

“Beautiful Words”
By Adam H. Fronczek

This morning I’m going to talk about some of the most beautiful words in the Bible and the deep and important challenges in those words. First a story:

I know it’s kind of a cliché, because I’m a pastor, but one of my favorite movies of all time is the 1959 epic film *Ben Hur: A Story of the Christ*. Based on the novel by Civil War General Lew Wallace, this story of Jesus’ life is told, not from the perspective of Jesus himself or one of his disciples, or one of the Gospels; it is told from the perspective of another man, Judah Ben Hur, a man born in Jerusalem at that time, whose life is shaped by a few random encounters with Jesus. One of my favorite things about the film is how Jesus is shown on the screen. Each time Ben Hur meets him, you don’t see Jesus’ face, nor do you hear his voice. Instead, you might see his hands or the back of his shoulders in the foreground, but the focus is on the effect he is having on someone else. You see the look on their faces, the depth of feeling in their eyes as he touches the deepest parts of their souls. You hear the inflection in their voices as they recall and repeat for someone else the words they heard him say. In this way, Ben Hur comes to know Jesus like we do. We watch as his gracious presence shapes the hearts of regular people making their way through life.

One of Ben Hur’s indirect encounters with Jesus happens out in the country on a hillside. There he hears the words of blessings we heard this morning. These blessings are the opening lines of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount; and many of us know these words by the Latin word for blessing, the “Beatitudes.” In the scene in the movie, you see regular people—wary and downtrodden, yet peaceful and relieved people—wandering out to the hillside and back a few at a time. They are people in need of comfort and a Savior, you see the yearning and the hope in their eyes, and you hear one of them stop and recall to Ben Hur the words that Jesus has said to them:

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.”

The words come with comfort, and reassurance, and hope.

“The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote about the importance of hearing the words of Jesus in a “primitive way,” stripped of all refinements that we so often bring to any difficult text, in order to avoid it’s meaning.” (Quoted in Cook, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A.) That is to say, when it comes to words like the Beatitudes, these words may bring us tremendous comfort and calm our spirits—and they are intended to do just that. These are not another set of commandments for the hearer to follow, they are blessings from God to be received and embraced. And yet the refinement of the words in a context like the movie...the idea of surrounding them with a beautiful mountain scene, calming movie studio background music, the longing and peace in the eyes of a great actor, these refinements may also blind us to the raw meaning of these blessings. These blessings are meant to comfort people who have been beaten down by the struggles of life. And for those of us who are comfortable and secure, they are meant to awaken and convict us about the struggles of others. They are meant to remind us of the fact that God’s blessing is first and foremost intended for those who suffer: for the poor, the meek, the merciful. God cares for the hungry. For the neglected child and the refugee. The addict, and the powerless. We are to be reminded of God’s passion...for them.

The words of Jesus have a way of being beautiful and challenging all at the same time. Another way to say this is that the Gospel is intended both to “comfort the afflicted, and also to afflict the comfortable.” The Old Testament reading for today does this as well. “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” My friend Andrew Foster Connors remarks that these words are perhaps the best bumper-sticker length summary of the meaning of our faith. And yet we shouldn’t leave it with the thoughtlessness of a bumper-sticker; we misunderstand the words if we fail to ask difficult, specific questions about them. (Foster Connors, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A.) What does it mean to do justice in the way that God intends? Is the life that I am living one of loving kindness? These questions demand to be asked. Andrew remarks that in ancient Israel, these words were not a bumper sticker—they were spoken in response to exploitative land practices of the ruling elites. In the agrarian economy of ancient Israel, Roman rulers and priests up in Jerusalem lived luxuriously off the backbreaking work of the rural poor. These practices had become so commonplace that few people questioned them; and the prophet Micah says these words to remind

the people that in this way of living there is no justice, no kindness, no humble walking with God.

The relevance of such a message meets us modern folk everywhere we go. There are so many ways in which we choose to live with things that seem simple and easy around us without questioning what they really mean. It's so easy to live a comfortable life and not wish to be troubled with the unintended consequences of the systems in which we live. We can't stand it when people challenge our comfort. "Can I not enjoy this chicken sandwich without thinking about the half a dozen birds that were forced to live and die in a crate the size of a doormat? Can I not enjoy my hamburger without having to think about its enormous carbon footprint? My property taxes are high enough—please don't remind me that I'm contributing almost nothing to the schools in the poorest zip codes in town."

We hear or read about such things, and we think "Please, stop. Stop reminding me of all of my unintended exploitative practices, because I've had a long day too. I have enough to do caring for my children, worrying about my parents' health, trying to make ends meet and have something to contribute to my church. In the midst of it all, I too am trying to eke out some meaning and purpose and perhaps even pleasure along the way. I don't need these guilt-inducing reminders. What I need is for someone to come to me once in a while and say "blessed are you, who are pure in heart, for you will see God."

The answer to this quandary, this tension between the comfort and the challenge of the words of Jesus—the answer is not to try to find our way out of the tension and ambiguity, but rather to embrace it. God gives us these words that contain both comfort and challenge on purpose. We need both in our lives. God has created us with minds and hearts substantial enough to struggle, and it is in that struggle, not apart from it, that we often find God.

Those of you who have been here recently may have figured out that I'm reading a book by a theologian named Miroslav Volf. He was 41 years old when he told this story. At a time when he was in need of a little break, he drove a few hours for a winter ski trip. He hit the slopes for a while, went to the spa, drank a beer in the lodge, and then he finally called his wife to let her know where to reach him. The moment she picked up phone, she told him that the adoption agency had called a few hours ago—after years of hoping, they were finally going to have a child.

They had been trying for years to get pregnant, and finally making peace with the idea that pregnancy was not in the cards, they went through the adoption process. The process was full of moral ambiguities and odd questions and judgments of character. What kind of a child were they willing to accept? How old, what race and color, would they take a risk on a mother who had been a drug user during pregnancy? It was strange to be asked to answer these questions and make these judgments. All of the children in question, of course, needed a home, and a parent. Who were they to make these choices about a future child? And yet choices were being made about them, the parents, as well—and they wanted to be

chosen. Would the birth mother want to give her child to them? To an immigrant, a college professor, a 41-year-old bald guy? These questions seemed unfair, too. They were willing to raise this child—why all the judgment?

Miroslav Volf writes that all of this moral ambiguity surrounded him as he arrived at the hospital to meet his child... "...And then I saw him," he writes, "...fine featured little head with wide-open eyes, protruding out of a 'burrito-wrap.' That very instant I knew that I had received a most incredible gift. Its radiance shone brightly through all the ambiguities of the adoption process. What seemed like the placement of an order—'I do not want this but would be open to that'—was in fact experienced as a gift. And what felt like a demand to earn a right—'You must do this and that'—was in fact experienced unequivocally as grace."

Reflecting upon that experience, he wrote, "People sometimes ask me what theological insights I have learned as a father. This is one of them: Divine grace comes often to us through the ambiguities of life, not apart from them." (Volf, "Ambiguity and Grace," in *Against the Tide*.)

The comfort *and* the challenge of Jesus are God's gifts to us. The words are meant to be beautiful—to show us that we are accepted just as God made us; and they are meant to cut right to our hearts, and convict us. God's words insist on showing us injustice and unkindness so that we will not forget, and in doing so they drive us to be better. And through the comfort of the words we are helped to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly. "Divine grace comes often to us through the ambiguities of life, not apart from them." Amen.