

The Good and Beautiful Life
Gratitude
Colossians 3:12-17

We're having a conversation this month—you and I—about what makes a good and beautiful life. The kind of life that might fill up that yearning, incomplete place inside of us. The kind of life that might be our best and most important gift to the world. Here's a sentence that has captured me, from a book I've been reading as I've been getting ready for these sermons: "If the church of the twenty-first century will lay down its anger and frustration and instead joyfully sing the melody of Christ in the malls of meaninglessness, we can perhaps once again astonish a weary world with the beauty of [God's story].¹ The 'malls of meaninglessness'. Sounds a little like where we live, doesn't it?

In the paragraph from Colossians that you heard a moment ago, and that will be our text all month long, Paul lays out for one of those first century churches a sort of blueprint for what that life looks like. He lists all those qualities we would wish for ourselves: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience forgiveness. And then he stops, and his writing takes another form, as if this next thing is so important that it deserves a different kind of attention, a shorter sentence. "And be thankful people." Thankfulness, gratitude, has to be there, at the core of a good life. The life you want for yourself. The life that we, together, want to show the world is possible.

I recently heard a woman describe her discontentment with her life. It all feels so empty, she said. I'm tired of racing through every day, busy with the same things that seem like they're not getting me or my family anywhere other than into the next day of the same thing. One day, she said, she was getting her hair cut, and she noticed that the person next to her at the hairdresser was reading that book called *1000 Places to See Before You Die*.

She thought what we all probably all think when we hear that title: 'I'd like to go to all those places.' But then she asked herself, 'Why? Do I need to see those places before I die? Do I have to travel across the world to stand in front of sights that will *blind* me with their *magnificence* before I can feel like I've really lived?'²

She began to look more closely at her own life, to see if there wasn't beauty *here*, things she maybe hadn't paid attention to before. She began a list of the tiny, unremarkable moments that every day could knock her to her knees in wonder and gratitude if she just stopped to notice them. Simple things. The pleasure of jam dripping off the edge of a piece of toast. The sweet sound of her children saying their prayers. Rainbows—that amazingly, we've seen dozens of this winter!

¹ Briah Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World*, at xvii

² Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts*

Gradually, that practiced thankfulness began to change her life. It turned her face away from the parts of her life that discontented her, toward things that gave her joy. Things that had been there all along.

When I look around our life here at LAUMC, one of the things I am most grateful for, and one of the things that is, frankly, pretty unusual among the churches I know, is this church's commitment to keeping young people at the center of its life. Every church talks about wanting more young people. 'Youth are the future of the church!' people say. Yes, that's true. But if you want them to be the *future* of the church, you have to make youth the *present* of the church. The church has to offer young people a picture of what a good and beautiful life looks like for *them*, not their parents and grandparents. If young people are going to choose a life of faith for themselves, it has to be a life that makes sense for them, not for we who remember and wish for a time when things weren't so complicated or stressful or filled up with technology.

This church has had an extraordinary youth program. Some of you know that far better than I do. It has been led by people who have given their lives to loving young people. Cindy Golden, who has been on the staff of this church for 18 years. Carol Damonte, who celebrates her 37th anniversary here this year. They have built and sustained a program that has changed the lives of hundreds and hundreds of young people, sent many of them into their own work of ministry. They've loved kids whose parents came with them to church and a lot of kids who found their way here on their own. They've slept on the floor and driven 12-passenger vans and asked kids to put their phones away more times than they could begin to count.

For a long time, Cindy has known that when her own children were launched into adulthood, she and Bill wanted to move to Oregon. Several months ago, she let us know that that time was coming. And so, with the mixed feelings that change always brings, this coming August, we'll say good-bye to Cindy and send her off with our love and much gratitude.

That's how change happens sometimes—when people we love move or leave for some reason that makes sense for their lives. But that's not always the way change happens. Sometimes it happens without anyone moving at all. Some new possibility opens up, a door that you hadn't even noticed before cracks open, and suddenly the whole shape of the room changes.

Here's Carol Damonte, my friend, our Director of Youth Ministries.

"But that's not always the way change happens." as Pastor Kathi said.

"Sometimes it happens without anyone moving at all. Some new possibility



opens up, a door that you hadn't even noticed before cracks open, and suddenly the whole shape of the room changes. "

This is exactly what's happened to me...

A new possibility began walking alongside me...

The dream of a new ministry...

One that would bring together my passion for Youth, Faith and the Arts.

And as time passed I began to realize it was no longer walking with me...



it was waiting for me... on the other side of the door.

So while I share with you this morning, keep your eyes on the screens so you can understand more clearly through my images what this new ministry might look like.



It's funny, while talk of this emerging ministry may be new to you, to me it feels like an old friend because it's been growing and taking shape in me for about 2 ½ years. I think it was the transformative work I did as a Changemaker Fellow that gave me the courage to stop and really listen to what God was inviting me into.



I suppose, really, it was more than an invitation...it was a calling. One that challenged me, unraveled me, peeled back layers of fear inside of me, dared me to risk,



invited joy, creativity and curiosity in, and then said, "Let me tell you what's next."



It was in *that* moment I knew it was time for me to make a change, that there was more I was being called to do in my ministry.

A call like this, well, it doesn't happen often...

it isn't something to push aside or something to be taken for granted.

To honor this call, after much thought and prayer, I have decided to step down as Dir of Youth Ministries at the end of the summer. This doesn't mean I'll be leaving LAUMC...not at all.



I'll still be working here...directing Lightshine and Starfire choirs, leading Spiritual Pilgrimages, and singing in Creekside Worship band. But it does mean I won't be the Dir. of Youth Ministry anymore.

I'm guessing some of your heads are spinning right now and everything I said after, "I'll be stepping down" wasn't heard. So let me say those last few words again. I am NOT leaving LAUMC. I will continue to direct Lightshine and Starfire choirs, lead Spiritual Pilgrimages, and sing in Creekside Worship Band.

So what is it that I am being lead to?
You're seeing the signs of it on the screens right now.



For years, I have loved photography... but recently it has become a spiritual discipline that has deepened my faith in profound ways.



In this past year as a Changemaker Fellow



people have told me that my photographs help them to see something—



a different perspective, perhaps some beauty they hadn't been able to see for themselves.



If that's true, then I want to share this gift I've been given. So I've begun to imagine a ministry of arts that will bridge young people from our church with young people in the Mtn View area, the location our church has chosen

to expand its ministry in.

And what's it going to look like?



Well, we're hoping it will look similar to *Artists For Humanity*, an inspiring organization in Boston that combines the arts with a social entrepreneurship business model.



In an after-school and summer program, teen-agers from across a diversity of racial, economic and social backgrounds come to learn skills in the arts.



They're actually employed while creating commercially marketable artwork in photography, painting, video production,



graphic arts and music.

We have been in conversation with the founders of *AFH*, with the hope that we might replicate a faith-based model of their program in downtown Mountain View. I am excited to be the founding Artistic Director of this new Ministry at LAUMC.

I'm sure you already have questions about the details of what all of this will look like. I don't have all the answers yet, because this ministry is just beginning to come to life. But there is one thing I need you to know now... I would not be stepping down from youth ministries if I didn't know for certain that this was, and is, God's call for my life right now.

Kathi:

In the next few days, members and regular attenders of LAUMC will receive a letter in the mail that I hope will answer the questions you're no doubt already asking. I do want to tell you two more important pieces of this news now, though.

- We have already engaged a faculty member from Princeton Theological Seminary to consult with us on how to begin re-imagining youth ministry for the future, and to lead us through a nationwide search for a new leader for our youth programs. We know how critical this part of our ministry at LAUMC is, and we will hold that commitment.
- Both Carol and Dirk are planning to be here, continuing their work at this church, for another 8-10 years. Neither of them is going anywhere for long time.

In moments of change—and especially when it's hard to see into the future—it's gratitude that is our best and most useful link to the past. There's a lot ahead of us. Lots we could be afraid about. But also lots to look forward to. Let's not lose track of that gratitude thing. There is so, so much to be thankful for.