? We need a community, we need the fellowship of believers that carries us through life and spurs us on. We need simple habits that connect us with God every day—so that we spend more time with Godly input entering our souls than all the garbage we often find. We need to change the way we think, like Romans 12 says to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds.” And it all starts with simply *being loved by God* so we can return that love to God and others. Be in a *relationship* with God and God’s people. Immerse your life in God’s Presence, in God’s Word, and in God’s people so that you can live out God’s mission of saving the world.
  - To do all this, we need the Good and Beautiful Community—we need each other, we need to not merely *go to Church*—we need to *be the Church*. And that’s what this season will be all about. I hope you will join us!