

## **“Deep, Beautiful, Fearless”**

*Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21; Revelation 2:1-7; Luke 10:1-24*

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Our sermon for today is something many of you have heard before. I first preached this message in 2012 to raise a call for a new focus and momentum in our congregation. We're in a very different place now than we were then. That was before Five Loaf House: since then, this congregation has answered the call by taking risky and costly steps to reach out in love to our community. That was before the many funerals we performed over the last few years: since then, this congregation has answered the call by showing deep, fearless love toward those in grief. We've been through a lot, and we've come a long way.

But today we begin to renew that call, and we will continue to renew that call in the coming weeks as we journey through the season of Lent. Lent is a time of examination and preparation in anticipation of the cross and resurrection of Christ. We renew the call to the unique commitment of life in this congregation of the church because it's time. We renew the call because we still believe that God has more for us, that our best days as a congregation are yet to come. This year is the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of this church, believe it or not, and God has done many great things in those years. But we read two passages of Scripture, separated from one another by several decades, that sketch out the life of the church at Ephesus: they started out so well, but somehow, probably gradually, lost their first love. It's a sad story, and it's a story that I do not believe will be told about Pocono Lake Wesleyan Church. God has done great things, but He is not yet finished.

We have some challenges ahead of us. We have to continually think about how we do ministry unless we want it said of us that we started well but stumbled in the end; that we were a beautiful church when we were young, but we lost our first love as we aged. The world is changing, and multitudes around us are dying in their sin, not knowing the hope of Christ. Who are we called to be in this place and time?

Many times when churches come to this point they will choose one of two options. Some churches will conclude that we are a friendly church, and what we have to offer the world is that we love one another; we have wonderful fellowship. And so they double down on their fellowship, and sometimes that can result in churches that tighten their holy huddle. We're such a loving church that we start to focus on our love for one another, and what's wrong with those sinners out there who aren't attracted to how much we love one another? And so these churches basically stay the same and blame their decline on the sinners who aren't coming, and over time they can come to define their success as a church by how much they stay the same. It becomes a mark of pride that they're small, because it means that they aren't sellouts like some other churches.

The other direction that churches tend to go is to start gearing their church toward what will appeal to outsiders, and in a lot of cases they pride themselves on how much and how quickly they've changed. Instead of focusing on how much they love one another, they'll double down on love for sinners. We'll start programs left and right to try to appeal to every possible demographic we can. It views church like a business that has to sell its product to consumers, and forming people into the image of Christ gets replaced with consumers choosing between what they like and don't like.

I don't think that either of those necessarily counts as "success" for a church, and I don't think either one would be a good fit for our congregation. Just like different people have their own personalities, churches have their own personalities, too, and we can't just adopt some other church's model for ministry. So what does "success" look like for Pocono Lake Wesleyan Church? If our best days are yet to come, what will they look like, and how will we get there? Well, we could go with the easy answer and say that we want to grow, so we will be a "success" if we add more people. But that's not exactly what the mission of the church is. We are called to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, to proclaim that God is with us. That's really all we have to offer the world: not programs, not buildings, not holy people or impressive people; the only thing we have to offer is the power and the presence of the living God.

But here's the thing: we don't control God. We can't *make* God do anything, whether it's giving us a bigger church or a bigger impact or whatever. We don't control God. And while we're at it, we don't control anyone else, either. We can't *make* people come to church. And of those who *do* come to church, we can't even really *make* them better followers of Jesus. It's one of those basic facts you give someone when you're doing marriage counseling: you can't change anyone else; the only person you can change is you. We as a church, every single one of us, need to become better disciples of Jesus Christ, and as we do so, we will prepare the way for others to become better disciples. We can't make God plant the seeds or grow the plants, but we can prepare the soil. We can make the conditions right for God to do an amazing thing.

And as we've thought about what conditions we ought to cultivate in ourselves and in our church, there are lots of good, biblical options to choose from – like maybe the fruit of the Spirit – but we've summarized them into three virtues, virtues that I want for myself and I want for this church. These are three virtues that I hope each one of us would want, and I hope we can agree that if our church is characterized by these three things, we will be genuinely better than we were yesterday. We don't claim that each one of these comes from one specific Bible verse, but I think they're still very biblical virtues for the people of God, and each one of them runs very much counter to the values of our age. These three virtues are going to frame what we talk about during this Lent, so if you hear me talking about these and your response is "no, thanks," I'd really encourage you to find a church that's going to cater to your apathy, because this one won't.

First of all, I want *deep* people in this church, because that's what I want for myself. The world doesn't have time for depth; you're encouraged to change channels as fast as you can and check Facebook fifty times a day and never stop and focus on any one thing for more than thirty minutes. The world wants you to be shallow, but God wants us to grow deep roots. What does it mean to be a deep person? Deep people are able to feed themselves. They don't need to be consumers of whatever the world gives them, because they can produce what they need for themselves. Deep people are curious and growing, people who want to learn and enjoy the thrill of discovery. Deep people ask questions and evaluate and wonder and explore more than they pronounce answers and make conclusions. Deep people tend to listen more and talk less, and when they do speak, they're able to use their words to bring light where it is needed, peace where it is needed, and fire where it is needed. Being deep has more to do with being wise than it does with being smart. Like those disciples Jesus sent out who received a revelation of who God is, deep people know something others don't. Deep people have a sense of perspective, so they get worked up about the things that deserve it – like whether a person is suffering and going to hell – and they don't get worked up over the things that

don't deserve it – like what color the paint is on the sanctuary's walls. Deep people tend to be humble people, and they often have the goal of setting others up for success rather than claiming success and comfort for themselves. I want *deep* people in this church, because that's what I want to be.

And second, I want *beautiful* people in this church, because that's what I want to be, too. That probably sounds a little odd; some of you are looking at the person next to you and thinking *beautiful* is a bit optimistic. But again, our world doesn't value true beauty. You may or may not realize that you almost never see a real human being in a magazine or on a billboard. Anything that might be even slightly imperfect is Photoshopped away, so that the people we see presented to us as models of human perfection are literally unreal and, in many cases, physically impossible. Even our models and celebrities are not beautiful enough for our culture.

The beauty I'm looking for in this church has nothing to do with physical perfection. I hope you know what I'm talking about; I hope you've had the privilege of knowing some of the world's few truly beautiful people, because it's a beauty that feels more than you see. Beautiful people get that way as a result of God's work in them, like when God produces the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. That's a beautiful person. It's a beauty that comes from receiving grace and being grateful for it: beautiful people know that they have God's forgiveness and love, and it changes them. Beautiful people are loving and generous and gracious. In many cases, the most beautiful people you meet have, at some point in their lives, suffered greatly, but have been healed and have overcome their bitterness and have used their suffering as a means to grow closer to God. Beautiful people, therefore, are wounded healers, forgiven forgivers, grace-filled grace-givers. I want beautiful people in this church, because that's what I want to be.

And third, I want *fearless* people in this church, because that's what I want to be. Again, this is a virtue that our culture does not value. Fear is a powerful motivator, and politicians and advertisers know it. Making you afraid of what might happen or what you might lose is a tried and true method for getting your vote, your support, or your money. Fearful people are compliant people, but fearless people are dangerous. Our fearlessness begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and ends with us engaging in fearless mission. We have a reason to be fearless, because we serve a God who is almighty, who has defeated death through the work of Christ, and who has given us hope of resurrection. We have the examples of generations of martyrs of the church, those who suffered terrible scars and death in the name of Jesus. I hope that we can be so blessed to suffer for Christ. There are Christians around the world right now who risk their belongings, their livelihoods, their families, their comfort, and their lives to worship Jesus. If Jesus has defeated sin and death and hell, if He has been enthroned as Lord over all creation, and if He has redeemed suffering, what do we have to fear?

Jesus sent out those seventy-two disciples to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, and they went out fearlessly, and Jesus said that their faithfulness dethroned Satan. That's what I want. I want the devil to have us on his hit list because we're so fearless in challenging his strongholds. I want him to fear us so much that he sends us his worst, because we won't be shaken by suffering or threats, because our God is stronger. I want us to be fearless in hospitality, in love, in generosity, in getting down into the muck and embracing the unlovable people the world has cast out. I want us to never be afraid of going out in mission because it might hurt – it might! – or because it might not work – it might not! – or because it might cost us in money or resources – it might! I want us to be

fearless in trusting the promises of God in healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted and setting free the oppressed and miraculously transforming lives.

I want every single one of us in this church, without exception, to accept the challenge of becoming a deep, beautiful, fearless person by the grace of God. And if you won't, please make room for someone who will. Some of you are probably thinking that this message doesn't apply to you because you're too old and don't have the energy and can't change. Or you're too young and don't have the wisdom. Or you're too busy and don't have the time. Excuses don't matter to God. I don't want to hear that old people cannot change; that's just an excuse. It might be harder to grow, but our God is greater. Old folks have a place of special honor in the Bible because of their wisdom, so there is a place for you in this. If you think you're too old and tired to get involved in mission, then your job is to set up the next generation for success through prayer, encouragement, sharing your experience, and letting go when it's needed. Young people are specially blessed by Jesus; there is a place for you in this, too. There is no one who cannot grow, and if you refuse to grow, that is your choice.

So what do we do? Obviously we can't just wish ourselves deep, beautiful, and fearless overnight. How do we go about this? I'm sure I'm not the first person to notice this, but if you've ever done any gardening or yard work, you've probably noticed that it takes effort to grow the plants you want to grow, but it doesn't take any effort at all to grow weeds. Becoming a deep, beautiful, fearless person begins by learning to feed and maintain your body, soul, and mind. We do it through exercise, putting good things in, keeping bad stuff out, and practicing discipline. It comes down to each one of us taking responsibility for our own spiritual growth and health. We're going to be working on this for a while; very little will happen overnight. We're going to explore different methods of preparing the soil for growth over the next couple of months. You're going to hear about a *lot* of different spiritual practices, but try not to get overwhelmed. Don't try to completely change your life all at once, because it won't work. Instead, keep listening over the next few weeks for one or two things you might implement in your life to help foster growth in the right direction, and we'll try to keep things pretty concrete to help you think of what specifically you can do.

To get us heading in the right direction, first of all think of one spiritual victory in your life, because I want us to recognize that God is already at work in each of us. Your victory might be that you dragged yourself to church today, or it might be that God chased a dozen demons out of you. It might be something from last week or it might have been fifty years ago. Whatever it is, stop and think of one victory in your life. And then, either today or over the course of this Lenten season, think of one small, specific goal you would like God's help in accomplishing. It might be to pray for five minutes once a day, or it might be to pray for five hours a day. Whatever it is, think and pray about one incremental step you would like to make your goal to become a deep, beautiful, fearless person of God.



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