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“The Neglected Virtue”

Isaiah 53:2-3, Philippians 4:8

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I'll save the Philippians passage for later, but listen to God's word in the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53:

Isaiah 53:2-3:

² For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³ He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Truth, Goodness, Beauty.

According to Plato, these are the **prime ideals**—not just admirable values, but eternal **realities** beyond the material world we live in. These are the Forms we are meant to contemplate and pursue. They are the patterns within which we should seek to mold our lives.

Plato, if he were alive today, would welcome debate about this. But I offer a word of caution to those who would try, because Plato's final argument can be maddening. It's something like, “[If you know, you know.](#)”

He would acknowledge that in the material world—in life as we live it—you'll find plenty of evidence that these ideals don't seem to matter.



- People who lie,
- who do what is wrong,
- who embrace what is base or ugly in how they speak and act can do quite well for themselves.
- They can get rich.
- They can become famous.
- They can gain power.

And isn't it all just a matter of opinion anyway?

And Plato would say, “If that’s how you want to see it—if that’s how you want to live—well, go ahead.” But some of us—the *best in us*, he believed—**sense** that life is more meaningful, more noble, when we seek

- to know and understand (truth),
- to act rightly (goodness),
- and to find harmony in ourselves and our communities (beauty).

We don’t just discover these ideals—it as if we *remember them*. It’s more of an “Oh yeah, I remember” than an “Ah-hah, now I get it.”

“Well, you still haven’t *proved* that they matter,” one might respond.

And Plato—still frustrating, still unshaken—might reply, “Maybe. But for me they prove themselves because we intuitively know that they matter.. Truth, goodness and beauty are ideals because—well—they are true, good and beautiful.”

Call it circular logic if you want, but Plato is saying something we Christians ought to understand. The most important of what we believe is given to us, and something divine shines through these ideals. We Christians will even speak of them as virtues when we talk about who we want to be and how we want to live. We are virtuous when we “seek to

- *believe* what is true,
- *be* what is good,
- and *behold* what is beautiful.”¹

When we live that way, we are being *our best selves*. Indeed, something divine—of God—is shining through them.

We also speak of them as virtues because we experience their opposite—what is false, evil and ugly—as dehumanizing. We intuitively know that those

- who spread disinformation,
- who intentionally do what is wrong,

¹ Brian Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World*, Chisma House, 2012, p. 60.



- and who are ugly toward others

are, in those moments, less than who God calls them to be.

It is why, seeing Jesus' truth, goodness and beauty, we confess that Jesus is not only *fully* human in being his best self but fully divine in that God's truth, goodness and beauty shine in him.



I think I'm preaching to the choir, though. Even if Plato's, "[If you know, you know](#)," doesn't work for you, and even if you can't explain or prove why you believe it, you sense that this world is a better place if truth, goodness and beauty are served. So, I'm going to spend the rest of the sermon with that assumption. What I want to talk about is the *neglected virtue* of the three, and that is **beauty**.

Yes, I am going to talk about beauty and call on Brian Zahnd, just as I did in my sermon two weeks ago. I feel compelled to double down on beauty because recent events seem to have doubled down on ugly.

I think Zahnd is right when he calls beauty the neglected virtue. Certainly, when passion runs hot and the stakes feel high, people will fight for the high ground of truth and goodness—but often abandon the field when it comes to beauty.

Look at what truth can become without beauty.

A weapon.

There can be within the words, "[I'm just telling the truth](#)", a sort of violence when the tone is mean-spirited and the posture smug—when the goal isn't to persuade or invite; but to be right--and to shame, demean or humiliate those who disagree. You don't have to look far for what I'm talking about—just scroll social media or watch the news.

It might be worse now, but it was enough of a problem fifteen years ago that I led a class addressing the violence of words. In 2010, I taught a Wednesday night class using the book *The End of Words* by Richard Lischer. Lischer writes about how, especially in times of panic or outrage, religious and public figures use language like a cudgel. Even God's truth gets evoked in ways that are cold, condemning, and cut off from love. They speak

without beauty—

without mercy,

without grace,

with little recognition that their "targets" are human beings.

In their hands, truth becomes a substitute for listening—and a justification for cruelty.

He tells of the prominent preacher who claimed that the 9/11 attacks were God's punishment for America's moral failure. The preacher called it "biblical truth," but there was no beauty in it—no lament, no tenderness, no grief, no invitation to hope. Just pronouncement.

Lischer says that's when words lose their moral imagination. They don't reconcile or redeem; they only condemn. They become weapons in a war to be right.



If you're looking for a familiar example, just think of the arguments with loved ones we most regret. They may be the clearest illustrations of what I'm saying.

There's a kind of violence in the words—and sadly, violent words so easily lead to violent actions. That's truth without beauty.



And look at what goodness can become when it is without beauty.

- It's the do-gooder who never smiles.
- The activist who speaks in outrage, but never in grace.
- The spiritual folks who are so humble, they've become proud—
 - So virtuous, they've become unbearable.

When goodness loses its beauty, it hardens into moral superiority. And once you've decided you're "the good one," it becomes easy—almost automatic—to treat others as fools, as inferior, *even as enemies*.

There it is again: the hidden violence—this time, violence hidden within righteousness.

Every Sunday, when we confess the Apostles' Creed, we say we believe in "the communion of saints."

As Protestants, we believe that all of us are made saints by grace. But let's let our inner Roman Catholic speak for a moment—and think about those saints whose holiness seems to set them apart.

I'll be honest—if I thought saints were the kind of people some folks make them out to be, I wouldn't say that line with much joy. I'm talking about those who act like they never do anything wrong—and make sure you know it. The ones who carry a spiritual scorecard, and somehow, just by being around them, you feel smaller. Less holy. Not enough.

But that's not who I think of when I speak of the communion of saints. When I hear that phrase, and my inner Roman Catholic is doing the hearing, I think of the people you want to be with precisely when you don't feel much like a saint. They're the ones who won't stand over you but stand with you.

- They listen without judgment.
- They make space for your weakness.
- They hurt with you over your regrets.
- And then they laugh with you—when you finally get to the place where your mess-ups are more funny than shameful.

They're the kind of people who can tell you the truth you don't want to hear—in a way you can actually hear it.

They live goodness not as performance, but as presence. And because of that, their goodness is beautiful.



I think of someone like **Dee Moore**. She's lived long enough that I don't think calling her out for goodness is going to go to her head. This past week, she moved away from Roanoke to be closer to family but remains with us in prayer—and by joining us for worship online.

Over years, many who dug a hole in their lives found in Dee a **compassion** who helped them begin to climb out. They found that Dee has this remarkable ability to speak for them as if she understands—because she does. Her words come from a place of humility, not judgment. And because she never looks down on people—people look up to her.

That's what **beautiful goodness** looks like. Not loud. Not showy. Not self-righteous bravado. But strong, steady, redemptive.



And that's what finally brings us to the passage I read at the beginning. Having spoken of goodness that is beautiful—

- of saints who don't stand over others, but with them—
 - of people like Dee whose humility and compassion help others rise,
- Isaiah speaks of the beauty of one the world did not see as beautiful.

Listen again to his words:

*"He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others,
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...
and we held him of no account."*²

Isaiah is describing the **Suffering Servant**—the one Christians have long understood to be Jesus.

Think about that:

The *one who lived with God's beauty*—the one in whom we see the fullness of God—was not outwardly impressive. Not commanding in presence. Not physically desirable.

Jesus was overlooked.

Jesus was rejected.

Jesus was misunderstood.

And he died an ugly death for ugly reasons.

Yet through him, **divine beauty broke into the world**. It wasn't the beauty of polish or power. It was the beauty

- of compassion in the face of hatred—

² Isaiah 53:2-3.



- truth spoken in humility—
- goodness offered even to enemies.

This is beauty at its most costly.

This is love *crucified*—love so selfless and sacrificial, *it is beautiful*.

When I talk about beauty being a neglected virtue, this is what I mean. In a world that prizes spectacle, anger, dominance—Jesus shows us a beauty that suffers, forgives, heals, and reconciles.



And that brings me to the moment we're in now: **Charlie Kirk**

There's debate about what kind of man Charlie Kirk was. I'm not entering that, just as I didn't enter the debate about George Floyd's life and character. Because whatever we think about either person, what happened to them was ugly—and wrong.

But what's maybe equally upsetting is what has happened *afterward*—the rhetoric. The reaction. The way people justify their hatred by calling it truth—or by calling it goodness.

In the aftermath of this shooting—as with so many other publicized acts of violence, and the countless unseen ones—we all should be asking **ourselves**: *Do our words carry the same ugliness we say we condemn and are we contributing to this dangerous climate?*

Whether you're a leader, a public voice,
 someone on X, or with a Facebook page, or an Instagram account,
 or a loud voice in the neighborhood or at the dinner table—

If you speak of those you disagree with as enemies—

If you repeat wild claims that stoke fear and cast others as villains—

If you talk like a war is starting—

You're not calling out violence.

You're contributing to it.

I want to speak now to those who feel justified in their hatefulness, to those who are aggressive in their words—mean-spirited, mocking, self-righteous—because

- they believe they are in the right (their version of truth)—
- and on the right side (their version of goodness):

You are part of the problem.

- because truth without beauty is its own violence.
- and goodness without beauty is pride.

I say this not to shame anyone, but to confess that *I don't want to be that kind of preacher*. (and believe me, sometimes I'm tempted to be that kind of preacher and person).



I don't want to preach a gospel that takes partisan sides and becomes another form of ugliness. I want to preach **the beautiful Gospel of Jesus Christ**—the one who absorbed the world's ugliest violence and answered it with love, grace, and peace.



Jesus says, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*”

I love those words. They're beautiful, and I want to come to him.

And I trust a similar word is going out from this congregation because we are trying not to join in the ugliness. So,

- Come to us, all of you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.
Come.
- Come, you who have been wounded by cruelty, by gossip, by ugliness you didn't deserve—come here for refuge.
- Come, you who have spread lies, or acted in ways that were harsh or ugly—and are tired of living that way—come here to confess your sins and hear God's pardon.
- Come, you who are angry—and maybe even have a right to be—but don't want to become hateful.
- Come, you who believe in a good cause, but are tired of the self-righteous outrage and pride that sometimes hurts the cause more than it helps.
- Come, you who have finally realized there is no political party or government that can ever be the kingdom of God—and you're now looking for the “hospital for sinners” that is the church.

Come.

Come join us here—not because we are perfect, but because we seek to be formed by the truth, goodness, and beauty of a crucified love.

We don't glorify violence—we follow the one whose violent death became a call not for revenge, but for reconciliation.

We're trying to be the kind of church where, in a time when lies, evil, and ugliness are often celebrated, we quietly remind each other:

If it's not true, good, and beautiful...

it's not of God.

And it's not fully human, either...



You may have noticed—I haven't yet read our other Scripture passage from Philippians. I've been saving it for now.

It's a benediction of sorts—but also a calling.



And if you're committed to what Paul is saying—if you want to be part of what is true, and good, and beautiful—I hope you'll answer with full voice when, after I read the passage, I say, *"The Word of the Lord."*

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just,
whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing,
whatever is commendable—
if there is any excellence,
and if there is anything worthy of praise—think about these things.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.



Benediction:

Go now in peace—
but not in passivity.
Go in truth—
not the cold kind that wounds,
but the living kind that heals.
Go in goodness—
not to stand over others,
but to walk beside them.
And go in beauty—
the beauty of compassion,
of mercy,
of a crucified love that reconciles all things.
Let your life be
a quiet resistance to ugliness,
a living witness
to what is true, good, and beautiful.
In the name of the Father who created you,
the Son who suffered for you,
and the Spirit who is making all things—including you—beautiful again.
Amen.

