
Justice & Beauty

DAVE BAST

Talking about how justice intersects with faith is one thing, but as Christians we have to move beyond talk to action. This looks different for every person who tries to make this integration real in their own life. Find out how special guest Jonathan Bradford has made justice personal, and how he lives out the intersection between faith and justice every day. Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, we have been talking in a series of programs about social justice, about the way in which our faith intersects our life in community, our culture, our society. You go to scripture, Dave, and there are a number of passages which talk about that intersection, and one of the passages that has meant a lot to me is this concept of being salt and light. We are to be really cultural transformers in the world today.

DAVE BAST

But the interesting thing is, there is a whole different strand of biblical thought too, and another set of images that sort of suggests detachment from the world, or noninvolvement. You think of the description in Hebrews 11 of Abraham as a pilgrim and a stranger in the world and seeking a heavenly city; and so a lot of Christians, especially I think it is fair to say, more conservative Christians have been sort of world denying. We are exiles here; we are pilgrims on the way to heaven and our job is maybe to try to gather people into the Church, to save souls, but really, we should be not part of the world or not involved in it; and the question is, you know, how do those two things intersect? Is there some way of reconciling them?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, there is a very interesting text in Jeremiah where actually the prophet is talking to exiles, and he says: you know, as exiles you need to engage the culture around you. He says: seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in its welfare you will find your welfare.

DAVE BAST

In the city's welfare you will find your welfare, even though you are exiles. Now, that verse has been a key thing in the life of our special guest today. Jonathan Bradford, who is the CEO of the Inner City Christian Federation in Grand Rapids, Michigan; we welcome him as a third voice on today's *Groundwork*.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, welcome Jonathan.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Thank you; good to be with you.

DAVE BAST

I wonder if you would just start by sharing something about your own pilgrimage, as one of those on the way to the heavenly city, but really engaged in the earthly city as well.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Well thanks, Dave. My pilgrimage actually starts a long, long time ago. I mark it particularly in an experience that I had as a freshman in high school in 1963, living in the Chicago area. As I was walking down a sidewalk heading back home from school, I heard a voice... I literally heard a voice and couldn't find where it was coming from. A fellow was calling me and I didn't see where he was. He said: Over here, behind a bush; and I finally found him. He said...

DAVE BAST

The bush wasn't burning, was it?

JONATHAN BRADFORD

It wasn't burning, but for a while I thought for sure it was talking. The bush – the gentleman behind the bush said: I need somebody to work with me. I know that you just moved into the neighborhood. Would you be interested in a little bit of a part-time job? Well, to cut a long story short, I was hired as a laborer for this fellow who was a bricklayer who had turned into a home remodeler. He paid me \$1.25 an hour, and I worked my fingers to the bone, after school, Saturdays, vacations from school, and so forth. After about a year with him, I said: Ron, isn't it about time that I get a raise? And he exclaimed: A raise?! You should be paying me for all that you are learning. I surely did not have any idea, but indeed, right then, right there as a high school kid I was learning – I was preparing – for a career in housing. While you would not want me to build a house for you, I am today a licensed residential builder, and it is through that that I understand an awful lot about residential construction.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, the interesting thing is that that understanding of how to build a house at some point intersected with your Christian faith, which is probably...

JONATHAN BRADFORD

It surely did.

BOB HEERSPINK

The big surprise of your life, that that happened.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Indeed, a big surprise; and I can only understand it looking backward. I surely did not see it looking forward; and you are quite right, Bob. Living in the Chicago area in the '60s I had considerable exposure to matters of racial justice and concern. Going through college in the later '60s and early '70s that experience – that involvement – continued; and indeed, having grown up all of my years in urban communities, I was a city kid; and I felt indeed drawn by my faith as I passed out of high school, through college, and as a young adult, where should I live? Well, I chose to live in a city, and have never lived any place but a diverse urban community; and going on through my early professional years, choosing to go to graduate school, all of it sort of inexorably was pointed toward learning about how people live in relationship to one another in urban America; and with that sort of backdrop of housing, I found myself irresistibly drawn into this matter of community building – the shape, the design, the financing, the preparing of people to exist with one another in success in a community context.

DAVE BAST

Tell us a little something about the Inner City Christian Federation. How did that get started and how did you get involved with that?

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Well, I was employed elsewhere in the middle '70s, but a friend of mine, a member of a nearby church, although not the church I was a member of, said: hey, we are fixing this house down the street from our church. I understand you know something about residential remodeling. How about if you come over and help us roof this house? Well, I did, and then they did a second house, and after two houses in almost three years, it was time to get more serious: hey Bradford, why don't you come to this meeting? We are going to talk about maybe forming a new nonprofit corporation. I went to the meeting, and when not paying attention at a certain point in the meeting, they put my name down as the vice president of the first board of this organization. I was with it for about a year. I left, though, to go to graduate school, had another job elsewhere briefly, but then when they were looking for a second executive director two, two-and-a-half years later, I took that job in March 1981.

DAVE BAST

So, just a very small beginning. A local church deciding: Let's do something about rehabbing a house in our neighborhood...

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That's right.

DAVE BAST

And from that seed comes this great organization. We want to pursue that in just a moment, but first we need to take a break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. We have been talking to Jonathan Bradford, the CEO of the Inner City Christian Federation, which in Grand Rapids, Michigan is very much involved in housing rehab, in providing affordable housing in the city. Jonathan, the work that you do is very hands-on, and yet you approach it from a Christian point of view. For you, and I know for your organization, this is a matter of social justice. Can you help us understand how that unfolds in terms of the practical things that you do for folks?

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Sure. Bob, we start with the realization that God rules all of his creation. There is not a square inch he doesn't care about. So that means we must pay as much attention to the matter of residential building design and construction and finance as we do to the skills and the abilities of the families in that housing unit. So, at ICCF we are divided sort of equally. Half of our energy and attention goes to the design of houses and the building of them, the financing of them, the improvement of the context – the neighborhood; and half of our attention goes to education and counseling so that the families we serve will succeed, first in their housing, but then go on to broader life accomplishment.

DAVE BAST

I noticed that you are doing a lot of counseling with families facing foreclosure...

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Indeed.

DAVE BAST

And that is a big issue today. Say a little something about that.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Well, foreclosure prevention is a gigantic challenge for all communities; and indeed, we have a 14-person housing counseling department; and these people are uniquely capable of getting next to the Jones family, but also getting next to the corner bank, and sort of standing between the borrower and the lender and finding a way, if it is possible, to remediate – to reconstruct – the situation between the two of them. Very often it is not something that the borrower, the family, has done wrong. Indeed, their economic position has changed through no direct fault of their own, yet the lender has every right to have its collateral – indeed, the house – back if the loan isn't being paid; but it goes without saying that banks cannot deal with the bumper crop of houses that are coming back. So it is in everyone's best interest for us to renegotiate the terms of the loan; but in order to do that, the family has to commit to being with us and learning new skills about family budgeting and so forth.

BOB HEERSPINK

Jonathan, when I was looking over your values for your organization, much of what you are talking about plays out in terms of education, helping people to develop the skills to maintain a home, the financial challenges that people face; but then you have this value of beauty, and that really, really surprised me because it suggested that what you are dealing with isn't just a matter of dollars and cents or a utilitarian approach to putting a roof over people's heads, but there is something more going on here.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That is quite right, Bob; and it starts with the fundamental truth that each of us is created in the image of God. There is not a single difference between a person who is wealthy and one who is not; one who is black or white, male or female. Indeed, each of us is blessed with having been created in his image; and we then note that God is the author of all that is right and proper – all that is true and beautiful. Indeed, it was not God's intention that sin should be in the world; indeed, it was our own failure that brought sin. Well, in our image-bearingness and in the reality that Christ has made all things new: The old is gone, the new has come; we then look at what is old; what has to go? Well, one thing that has to go is the notion that just because somebody is of lesser economic ability, he or she should be consigned to that which is of lesser esthetic quality.

DAVE BAST

Just because somebody is poor doesn't mean they should live ugly.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That is exactly right.

DAVE BAST

They deserve beauty, too. We all flourish as humans with beauty.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Flourish is exactly the word – that notion of flourish... I appreciate you using it, Dave, because it is sort of fundamentally the whole concept of shalom – that wholeness, that fullness, that nurture, that ability to use your gifts without impediment – that great word: Flourish. What a wonderful thing it is for a person to flourish; that is, use the gifts that God has given him or her.

BOB HEERSPINK

So you are not just concerned about people existing in the inner city; it is really creating a community of wholeness and health...

DAVE BAST

And beauty.

BOB HEERSPINK

And beauty.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, I visited your building. It is a magnificent place. It is very stunning. It is an old building that you rehabbed, and not only have you made that beautiful, but there is art inside it, the community is welcome to just come in and look around. That was a challenge, I'm sure.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Well, it surely was. This is really quite a story because in 1906 a philanthropist here in Grand Rapids was challenged with the opportunity to give money for the construction of what was called a proper children's home. Mr. Blodgett was his name...

DAVE BAST

In other words, an orphanage.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Yes; back then it was called an orphanage, indeed. He said he would be happy to provide those funds, but with the stipulation that it be a truly memorable building. He wanted it to be very beautiful because he believed, and was quoted as having said many times: How we treat the foundling – that old word for orphan... how we treat the foundling so goes the future of our community.

BOB HEERSPINK

So he put beauty as a central core value right at the beginning of his work.

Jonathan Bradford:

Right, exactly; so here we have a building dedicated to the futures of whom? Kids; kids without parents; kids for whom no one else was caring; and that these children should be housed in a truly beautiful building. You could even say a very highly ornamented building. It is an Italianate neoclassical building with a lot of fancy stuff on the outside. Well, that building existed as an orphanage until the late '40s, and then it became a private physical rehab hospital; but in order for that organization to flourish they tore down the very ornate façade and over-doubled the size of the building with four different additions. They left the building in 1976. It was minimally used for a few years, and then it was abandoned for nearly twenty...

DAVE BAST

So, an old story of kind of changing neighborhood, urban decay.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Exactly; it was literally within three months of having to be demolished, and in God's wonderful providence we were able to acquire it in 2004, raising money, acquiring various kinds of tax credits, and indeed, reconstruction of the building began in January 2006 and we moved in in September 2007; and Bob is right; we did this building... because it was beautiful, we did it in a special way to honor the legacy of this community and its original caring about the quality of design and about the way that we cared for poor kids. Well, here we are, in the name of Jesus Christ continuing that legacy in caring for low and moderate-income families.

DAVE BAST

And now creating what has really become a centerpiece physically in a revitalizing neighborhood.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; it really is living out your values and putting them on public display.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That is exactly right.

DAVE BAST

The old has to pass away; the new needs to come, and we need to see that physically...

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That is right.

DAVE BAST

Here in our own communities and neighborhoods.

BOB HEERSPINK

We will need to pursue this more, but we need to take a break. We will be back in just a minute.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. We are here today with Jonathan Bradford, the CEO of the Inner City Christian Federation in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is a housing advocacy group and counseling and a number of other things; but we are also thinking about this text from Jeremiah 29:7:

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jonathan, help us to figure out how we as individuals can seek the welfare of our communities, whether it is a city or a little country town.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Sure, Dave. First of all, it starts with recognizing that regardless of size and regardless of the individual, we are all one in Christ; so whether there are five hundred people or five million people, God loves us all so much that, again, we were all created in his image; and furthermore, if we know the transforming power of Jesus Christ, if we have already been made new by that love, we then must be those transformers. We are told in 2 Corinthians 5: you are his ambassadors; don't receive the grace of God in vain; and that is not just about renewing our hearts; that is renewing our lives as well. So, in our decisions about where we buy our house, in our decisions about voting for elected representatives, in our decisions about taxation, we need to recognize that we are making decisions, not just for ourselves, but we are making decisions for all of our neighbors – the people whom God loves.

DAVE BAST

It could even be a small thing; I mean, my wife and I went to a lecture given by a garden expert and he said: Plant flowers in your front yard; plant your garden in the front yard, not in the back, so that your neighbor... it can build community... your neighbors could see it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Build the value of beauty.

DAVE BAST

Of beauty, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, we have talked on this program a number of times about the common good, and what you are saying is, as we live together... and it doesn't matter whether we are in a big city or a small town, the common good is a basic Christian value that needs to drive the decisions we make.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That is right. You know, I will tell you a quick little story about common good. When we design houses... houses that we will build brand new, we are designing them to blend with the surrounding architectural character of the neighborhood so that the Jones family that will be moving in that house is not in any way labeled or stigmatized; so they are not called out or isolated as having been helped because they are lower income. Well, when the Jones family moves into one of our houses, pride – absolute giddiness at success at having gotten a decent place that they can afford shines in the way they care for their house. In other words, you don't need a lot of money to do that. So there is Mrs. Jones out there planting more flowers, there they are caring for the neighborhood, picking up the papers that are blowing by. The fact is, they are conscious of their presence and their role in the neighborhood, and how the appearance of their place works; and so, not only is it good for the Jones family living in our house, but it has also become a testimony to the passerby, when stereotypes about this neighborhood – that neighborhood... Oh, that is where *those* kinds of people live... Guess what? Those stereotypes get broken when we design well and when we educate successfully so that the respect that we have for the people we are serving is very, very apparent – very visible.

DAVE BAST

We have seen, I guess, in our lifetime...we are all roughly contemporaries...sort of this flight outward, away from cities; and that is not always a good thing.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

It has been a problem.

DAVE BAST

Are you seeing some sense of reversing of that?

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Well, yes; that is a good observation, Dave. For a whole lot of reasons, we are seeing a reconsideration of life in the city. Indeed, as urban America has grown, as we have needed to produce more housing, those with economic ability have left the city and gone to the suburbs, or even the exurbs, as they are sometimes now called, leaving successive rings of housing for the less economically able, and the less and the less and so forth. Well now we are seeing folks asking the questions: hey, I don't want to have to drive forty minutes to and from work. Hey, I don't want to have to heat this 4,000-square-foot house. Hey, I would like to know my neighbors, and I cannot do so if they live a quarter-mile down the street. So, there are people coming back to the city; and I think the unique challenge for us is to do so – come back to the city in a way that truly celebrates the diversity that God has created. In other words, we should be looking for all kinds of ways to break some of the class definition that has caused these separations in urban America. So, looking for ways to associate with people who are different, not only culturally but also class wise.

BOB HEERSPINK

These are all elements of shalom biblically defined.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

That is exactly right.

DAVE BAST

There doesn't have to be a right side of the tracks and a wrong side of the tracks in any town. We could, especially if Christians are intentional about this, choose to live together.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

As God's transformed people, there is no right side and wrong side.

BOB HEERSPINK

Jonathan, we have just got a couple of minutes left. I wonder as we conclude, do you have a vision for what you would like to see happen within the city from the perspective of God's transforming work?

JONATHAN BRADFORD

I do. It starts with the fact that we all must recognize that we are only as strong as our weakest citizen. So for instance, in the matter of where we live, if we could achieve that economic diversity that I was just talking about, in fact what we would be doing, we would be going back to some of the values and some of the conditions which were common in urban America prior to World War II, where there wasn't this sort of class separation. When there wasn't that class separation, we also had schools that worked, and we had neighborhoods that were safe, and so forth. So, we look at the current situation and it seems daunting – it seems nigh onto impossible. Well, I recognize that it might be, but the prophet Jeremiah had an experience; I guess I have just got to share it with you very quickly. He was commanded by the Lord to buy the field at Anathoth, just outside the gates of Jerusalem; and he didn't want to because the Babylonians had sort of taken it over. He bought that property, but still complained: Why should I do this? And God came back to him and said: Is there anything too hard for me? He said: One day vineyards will be planted, houses will be built; it will be a place of shalom; and Jeremiah accepted that promise from the Lord; and I think we have to accept that same promise. That is something we can see in our own lifetimes as well.

DAVE BAST

Jonathan Bradford, thank you very much for being our guest on *Groundwork* today.

JONATHAN BRADFORD

Thank you.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keeps our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-beauty>

Printed on September 5, 2025