

A Beautiful Community

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Date: 02 May 2021

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- [0 : 01] This morning, this morning we're going to talk about a beautiful community, kids. I know that you probably come from a family that you love. We're going to talk about the greatest family, the greatest family that has ever been, as we talk about a beautiful community.
- The United States, many of you know this, the United States is increasingly becoming what we refer to as a majority-minority country, meaning that minorities make up more than 50% of the population.
- We continue moving further and further in that direction. And it raises lots of questions and lots of challenges for how a country with such diversity can hold together.
- And the fact is that there may have never been a society in history that is more culturally, religiously, and politically diverse as the United States is today.
- What we need to understand is that our degree of diversity is historically very rare. And we are struggling to hold things together in our society. We're deeply divided along the lines of politics and race and class and wealth and religion.
- [1 : 17] Our society is increasingly fragmenting into smaller and smaller factions. And there are very few models out there for how such a diverse community can sustain itself.
- But here's what's humbling. History is filled with examples of failure of countries that weren't able to do that. The only other society in history that comes close to the U.S. in terms of diversity is probably the Roman Empire.
- And even as the Roman Empire crumbled, what we see in history is that there was a community that emerged from this crumbling empire.
- And this community was diverse beyond anything that had been seen before in the world. And of course, this new community that emerged from the ashes of Rome was the Christian church.
- And in Acts chapter 2, verses 42 to 47, we catch our first glimpse of this newly formed community, the newly formed church.
- [2 : 26] And this is a place where Luke sort of pauses in his telling of history. He zooms out and he just gives us a summary of life in the early church. And it's a very famous passage for that reason.
- And so as we look at this very famous passage, we're wanting to know how to be the same kind of church in a highly diverse city like Washington, D.C.
- If they could do this in Rome, what would it look like for us to be a similar kind of community in Washington, D.C.? And this will break out into two parts.
- First, we're going to look at this beautiful community briefly. What made it so beautiful? And then two, we're going to look at two ways that we can go about building a beautiful community like we see in Acts.
- Two opposite ways that we might go about trying to build such a community here and now. So let's pray and then we'll dive into God's Word. Lord, we thank You for Your Word and we thank You for the fact that it has a power all its own.

[3 : 30] That You say in Your Word that when You send Your Word out, it never returns to You empty and void and unable to accomplish what You intend, but rather it always accomplishes what You intend.

And so, Lord, we know as we open Your Word that there is a divine intentionality behind this time, that there are things that You want to do in us and through us, and You're going to do that through Your Word.

And so, we pray that You would do Your work through Your Word for Your glory, Lord. In Your Son's name, amen. So, first of all, the beautiful community. This is a very famous passage and for very good reason.

At Pentecost, for those who were here last week, we saw that the apostles received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is poured out in fulfillment of all of these Old Testament promises.

And part of what happens as a result of that is the apostles begin to preach the gospel in many different languages. And all of these people are gathered together in Jerusalem, all of these Jews from different cultures and who speak different languages, different ways of life.

[4 : 39] And they all miraculously begin to hear the gospel being preached in their own language. And Scripture tells us, this is where we left off last week, that there were about 3,000 people who heard this message.

They were cut to the heart. They said, what should we do? And the apostles said, you need to repent and be baptized and become part of this new community of Jesus followers. And that's what happened.

And so, we have the establishment of the very first ever Christian church. And over the next couple of hundred years, the church experienced extraordinary exponential growth.

Kenneth Scott LaDourette, the Yale historian, he's a great church historian, writes, here's what he says. This is kind of his historic, one of the big quandaries in history.

Why among all the many cults and philosophies which competed in the Greco-Roman world, and in spite of more severe opposition, in other words, all these religions and philosophies, probably the worst persecution at that period of time came upon the Christians.

[5 : 45] And he says, why in spite of all of this, did Christianity outstrip them all? Why did Christianity grow more quickly? And he says, in significant part, Christianity's success is to be found in its inclusiveness.

That's a really big word by today's standards. We're all talking about inclusiveness. But he says, Christianity's success is to be found in its inclusiveness. More than any of its competitors, it attracted all races and classes.

Christianity gloried in its appeal to Jew and Gentile, to Greek and barbarian. Christianity drew the lowly and unlettered multitude, yet Christianity also developed its own philosophy, which commanded the respect of many of the learned.

Christianity, too, was for both sexes, whereas at least two of its main rivals were primarily for men. The church welcomed both rich and poor. No other religious community, therefore, took in so many groups and strata of society.

I mean, you read that description and you think, this is the kind of community that diversity and inclusion officers dream about when they go to sleep at night. This is the kind of community that everybody wants in modern times.

[7 : 01] And when we call this a beautiful community, to come back to what I said to you at the beginning, kids, as great as your family is, imagine a kind of family where you can enter into this family even if you weren't born, or even if you weren't in any way biologically related to anybody in this family.

You could enter into this family, and you could come in speaking any language from any walk of life, with any cultural or religious background. You could be rich or poor, educated or uneducated.

You could be from any ethnic background, and you could come in, and this family would become your family. And you would be received as a family member. And all of a sudden, you would have thousands of brothers and sisters who would receive you in.

And that's what made this community a beautiful community. It was the kind of community, particularly, that people in society who didn't have families, who didn't fit into the normal family structure, for the first time ever they could have a family.

That's what made this community beautiful. And so it raises the question, how do we go about building a beautiful community like this in our day and age? And what we're going to see are two basic approaches that people take.

[8 : 21] The first approach is what you might think of as the outside-in approach to building the beautiful community. These days, nearly everyone believes in ideas like universal human rights and justice and equality.

Most everybody you talk to believes that racism is wrong. Most everybody we talk to believes that it's wrong for the strong to trample the weak. You meet very few people who will openly admit that they disagree with that.

Most everybody believes that we should care for the poor and the marginalized. So we live in a society filled with people who believe these things. And the story that is being told in popular culture is that all of those values came from the Enlightenment.

And the idea that a lot of people have is that before the Enlightenment, there was a lot of ignorance and darkness and oppression. And the Enlightenment came and human beings began to wake up.

And all of these values sprang out of that kind of awakening. And as a result, in kind of popular culture, the Enlightenment is seen as the kind of beacon for these values.

[9 : 35] And the Christian church is seen as one of the great enemies of these things. Most people out on the street who believe in these values would point to the Enlightenment as their source.

And they would say, you know, the Christian church is a source of oppression. The Christian church is a source of racism and bigotry and patriarchy and all other forms of oppression.

And so in many ways, the modern secular progressive project is an attempt to liberate our society from the oppressive stranglehold of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

And any of you who are in university, undergrad, grad school, this is a common narrative that you'll encounter, especially in places like that. And so the mission is, in order to build a more just, equitable, and inclusive world, we have to liberate society from the stranglehold of old, dead religions like Christianity.

And this is an approach that relies heavily not on religion, but it relies heavily on government involvement, on education, on legislation and policy, and on social pressure to accomplish its goals.

[10 : 52] You know, if we're going to build this kind of beautiful community and transform our cities into these kind of beautiful communities, it's going to take the government and education and policy and social pressure, all of these things, to liberate our society to become more just, equitable, and inclusive.

And the reason that I would call this the outside-in approach is because it focuses entirely on external factors. It's an approach that says, with enough government oversight and education and legislation, we can accomplish these goals, and then sooner or later, people's hearts will follow.

But we establish it externally, we get it into the policy, we get it into the warp and the woof of daily life, and then people's hearts will follow. And certainly, let me say this, you can do a lot through legislation.

Some of you work on policy, very important. You can do a lot if you get the right leaders in government. You can do a lot through education. All of these things are extremely important.

But here's the point we want to make. At the end of the day, this approach, no matter how well intended it might be, is never going to produce the kind of beautiful community that we read about in Acts chapter 2.

[12 : 08] And you ask, well, why not? And the answer is this. And this is what we're going to spend the rest of our time on. Because you cannot have the fruit of a tree without the roots of that tree.

You cannot have the fruit of a tree without the roots of that tree. There's an overwhelming amount of scholarship. Scholars like Brian Tierney at Cornell or Kyle Harper, I think he's at Oklahoma, who clearly show how all of our modern values around universal human rights and justice and equality, those did not come from the Enlightenment.

They came straight out of Christianity and its influence up through the Middle Ages. So, Jürgen Habermas writes this. He says, universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom, a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, democracy.

He says all of that is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. That's where we gained these ideas.

And the thing that we need to understand about the early church is, the early church was wildly diverse before diversity was a thing. And that's what's so impressive about this community.

[13 : 44] These days, organizations all around the country are scrambling for more diversity. For those of you who work, I guarantee you, your organization's leadership is scrambling to build diversity, because diversity is a very high value in today's world.

What we need to understand is we've got to get in the minds of the Greco-Roman world. This was not a value in ancient Rome. It wasn't a value at all. Right? Nobody cared about diversity and inclusion and equity.

One of the ways we know that is because in Rome, one in three people would have been a slave. Right? Nobody cared about these values in the ancient world. This was a culture that was absolutely obsessed with strength and honor.

That's what it's like to be a Roman in ancient times. It was all about your personal strength, and it was all about your honor. And this was more of an honor-shame culture than we realize.

And their entire morality, like why do you do the right thing in ancient Rome? Their entire morality was driven by what philosophers call a self-regarding ethic. I do the right thing because that's what a strong person would do.

[15 : 02] I do the right thing because that's the honorable thing to do. I gain honor and I gain glory for myself and my family by doing the right thing in society.

It's a self-regarding ethic. So, of course, in a society that values strength and honor and glory, of course the strong are going to trample the weak.

If you are strong enough to trample other people, that brings you honor and glory. And that's the way the world should be. You say, well, how could a third of the community have been slaves?

Right? That's exactly what many people thought should happen in society. You have the strong trampling and ruling over the weak. That's what we should have. And all of a sudden, in a community like this, here comes another community that embodies a completely different ethic.

What you might call an other-regarding ethic. This is something the world hadn't seen before. Because we're not just talking about Rome. All of the ancient societies operated this way.

[16 : 05] It's about strength and glory and honor. But you have an ethic in this Christian community that's defined not by glory, but by humility.

Right? Not by strength, but by love. Not by power, but by self-sacrifice. It's a radically different ethic.

An other-regarding ethic. And that is why historians say the church in the early days was so diverse. Roman society was a place where the strong trampled the weak.

But in the church, people found a community where they were treated with dignity. Where they were treated as equals. Where they received the same rights and the same privileges as everyone else.

You could be out in Roman society, and there were very few people of privilege, and there were a whole lot of people that got trampled on. But you could come into the church, and everybody had the same rights.

[17 : 07] Everybody had the same privileges. And this is why it grew. And this other-regarding ethic, you need to understand, began to work its way up through history. Right?

So we move from the Middle Ages, right? And then as history progresses, we have Christian monks interacting with pagan Anglo-Saxons. Right? And the pagan Anglo-Saxons had this self-regarding ethic of strength and honor and power.

And the Christian monks had this other-regarding ethic of humility and love and self-sacrifice. And they began to interact, and guess what happened? Over time, the Christian monks influenced the pagan Anglo-Saxons more and more and more until this other-regarding ethic took hold firmly in the West.

And then as history began to progress even more, this other-regarding ethic began to shape the Western imagination as a whole. And so you fast-forward to today, we could pause the service right now, I could say, go out on the street, the first person you find, I want you to ask them, chances are the first person you find, no matter which direction you go, is going to believe in universal human rights, justice, diversity, equality, freedom.

Nobody really in ancient Rome would have affirmed these as high-priority values. Everybody on the street would today. Why? It's because of the influence of the church and the Christian tradition on Western imagination.

[18 : 36] The Enlightenment did not produce these values. It cherry-picked these values off of the Christian tradition, off of the tree of Christianity.

And now we live in a society that unabashedly wants the fruit, but without the roots. Now somebody might be hearing this and say, okay, well, great.

Let's assume that's true. Who cares? Who cares? Now we have the values. Now everybody understands these things matter. We all agree. We'll give you the credit.

But why do we still need the church? Right? Can't we take it from here? Can't we do this through government and legislation and policy and education? Can't we take it from here and make it happen?

The answer is no. Why? Because all of these values in our secular progressive society are like cut flowers.

[19 : 39] Right? You clip some flowers and you put them in a vase on the dining room table of the secular humanist progressive house. And they look really great for a while.

They brighten up the room. Everybody who comes in the door says, man, I really love that. I want to be a part of it. But over time, they're going to wither and die. Why? Because they're cut flowers. They're not rooted in any source of life.

And so eventually, they're going to fade and die. We all remember back in 2006, the story of the Amish community at Nickel Mines when a man came into a schoolhouse, opened fire, took the lives of five young girls, and then took his own life.

And what most people remember about that is the fact that within hours, within hours of that terrible tragedy, the Amish community was pouring out support for the family of the shooter.

Right? For his parents, for his immediate family, outpouring of support for the shooter's family. More than half the people who showed up at that guy's funeral were from the Amish community.

[20 : 56] An Amish spokesperson announced, on behalf of all of the families of the victims who were shot, we forgive this shooter. And people were all abuzz about this extraordinary act of forgiveness and grace.

And then, and I remember hearing Tim Keller talk about this and making this point, and I thought it was so fascinating. Within, you know, days of this happening, you have all the press starting to generate all these articles.

And they all said the same thing. This is what America is capable of. This is how great we as a nation can be. Look, when something like this happens, these are Americans at their best.

Look, look how we just stepped up and rose above this and go us. And there was a lot of kind of patting on the back of this is the best of what we have as Americans to offer the world.

Right? A few years after this, a book comes out called Amish Grace. It's written by three sociologists. One of the main points they make in that book is this.

[21 : 59] Not so fast. Not so fast. They say an act of forgiveness like this, what we see in the Amish community, this is an extraordinary example of an other-regarding ethic.

Of people who prioritize the good of the community over themselves. Of people who are steeped in a culture of forgiveness and self-sacrifice and self-denial.

Right? And what the authors of the book essentially say is this. Something like this is only possible if you are completely immersed in a tradition and a community that embodies these values of self-denial and sacrifice.

Right? And they say, we should not expect to see our country, our society, continue to form people in future generations that do this kind of thing.

In fact, it's going to become more and more and more rare to see this as a fruit of the American culture. Why, they say? Well, because the American culture doesn't embody values of self-sacrifice and self-denial and other-regarding ethic.

[23 : 07] They say increasingly what you see in our society is self-aggrandizement, self-promotion, right? Self-actualization. You know, the most important thing is me and my discovery and expression of myself in an unfettered way.

And they say, that kind of culture that is rife with a kind of hyper-consumerism, a hyper-individualism, that's not going to produce people who do this.

It's going to produce people who are filled with outrage and who cancel one another.

Right? And that's exactly what we're seeing. And culture, since that book came out, has only proven their point more and more and more.

So what we see in the Amish community, what we see in the early Christian church, what you're looking at there is the same fruit precisely because both of those communities have the same roots.

It's the same fruit because they have the same roots. And that leads us, finally, we're not going to spend as much time on this because it's a lot clearer, the only other option we have for building a beautiful community in Washington, D.C., in the world, is the inside-out approach.

[24 : 18] Not the outside-in approach, but the inside-out approach, meaning you start with the roots. Right? The community, and here's really the point, the community everybody wants, this beautiful community, the community everybody out there wants is only possible because of the man that no one wanted.

Because of the one that no one wanted. All right, Kenneth Scott Ladurett, in that same piece, he goes on to say, no other religious community took in so many groups and strata of society.

Here, the query must be raised, why did it appear in Christianity? Why the diversity? Why the inclusion? It is the uniqueness of Jesus which seems the only tenable explanation.

Without Jesus, Christianity would not have sprung into existence and from him and beliefs about him came its main dynamic. That's the only reason they were able to do what they did.

Because they had Jesus who had all the power. He had all the strength. He had all the glory. He had all the honor, more than any Roman could ever possibly imagine having.

[25 : 31] It was all his. But because of his profound love for human beings, even though we rejected him and despised him, he gave away his glory. He gave away his honor.

He gave away his power. He humbled himself, as Philippians says, and became in every way like a servant and slave for humanity. And then he sacrificed himself on the cross, taking the full weight of sin on himself.

And what you see in that is the ultimate act of self-love, of an other-centered ethic, an other-regarding ethic. And this was, I believe, the birth of this ethic in the world.

And when Christians realized that the God, that the central defining reality of existence, the God who made all of this, has this kind of heart, that radically transformed their hearts.

these are all people who grew up with this self-regarding glory, power, honor, ethic. What changed them so radically? It was not a class. It was not a class where somebody was telling them how they should think about people who were different from them.

[26 : 45] It was the God of the universe dying for them that radically reoriented their entire way of seeing themselves and everybody else around them. This is a spiritual transformation.

It's nothing less. You can't have the fruit without the roots. And Acts chapter 2, verses 42 through 47, shows us what a church looks like when it is deeply rooted in Jesus Christ and bearing this kind of fruit in the world.

And I want you to imagine Church of the Advent one year from now. Five years from now. Ten years from now. And as we look at this list of characteristics of the early church, we recognize that there's no church out there today that's going to fully live out all of these things.

This is sort of the archetype of what all churches want to be when they grow up. But what it does do for us is it sets us a kind of north star vision, ideal of what we hope to see our church become.

And it helps us understand the ways that we are maybe further along and the ways that we need to really grow. And it gives us a direction as a community. And so as we look at these characteristics, and I think that you can see them up on the screen, if we look at these characteristics, this would be my hope for Church of the Advent as we move forward into the sort of coming season of our life together.

[28 : 16] And we're drawing these all out of this passage in Acts, and I'm only going to just briefly hit on each one of them. This is what we see, and this is what a church like this looks like. First, I pray that we would be known as a place where there is always a constant emphasis on biblical teaching.

That there would be a sense in our church like there was in the early days that we are people who are devoted to the teachings of the apostles. And that's more important now than ever before because as N.T. Wright once said, without constant, lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture with their minds shaped by whichever social pressures are most persuasive.

So if you're not anchored in the teachings of the apostles, you will very quickly revert to the exact same way of thinking that everybody around you shares. That's the first thing.

The next thing that I hope and pray for our church is that we're a place that is known as having what you might think of as thick community. Thick community. Thin community as I see you once or twice a month, hey, how you doing?

We're not really involved. Thick community is a high degree of overlap, right? Between your church relationships and your neighborhood relationships and your work relationships and your Saturday recreational relationships and all of your kids know each other and the kids have a sense that they have maybe 10, 15 sets of spiritual parents in addition to their immediate parents, right?

[29 : 46] And that's what a thick community is. Right? And a thick community is absolutely vital because we live in a society right now, if you're a biblically faithful Christian and you're living in a place like Washington, D.C., then you're living in a cross-cultural environment.

And I actually think that we in some ways would have more in common with our neighbors if we lived in a Muslim country than we do living in Washington, D.C.

And so we need thick, interdependent, formative community where we have a high relational overlap across multiple spheres of life to be forming one another in line with Scripture.

The next mark would be that we are a church known for Eucharistic celebration, that that's the absolute center of our spiritual life because it's the meal that unites us to God, it unites us to one another, and it unites us to God's unfolding story of salvation history in the world.

And that that is the thing that we come back to again and again and again. That church is serious about the Eucharist. I pray that, number four, we are a church that is known as a praying church.

[31 : 00] It has been famously said that prayer is the engine room of the church. And if you really want to know the health of a church, do not look at its Sunday attendance, but look at how many people come to the midweek prayer meeting.

I'm not even sure we have a formal midweek prayer meeting. What I'm thankful for is that I know many of you are people of deep prayer. And I want to see that grow and grow and grow in our community.

Fifthly, that we would be known as a community of joyful praise and worship. Right? That we are filled with joy. That we are excited and eager to worship the Lord in our homes and together when we gather.

That we are known, number six, as a church that takes the ministry of the Holy Spirit very seriously. Right? That the Holy Spirit, that we are constantly seeking to see more and more and more of the work of the Spirit in our midst.

that we come and we gather together with a sense of awe. We recognize that we're in the presence of God and we have a sense of excited anticipation at what the Holy Spirit might do.

[32 : 14] That we are known as a community, number seven, that is marked by generous justice. You know, you see this, you see this ethic in the Acts 2.42 church that they're selling whatever they have to sell.

We know in later chapters that they're not all selling everything. There are people who have nice houses that the church can meet in and things like that. But the point is that when they see somebody in need, they enter into that need and if it requires selling something in order to help that person meet that need, then so be it.

This is a radical, generous justice that has been inspired by the generosity of Christ on the cross. Right? And so that we would be a church that is known for caring for those in our midst, for standing in solidarity with the suffering or the oppressed, to confronting injustice in our community.

That we would be known next as a church that is known for hospitality. That we're open, that we're welcoming, including to those people who come from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

that we are known next as a church of, who has a public faith. Right? These Christians were not in hiding. Even though persecution comes almost immediately.

[33 : 33] They were out in public. They were meeting together in the temple courts. People knew who they were. They saw them. They knew who was associated with this ragtag group. Right? And a lot of people suffered as a result of it.

That we would be openly and unapologetically Christian in this culture. That we would have a public faith and that we would know how to engage the issues of the day as Christians.

And that we'd be willing to have a voice in public discourse. And then lastly, that we would be church, that we would be a church that is known for our commitment to evangelism.

That we would pray for people to come to know Jesus. That we would be courageously committed to sharing the gospel. That we would be courageously praying that God might add daily to our numbers those who are being saved.

Now you look at this list and if you're like me, you sort of look at this list and you're like, well it kind of sounds like you want us to be Presbyterian and Baptist and Anglican and Pentecostal and maybe a little mainline progressive kind of all at the same time.

[34 : 35] Right? This isn't a very clear vision. And I would say, you know, maybe you're right. You have a point. But maybe the church of the future needs to look less like the denominations of today and more like the church that we see in Acts chapter 2.

Maybe that's the church of the future. And maybe when you give yourself to the leading of the Holy Spirit, maybe you fit less and less into existing categories.

Maybe you start to create new categories of what ministry looks like in the coming century. But in all honesty, I care less about what we look like and more about that no matter what, we are rooted in Jesus Christ, we are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and we are bearing fruit for God's glory.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your spirit. we have our visions and hopes and ideals, but we can do nothing without the root and we need Jesus Christ, the foundation of the church, to give us the life and vitality we need.

We read in your gospel lesson of your promise to send the helper, the Holy Spirit, and you've done that. And now I pray that in our rootedness in you and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we might become not the kind of church we want to be, but the kind of church that you would have us be in this particular time and place that we would bring you glory.

[36 : 09] In your son's name, amen.