

Micah 6:6-8 “With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

[1] Seek justice, Love mercy, Walk humbly

Philippians 4:4-9

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! ⁵ Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. ^[a]

⁶ Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

⁸ And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. **Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.** ⁹ Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

[2] Think on these things: true, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise.

Matt 5

When Jesus ^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those **who mourn**, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are **the meek**, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who **hunger and thirst for righteousness**, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the **merciful**, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they will see God.

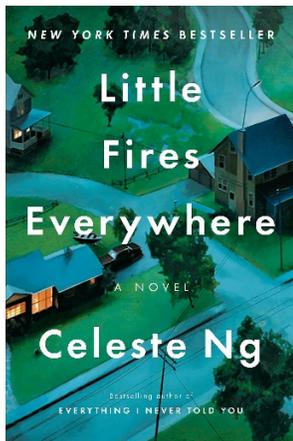
⁹ “Blessed are the **peacemakers**, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those **who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely ^[b] on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

[3] Learn from Christ’s teachings & ways; Internalize Christ’s character

Sermon: Little Fires Everywhere: The Church's Mission of bringing Hope, Justice, And Love.
September 12, 2021
Pastor Tracy



A New York Bestseller, Celeste Ng provides us a fantastic story about how some people play by the rules, others live more on the wild side, and what happens when the two worlds collide through family, art, poetry, tragedy, and suffering.

I love to read and occasionally binge-out on Netflix. One of the series I watched during our 1st Covid lockdown was “Little Fires Everywhere.” (I have since read the book, which was surprisingly not as good as the movie) Aside from having some great actresses like Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington, the movie was evocative, relatable, and showed how we give so much to the world, both in seen and behind-the-scenes ways. Little Fires Everywhere captures exactly what the title tells us: smoldering piles of events occur in life in a variety of ways, and we have to put out the fires, not breath in too much smoke, and check-in with our own inner life and backyards for disasters to avoid.

Also, we’ve come to our final Sunday of NT Wright’s study, “Surprised by Hope” and I believe we’ve learned a thing or two. Pat yourself on the back! We’ve covered a lot of ground with this major theologian and scholar, and we’ve reflected on the hope held in the Christian gospel, hope of the resurrection, hope of heaven and eternal life, the anticipation of Christ’s return, and the hope of salvation. That’s a lot! So, our last discussion is centered in the hope of the church. And I’d like to add that I admired this one the most. Not because we’re almost done (although we may have some relief), but because I believe in the church. To provide a simple-worded summary, I believe a central point Wright is conveying is that hope didn’t happen only in Jesus’ day, but hope is continuous and generative and found in our present day. And we are agents of a Christ-like love to share with those around us to provide a witness of that sustaining hope up until Christ’s return. And that in the new creation which has already begun, we are to work and pray in areas of justice and mercy within our communities through our corporate witness known as the church. We are to be searchers in our community to find the things that are unsuitable and then find ways to improve the conditions for those who may be suffering and without. So, how do we begin?

Let’s dive into our 3 scriptures:

[1] Seek justice, love mercy, walk humbly: We can begin by looking; and by first receiving grace given to us and then extending it outward, and by walking not in arrogance, but in humility and curiosity and creativity. If we hold out our empty hands, we can receive the blessings of God: grace, mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness. Now close them up, and give it all away!

[2] Think on these things: true, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise. When I was in graduate school to become a counselor, my professor pulled out this verse and asked, “What are 3 things you thought about today since you rose out of bed?” Our answers varied, but generally included breakfast food, social media/cell phone/ email, and generalized anxiety about the upcoming exams and coursework. I don’t believe any of those thoughts fit into the categories Paul lays out here. What we think on is what we become. In other words, we internalize the world around us and what comes into our hearts will eventually come out of our mouths. As a therapist, I have spent countless hours helping folks untangle untrue thoughts about themselves. What we digest becomes so important, not just with food, but also our thought patterns. Where we focus our time and attention will direct who we become.

[3] Learn from Christ’s teachings and ways; Internalize Christ’s character – We have a high priest in Jesus Christ to be our example of what it means to be a campaigner of justice and mercy. Our mandate is to be disciples of Christ, learn from his teachings, and internalize the very character of Christ. I love NT Wrights statement on page 270, “ If the gospel isn’t transforming us, how do we know that it will transform anything else?”

So, imagine. Let's rewrite that first book title a bit. Instead of Little Fires Everywhere, we write about Little Places of Hope Everywhere.

Little Hope Everywhere---→ Hope of the Resurrection
Hope of Heaven
Hope of Christ's Return
Hope of Salvation
Hope of the Church

Instead of playing by the rules as the book narrative provides us, what if we lived them out with God? What if we live justice; we become hope; what would our world look like if we infused love every where we go? Little fires everywhere would turn to unexcelled piles of grace, our relationships would be bound in mutual love and trust, and our pain washed away through immeasurable forgiveness.

A Missio Dei Story: A God Sending Story

I had so many ideas to share about the mission of the church; the love I hold for it despite its complexity and often challenging ways. Instead, I'd like to share a piece of my story about how the church played a vital role in my first years of life that I think, illustrates the love-mission that it carries and heralds.

I was born in the summer of 1970. I spent the first 3 months of my life in foster care while I awaited to be adopted by a loving family. My mother found herself in a series of unfortunate circumstances and believed I would have a better life with another family. I was finally adopted, and I indeed had a wonderful childhood, but that did not happen out of pure chance. No, it involved awesome love and a church that would embody the gospel to this girl. Later on, I would learn the many selfless efforts and sacrifices my church would make on behalf of someone they never met, but had vowed to nurture her entire life. You see, as my mother relinquished her parental rights, my adoptive parents had already begun to speak the desires of their heart to their pastor and church. My parents coming from minimal financial resources needed some support as they began to think about adoption. They had tried for over 7 years to conceive, but were unsuccessful. So, with the help of the pastor and the church board, the congregation all came together to provide my parents support through the process. They added my father to the church council, which was the first and only time he ever served. He was more of a mechanic and hands-on guy, so the board duties were quite different. They wrote letters and provided support to my parents as they met several caseworkers, held family visits, and prepared the final adoption paperwork. I was adopted and baptized a month later, and still to this day, have a little white bible that was given to me at my baptism. It is a symbol of immense love for me. And as I pray in the morning, I see that small bible and remain grateful for the love that was shown me through the church. This is the gospel lived out with tremendous hope and through every day people like us. This story may not make national headlines, but its written and hidden in my heart, and reminds me of the mission of the church that is so alive and transformative.

And for the book, well, there are little fires everywhere and big areas of chaos and confusion, for certain. But with God, we have hope larger than life itself, and love greater than any catastrophe. Pain and joy often are coupled in the same event, within the same canvas, in the most precious moments of life.

I'll end with the best quote of the whole book: "**Love is not our duty; it is our *destiny***" 



Love is at the very heart of the surprise of hope; we are people enabled to love in a new way. And people who are living a Christ-like love will be people who are learning more deeply how to HOPE. Christ has left us his spirit; the Spirit calls deep within us; the tethered line to our Creator encouraging us to be harbingers of hope and our world is depending on it.

Let us be the bringers of such love. Amen.

Pastor Tracy