

Why Christianity? Pt. 3: The Beautiful

Luke 15:11-32

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We've reached the last sermon in our three-part "Why Christianity?" sermon series. We've looked at how Christianity through the lenses of "The Good" and "The True." I want to conclude with "The Beautiful."

I want to begin with a general word about these three categories and why I have chosen to frame this series the way I have.

Yesterday morning when I sat down to write this sermon, I paused on the photos I have chosen for my various desktop backgrounds.

I have a bunch of different desktops that I use to keep my Word documents separate from my email, music, calendar, web browser, etc.

I'm going to give you a little visual tour of my computer.

The first image is a picture I took when Naomi and I went to Israel and Palestine six years ago. I think I've shared this story before, but I'll do it briefly again.

We were in Jerusalem just wandering around by the Al Aqsa Mosque. Naomi saw this tiny frail old woman struggling to get up the stairs to make her way into the mosque to pray. She was so hunched over that her back and her legs almost made a right angle.

While most of us stood and watched, Naomi leapt into action. She helped the woman up the stairs and walked with her to where she was trying to get to. They couldn't speak the same language, but they shared a hug and a smile and this moment together.

In a world where people of different faiths so often go to war (literally and figuratively), in a geographic location that has been the site of so much conflict throughout history, this simple act of kindness and humanity spoke to me of the deep goodness of the gospel.

It struck me as a very Jesus-y, Good Samaritan-y kind of thing to do.

(I heard a historian this week say that Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan has done more to shape the course of Western history than any moral philosophy or theological tome).

The next image also came from that trip to Israel and Palestine. It is artwork on the barrier wall that separates Israel from the West Bank. It is a huge, ugly wall symbolizing a huge, ugly reality.

I took this photo because I think it says something deeply true about what God desires for his human children. *But please don't forget to find the human in your enemy.*

I use this desktop background for all my writing. It speaks to me of a truth that is deeply Christian in its origin, a truth that I want to shape everything that I say in this ever more polarized world.

The next two images come from the trip to Europe that Naomi and I just returned from. The first is of a lovely little lake in Germany near the Austrian border where we spent one afternoon.

I chose this one for no other reason than because it is a beautiful scene. God has made this world beautiful and created us to love beauty.

The second is a picture from the top of the Duomo di Milano, the cathedral in Milan. This was a very different kind of beauty, an extravagant feat of architecture meant to bear witness to the majesty and grandeur and glory of God (this one took six hundred years to build!).

I know cathedrals are not everyone's thing — they can grate against our Mennonite pragmatism and simplicity, and we quite rightly wonder about the cost (financial and human) that went into this.

But it is undeniable that at the very least structures like this show that the human beings made in God's image share God's creative capacity.

So, those are my computer backgrounds. I didn't consciously set out for them to deliberately reflect "the good," the true," and "the beautiful." But they do.

And why? Because these are the things that matter most to me. And, I think, to all of us. These speak to the deepest parts of who we are.

I think, they also speak to the deepest and truest parts of who God is.

I want to spend the rest of this last sermon on "the beautiful" not on inspiring mountain scenes or majestic cathedrals but on the beauty of God and of God's love.

On my last Monday in the jail before we left for our holiday in January, I found a note on my desk indicating that one of the inmates wanted to speak with me. I looked at the name and recognized it immediately.

A few months earlier, I had met him for the first time.

Whenever I introduce myself to the inmates at the jail, I always try to make eye contact, refer to them by name, and shake their hands very deliberately.

So much of life in jail is impersonal and dehumanizing. Any little gesture to counter this feels worth it to me.

And so, I was very consciously looking this man in the eye when we shook hands. But something felt off. I looked down and was shocked to discover that he only had two out of ten fingers. I was shaking a palm and a few stumps.

I immediately suspected what the story was, and my suspicions were borne out during our subsequent conversation. Too many prairie winters living rough on the streets. Frostbite.

My heart broke for this poor man. Like so many of the men (and women) I talk to in jail, his story was one of great pain endured and almost certainly great pain inflicted upon others.

But back to the meeting earlier in January. It became evident very quickly that I could not do for him what he wanted me to, so I tried to steer the conversation in another direction.

One of the best ways to do this, I have discovered, is to simply ask questions. I asked him about where he grew up (Toronto), about his family (most of them, including all his siblings, refuse to speak to him anymore).

“Well, tell me about your parents,” I said. His face kind of lit up. “Aw, my parents, they’re the best... My mom died during Covid, but my dad is still around. He was a pastor in Pentecostal church.

“I remember when I was a young man in Toronto, and I would be out on the streets, you know, drugs, sex, parties, crime, the whole deal... But my dad, it didn’t matter where I was or who I was with or what I had gotten myself into, if I called him, he was there. He would come and bail me out or buy me breakfast or give me some cash for rent...

“He’s never given up on me. Even though I’ve given him every possible reason to, he never did.”

He stopped talking and just kind of looked down, and then back up at me. I smiled back at him.

I said, “Sounds like your dad was kind of like the father in that story Jesus told about the lost son who runs off and gets into all kinds of trouble and comes back home to a father who never stopped waiting for him.”

“Yeah,” he said. “He was just like that guy.” It was a beautiful moment.

The physical scene was not beautiful in any way. We were not gazing contemplatively at the stained glass of a European cathedral.

We were sitting behind a heavy locked door in a neglected storage closet where a desk and a few plastic chairs had been haphazardly thrown together. We were surrounded by stacks of toilet paper rolls and yellowing papers outlining Covid protocols and an old vacuum cleaner. There were guys yelling outside the door.

But it was still a moment of beauty, a moment where the beauty of God, of God's character and of God's love, reached into the real world with all its ugliness and pain and said, "Pay attention. This is your God."

There is a reason that our gospel story this morning is among the most well-loved and well-known in all of Scripture.

We so naturally see ourselves either in the wretched son off debasing himself in shameful ways or the obedient son meticulously keeping score, or in the father longing at the gate for his wayward son to return. The story speaks to and for us on so many levels.

But surely one of the most incredible parts of the story is contained in one little sentence fragment: *while he was still a long way off*.

Before the son can even start apologizing, before he can say a single word about all the wrong he's done, before he can offer a single excuse or try to justify himself in any way, before he can rehearse his speech that acknowledges that he knows he's not worth much of anything at all (go ahead and treat me like a hired man, not a son), the father rushes out to embrace him.

While he was still a long way off. While he was doing everything he could possibly do to demonstrate how little he was worth, the son was loved.

This is a love that we struggle to understand much less reproduce. But we are drawn to it. Perhaps in ways we can barely even express.

Because that kind of love is beautiful.

The reality that this is how God loves each one of us like this can make the beautiful scenes that we drape across our computer screens pale in comparison.

For this series, I have separated goodness, truth, and beauty out into three separate sermons. But in truth, they cannot be so easily separated. The three virtues all kind of bleed together.

The good is also true and beautiful. The truth is beautiful and good. And we might also say that a beautiful life is good and true. They all go together.

And our longing for them is among the ways in which Jesus draws people to himself.

For me, one of the most interesting recent stories that shows this is the conversion of Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Who is Ayaan Hirsi Ali? Well, she is a refugee from Somalia who fled to Europe and became a prominent Dutch politician. She is a one-time adherent to the severe and uncompromising version of Islam preached by the Muslim Brotherhood who became an equally uncompromising atheist after 9/11.

She was (and is) a tenacious intellectual who is never afraid to step into the fray.

She's also a recent convert to Christianity. Which is surprising. I remember reading her during my master's thesis on the new Atheism and she was a quite strident critic of religious belief.

But her conversion narrative is a fascinating one. On one level, it seems to be a conversion to a cultural argument. She sees how Christianity has been responsible for creating so much of the world she loves and doesn't want to lose, a world of human rights, and tolerance, and compassion, and freedom of conscience and expression, and democracy, and many other things besides.

Many have questioned, is there anything personal about her turn toward Christianity, or is this just an intellectual appreciation of the story of the West?

Hirsi Ali responded to this directly in an interview that I recently listened to:

Yes, it is a very personal story... I went through a period of crisis — very personal crisis: of fear, anxiety, depression. I went to the best therapists money can buy. I think they gave me an explanation of some of the things that I was struggling with. But I continued to have this big spiritual hole or need. I tried to self-medicate. I tried to sedate myself. I drank enough alcohol to sterilise a hospital. Nothing helped. I continued to read books on psychiatry and the brain. And none of that helped. All of that explained a small piece of the puzzle, but there was still something that I was missing.

And then I think it was one therapist who said to me, early this year: “I think, Ayaan, you’re spiritually bankrupt.” And at that point, I was in a place where I had sort of given up hope. I was in a place of darkness, and I thought, “well, what the [heck], I’m going to open myself to that and see what you are talking about.” And we started talking about faith, and belief in God, and I explained to her that the God I grew up with was a horror show. He created you to punish you and frighten you; and as a girl, and as a woman, you’re just a piece of trash.

And so, I explained to her why I didn’t believe in God — and, more than that, why I actually hated God. And then she asked me to design my own God, and she said, “if you had the power to make your own God, what would you do?” And as I was going on I thought: that is actually a description of Jesus Christ and Christianity at its best. And so instead of inventing yet another new God, I started diving into that story.¹

I found this so moving.

This image of trying to imagine the kind of God you might find compelling or lovable or even tolerable and then arriving at Jesus. What a way to put it.

Of course, I would hasten to add that faith isn’t *just* imagining the kind of God you find palatable. We must have theological room for the God who confronts, upends, and disrupts — the God who reaches across our preferences to judge, forgive and heal. But that’s another sermon.

It seems to me that Hirsi Ali was drawn to Christianity by her desire for the good, the true, and the beautiful.

She followed her the road marked out by her deepest desires for herself and for the world and found Jesus waiting for her there.

I have been mindful throughout this sermon series that I am speaking mostly to Christians each week.

Many of you, like me, have been Christians for a long time. Sometimes faith can seem sort of like an old habit. Just something we do because we’ve always done it. We may have our

¹ <https://unherd.com/2023/11/ayaan-hirsi-ali-answers-her-critics/>

private doubts or embarrassments about our fellow Christians. We may struggle with this or that aspect of the whole package. Some might even barely be hanging on.

I hope this little series has given you permission to be proud of being a Christian. That sounds like a weird thing to say out loud. We're here in church, aren't we?

But I hear a lot of apologizing for Christianity and for the church in Christian circles, especially among more "progressive" Christians.

It is good and important to be honest about the sins of the church, to acknowledge that Christianity has not always been experienced as good news wherever it has gone.

I hope you have heard me be clear about this over these three sermons. Where the church has failed, we must repent and humbly seek forgiveness.

But sometimes when I hear Christians pile on the church and seem just a little too eager to point out all of its real or imagined failures, I feel like saying, "So why do you stay? If Christianity is nothing more than a source of colonialism or oppression or whatever, why not leave?"

This sermon series has been my response to why I stay.

Christianity has been good news for a hurting and broken world. And it remains good news. The very best news of all.

Amen.

