

“Deep, Beautiful, Fearless”

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

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

There is a sad story embedded in the New Testament. Like most sad stories, it begins so well. It's the story of a church, a church full of life and promise and the power of God. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church at Ephesus that is one of the most beautiful letters in the Bible. He cared deeply about this church. He had invested a lot in this congregation, and he had seen them bear fruit. This was a church that took a stand against the corruption in their city, suffered for it, but continued to grow and spread the gospel and plant other churches in their area. In Ephesians 3, Paul's prayer for them is “that out of God's glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge —that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” It was a beautiful beginning.

But that is not the last word in the Bible about the church at Ephesus. Just a few decades later, the book of Revelation records Jesus' words to the Ephesians: “I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” The church that started so well, that ran such a good race, stumbled toward the end and was in danger of failing.

It is tragic that this is the last word in the Bible about the Ephesian church. It would be so much better if those two messages were reversed, if they started out poorly but gained momentum as time passed, so that the last word we hear about that church is that in spite of their humble beginnings, they are challenging the gates of hell and nurturing new believers and new congregations. That would be triumph rather than a sad story. Sadly, too many churches through the ages have failed to heed the warning of the church at Ephesus. They have lost their first love, rather than continuing to build higher on their foundation, growing deeper, and gaining momentum.

What about us? What will the last word about Pocono Lake Wesleyan Church be? The end of our first century as a congregation is not that far down the road, and we have started well. God has done powerful things in this church, and we have so much to be grateful for. But what will the next word be? The temptation is always to focus on God's power in the past, so that we are forever looking backward, and the result is a church whose best days are over. We would forsake our first love because it would be a thing of the past.

The alternative is so much better. The reality is that God is not done here. Our best days are not in the past, they are yet to come. We have every reason to look forward eagerly to what God will do in and through this church, because as great as our past has been, our future is even better. As good as the first words about Pocono Lake Wesleyan have been, my prayer is that the last words spoken about us will be even better. We will not be a sad story. Our best days are yet to come.

* * *

Pastor Carey and I are always talking and thinking and praying about what we are here to do and where we perceive God is calling us as a church, and as we've been thinking about this in recent times, one of the ideas that we keep coming back to is that we want a church that believes and acts like its best days are yet to come. We have a great heritage here with a lot to celebrate, but I firmly believe that this church's glory days are not in the past, they are in our future. Of course, I have to believe that, because if I thought that our glory days are long gone, that would mean that we might as well pack up and go home, because we're just waiting to die. We would just be coasting on the momentum of the past, and that's no way for a church to live.

The reality is that God is not done here, and in fact I think He is just getting started. As I talk with different people, both longtime members and new visitors, over and over I hear from people who have a sense that God is doing something special in this church. I am convinced that our glory days are yet to come. But that reality has to be balanced with a few other realities.

Maybe the biggest and most obvious reality is that the world is changing faster than it ever has before, and it's not likely to slow down any time soon. Part of that has to do with a society that is getting more diverse and in some cases more fractured: the economic divide between the rich and poor is getting wider, more and more different ethnic groups are coming into closer contact with one another, and we can become increasingly distracted, busy, and isolated as technology becomes a larger part of our lives. The practical upshot is that we as a church cannot cater to only a certain type of person, because our culture is not monolithic and we're faced with many, many different types of people, and they generally have less and less time to focus on church.

Along with the reality of change is another reality: the church cannot expect to have the privileged position in our society that it once had. Our influence is declining. We can't assume that people will give the church the benefit of the doubt. Our society is not in agreement over whether the church is a good thing or not, and there is less and less clarity about why we're here. It doesn't matter whether we like this change or not; it's the way it is. This means that we cannot sit within the four walls of our church building and wait for people to come to us. I looked quickly through a few records and found out that the population of Monroe County has increased by almost 250% in the last thirty years. But in that same time period, and as far as I can tell for most of our church's history, our Sunday morning worship attendance has stayed basically the same. What that actually means is that we as a church are losing influence proportionally to the growth in our area. We're not holding our own; proportionally we are shrinking. The same is true of the vast majority of other churches in our country, if they're not declining outright. Think about what that means: Satan is gaining converts faster than we are; people are dying and going to hell for eternity all around us every day.

We have some challenges ahead of us. We have to reconsider 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. And yet in spite of the stark realities I have just outlined, I say to you again that I firmly believe our best days are yet to come.

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 I've been asking myself lately what "success" looks 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 I'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 I've summarized them into three 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. I'm not going to 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 I think each one of them runs very much counter to the values of our age. These three virtues are going to frame an awful lot of what we talk about over the next year, 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. Earlier this year, it made the news when Cate Blanchett, an incredibly beautiful movie star, appeared on a magazine cover without being Photoshopped; even Cate Blanchett isn't 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 feel 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. Can I be honest with you? One of the challenges that this church must face is that we need to stop being afraid of the future. We honor the past, we value the past, we learn from the past, but we cannot live there and we cannot be bound by the past if we are going to be fearless as a church. There's too much work to do, so let's set aside our fear and get to it.

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. I don't care about your excuses. 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 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.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)