

Message Notes September 27th, 2020
The Good and Beautiful Community Week 2: The Hopeful Community
(1 Peter 3:15; Colossians 1:3-6; Romans 12:10-18)

- **You'll Never Be "Ready"**

- This week's chapter is called "The Hopeful Community," and I assumed by the title that it was going to be all about hope. But it's actually a message about *sharing your faith*. Remember, this series is about exploring how we outwardly live our faith, how we're called to live as followers of Christ. One of the most important things we're called to is to "go and make disciples." *The Great Commission*.
- When you hear that we're talking about "sharing your faith" today, how do you feel? A little nervous, a little guilty, unsure? Most people are afraid to share their faith. Would you agree?
- Last year, Barna research released a national study where they surveyed Christians in America about sharing their faith. In this study, they found that younger generations felt more conflicted about evangelism than ever. Even though the majority of the Christians surveyed said that spreading the Gospel was a key part of being a Christian, almost half of the Millennials surveyed said they felt it was wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in the hopes that they would one day become a Christian. Hear that again: *half of millennial Christians have a problem with evangelizing people of other beliefs*.
 - One reason for this is that younger generations have a heightened awareness of our culture. We live in a culture where disagreement with someone is automatically perceived as judgement. We live in a culture where everyone is encouraged to "do their own thing" and "live their own truth." We live in a culture where strong conviction and faith are viewed with suspicion, and proselytizing others is frowned upon. We live in a culture where the Church has gotten some really bad publicity and organized religion is not favored. Basically, there are cultural and ideological landmines *everywhere*. In this environment, many Christians are conflicted and afraid of sharing their faith.
- I think two of the biggest reasons we're hesitant to share our faith in this challenging landscape is that we think we have to be an "expert" and we think we have to "close the deal." We look at pastors, evangelists, theologians, "the professionals," and think, "*They're ready!* They're the experts, they must be rock stars and bringing people to Christ."
 - I can't speak to those other titles, but let me tell you the truth about pastors. *We're just like you*.
- Here's my journey: God began to work powerfully in my life as a teenager and I started feeling a calling to devote my life to ministry. I wrestled with this for a while and eventually said, "yes," to begin the journey of becoming a pastor. I was a reluctant leader.
 - The process for becoming ordained is a little different for each denomination; in the United Methodist Church, it's a pretty lengthy process. I first accepted the call to ministry when I was 16-years-old and, believe it or not, today at 31-years-old, I am just now heading towards the finish line of becoming a fully ordained Elder in the UMC. If all goes as planned and I pass this final phase of examination that I'm in right now, I'll be 32 next year at Annual Conference when I'll be "fully ordained." *16 years!* I've been in this process for 16 years!
 - I've met with district committees and conference boards every year; I've worked with multiple mentors; I have a bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies; I completed a Masters in Divinity Degree in seminary with 96 credits—twice as many credits as most master's degrees; I've gone through the two required rounds of examination with our Board of Ordained Ministry where I had to complete about a hundred pages of written projects in each phase on theology, discipleship, preaching, and leadership along with over two hours of in-person interviews.
 - If you put together all the pages I've written on the Bible and theology and ministry for College classes, Seminary classes, sermons, Bible studies, and ordination projects in the last 15 years, I'd probably have a multi-volume work at this point! (Not necessarily anything that people would want to buy, but still...)

- You probably think I'm showing off at this point. Actually, I'm just trying to set the stage to show you how messed up I am. Because, you would look at all of that training and study and experience, and you would think that if there is anyone who would be an "expert" or who has "mastered" the art of sharing faith, it would be a pastor like me, right? *Wrong*.
- I am just like you. After all this time, all this training and experience, I am still *nervous* about sharing my faith with someone who doesn't go to my church, who doesn't believe what I believe. Sure, I've learned a lot and grown a lot. I can bring some nuance and refinement and depth to the conversation, even some learned skills—but I'm still afraid.
- The point I want you to catch is that, if you're waiting until that moment when you're "ready" to start sharing your faith with people who don't know Jesus—if you're waiting for just a little more knowledge, a little more training, a little more confidence—you'll never be "ready."
- What are we actually waiting for? Are we waiting until conditions are clearer, until the weather is a little calmer out there? Are we waiting until we don't feel nervous? Are we waiting until we "feel like it"? Are we waiting until we've outsmarted every possible argument so we can be sure to avoid embarrassment?
- I've known people who just became Christians who started bringing their friends to church and sharing about Christ. And I've known people who have been church-goers all their lives and not a single person in their sphere of influence knew that they were a Christian.
- **Make them ask "Why?"**
- When I think of people who are good at evangelism, I think of our friend, Hannah. She was a college student at the University of Maryland when I pastored in Halifax. She got involved with the Cru program there (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) and became so captivated by the call of Christ to make disciples among the nations that after graduation, she went into full-time mission work. She's now spent many of the years of her young-adult life sharing the Gospel with college students in East Asia.
- Emily and I have the privilege of supporting her ministry, and we've gotten to hear about the challenges of evangelism in her context. We get to hear how she experienced training with Cru in ways to authentically engage nonbelievers in conversations about the Gospel. She's shown me tools they use to open up talks about God and the life of Christ. She's shared about overcoming her shyness to make connections with new people and stories of the small groups where non-Christians came to accept Christ in the context of biblical community. (By the way, if you're interested in supporting Hannah or just hearing her stories, just let me know and I'll get you in touch, I know she loves to make new connections. Her ministry is totally funded by support and I can tell you, it is a worthy Kingdom investment.)
- When I think of sharing my faith, I often think of what Hannah does and I'm blessed and inspired and *challenged*. I think to myself, "wow, that's hard, and I don't do that enough." And I believe that what she is doing is a wonderful ministry in the Kingdom; I wish every Christian would have the basic training she has at how to start faith conversations, how to engage people with the Gospel, how to form relationships and walk with them in their spiritual journeys.
- But I also wonder if we limit our ability to share our faith by thinking that *this is the only way you share your faith*.
- When we hear, "evangelism" we automatically think about engaging someone in the battle ground of words and ideas and philosophies in an attempt to convince them to believe what we believe. This is one aspect of it, yes. But I think God's more fundamental strategy and starting point for us is this:
 - to create communities of apprentices of Jesus throughout the world, whose shared life together and ordinary lives in the world have such a different, refreshing quality that outsiders look at us and think, "I want what they have," and they begin to ask, "*Why?*"
- 1 Peter 3:15 says, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,*" (1 Pet. 3:15). Have you heard this verse before? It's a pretty common passage to quote when you're talking about sharing your faith. But there's something about this verse that I've never noticed until now:

- Peter makes a pretty big assumption about the believers he's writing to here. Do you see it? *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."* Peter assumes that people are going to ask Christians, *"Why are you like this? Why do you live like that? Where does all this hope come from?"*
- When is the last time someone asked you, "Why are you so full of hope? Why is your attitude so different from everyone else? Why did react like that? Why did you do this?"
- Peter is telling Christians to live lives that are so full of hope that their neighbors begin to ask "why?" His strategy is simply, *"Make them ask why."*
- We falsely believe that evangelism is only for *certain people*—it's just for the Pastor David's and the Hannah's. The truth is, we are all *sharing our faith every day* by the way we live—for better or for worse.
 - Instead of thinking of sharing your faith in terms of convincing someone else to believe what you believe, just start living the way Jesus calls you to live!
 - Put your attention into being an apprentice of Jesus. Live like Romans 12 says: *reject evil; cling to good; love others; honor one another above yourself; serve the Lord with zeal; be joyful in hope and patient in affliction; share with those who are in need; practice hospitality; bless those who persecute you; live in harmony; reject pride and spend time with people who have nothing to offer you in return; repay evil with good; live in peace as much as is possible.* Live the way of Christ, and someone will eventually, "Why?" Or better yet, *"How do I get what you have?"*
 - That's the most fundamental way we share our faith: by living it, living lives of hope in this world.
- **Where is your Hope?**
 - Peter said, *be ready to share the reason for the hope you have.* If you want to get better at sharing your faith is this, start by asking yourself: *What are you putting your hope in? What hope are your living for?*
 - If you deepest hope is in the next election, the next supreme court decision, the next pay check, the next child, the next relationship, the next vacation, the next NFL season, the next glass of wine—you're going to ride the waves like everyone else. These things might be good, but they're not what we place our ultimate hope in.
 - Christians are people who live by the *Hope* of the Gospel. We are the *Hopeful Community*. *Get them to ask why.* Live *from* the hope that God is making all things new, that Jesus is coming back to restore all things, that the resurrection is *real*—then faith and love will pour out of your life and someone will want to ask how to get that.
 - It's like Colossians 1 says, *"...we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven...the true message of the Gospel..."* Faith and love spring from the *hope* of the Gospel.
 - The faith and love of the Christian life flow from our *hope* of what's to come. One author said that Christians are people whose roots are in the future, and branches are in the present.
 - In other words, our source of life and strength as Christians is drawn the glorious hope of what's to come, but it bears fruit in the present as we live lives of faith that point to that future.
 - Let me just summarize and restate this with three questions for you as we close. I really want you to think about this:
 - First: *Are you afraid of sharing your faith? Why?*
 - Second: *Where are you putting your ultimate hope right now? Really?*
 - Third: *Who in your life is not a believer, but walks closely with you enough that they might begin to ask, why? Would you commit to praying for them and asking God to show you the next step?*
 - Let's be a community of such *hope* in the Gospel that people ask *why*. Amen.