

Three Good Preaching Words

Beauty and Justice

Mike Graves

“It seems to me that painters as a rule represent the Saviour, both on the cross and taken down from it, with great beauty still upon His face.”

—Feodor Dostoyevsky¹

The church has always gravitated toward beauty and justice, and for good reason—they describe the very nature of God. As surely as the New Testament declares “God is love,” it could just as easily have included, “God is beauty” and “God is just.” Travel all over the globe and you will discover beauty is one of the hallmarks of the church. Tourists in Paris take as many photos of Notre Dame as they do of the Eiffel Tower. Stained glass, candles, pipe organs, on and on the list goes. Even the simplest of churches usually will nod its head in the direction of some beauty in its worship. Likewise, churches everywhere have always cared about justice—feeding the homeless, speaking out against war, providing sanctuary for illegal aliens, and so forth.

While beauty and justice describe the very nature of God, in far too many instances the church has chosen one of these over the other. Like a student taking the ACT exam in which two good answers seem right and only one will do, the church has assumed we must choose. Beauty or justice? Justice or beauty? I think of two examples.

Every Tuesday night for the past five years, my wife and I have gone to the Panera Bread store near our house to pick up leftovers. It’s usually several large bags of bread, which the store gladly donates to charity. On Wednesdays we take it to a food pantry at a local church.

We used to take it to another shelter run by another congregation, but we couldn’t take it any longer. The location was what you would expect of a food pantry—plain wooden shelves in a room with bare linoleum floors and cinder block walls painted a faded white. Only it wasn’t just the space that was less than beautiful but the spirit of the woman who ran the place. We would show up mid-morning lugging all that bread only to have her snap at us. Worse, she snapped at the folks who were there for assistance. More than once I heard her bark out, “Look, you people are going to have to wait. I’m on the phone right now. And you’re going to have to shut up while you wait. I’ll be with you in a minute.” After hanging up, she would ask, “Ok, so what do you want?”

When the poor are fed, justice is served. Christians believe that. But there was nothing beautiful about this particular church’s food ministry. Can justice exist apart from beauty? And what about beauty without justice?

In Kansas City, where I live, city officials recently decided to refurbish one of the oldest fountains in town. Kansas City prides itself on its many beautiful fountains, but this one had fallen into disrepair partially because of its location in a poorer part of town. While many residents were excited about the project, the estimated cost of \$3.6 million raised several eyebrows. Some folks wondered why the money couldn’t be spent on something more practical, like improving the schools or providing for the poor. This sounds like a scenario enacted in some churches when they choose to buy a pipe organ or refurbish a sanctuary.

Mike Graves is the William K. McElvaney visiting professor of preaching and director of continuing education at Saint Paul Institute at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri.

When worship happens in beauty, God is honored. Christians believe that too. But what about justice? Can beauty and justice coexist, or must the church choose between them? It was Elton Trueblood who said the most important word in the Bible is “and.”² To put it another way, *beauty and justice* are three good preaching words.

I want us to think about preaching in relation to beauty and justice, and in more ways than one. We’ll consider a text from Mark’s Gospel: the story of the widow’s mites (Mark 12:38–44), a lectionary passage for Year A, which could be used for a stewardship sermon on beauty and justice. Prior to exploring the text and how we might preach on beauty and justice, I want to suggest that these two concepts are in some ways exegetical and homiletical categories in and of themselves. In particular, we’ll explore Mark’s own commitment to beauty and justice in the crafting of his Gospel; and in light of the Gospel writer’s own commitment to both, we’ll explore how not just the content of our sermons but the shaping of our sermons must deal with both ideas as well. We begin with a brief recounting of recent homiletical theory and practice.

THE BATTLE OF THE METAPHORS

A seismic shift in sermonizing happened in 1958. That was the year when H. Grady Davis dared to publish a preaching book with the word *design* in the title—*Design for Preaching*.³ Prior to that, homiletical scholars relied on metaphors drawn mostly from construction. Only a few years earlier, W.E. Sangster wrote *The Craft of Sermon Construction*.⁴ Sure, the word *craft* was in the title, but this wasn’t in the sense of Hobby Lobby—more like Home Depot, the craft of a tradesman building a solid sermon the way you might build a house. Picture architectural blueprints and a hard hat, if it helps.

Yet, here was Davis using the word *design* and the metaphor of a tree. He spoke of the sermon growing out of the text’s soil, of organic sermon

We need not think of sermons as dull lectures, lacking artistry; nor need we conceive of preaching as an experiential event lacking substance. . . . There is a way to honor justice and beauty in our approach to preaching.

design. He used poetry and encouraged creativity. In a homiletic world that had been dominated by building it right, Davis talked about nurturing a sermon into existence. Picture a woman talking to the flowers in her garden, if it helps. (It is worth noting how the increase of women preachers has paralleled the rise of more artistic expressions of preaching in recent decades.⁵)

This homiletic battle of the metaphors was more than cosmetic; this was a theological

struggle for the soul of preaching. Karl Barth’s insistence that the sermon is solely a matter of being true to the text, speaking for God, period (no illustrations, no introductions, no attention to crafting of images), was in fact a vote for justice over beauty, even if those words were not used *per se*.⁶

While the revolution that began with Davis—further nurtured by Fred Craddock and Eugene Lowry, to name just a few luminaries⁷—was artistic in nature, some critics believed it was possible to do so at the expense of weightier matters. More than one scholar noted that attention to plot and metaphor could result in beautiful but empty sermons.⁸

So why must we choose? Surely there is room for theology *and* artistry in our sermonizing. We need not think of sermons as dull lectures, lacking artistry; nor need we conceive of preaching as an experiential event lacking substance. Just as there is a way to honor justice and beauty in our approach to preaching, let us consider a text that speaks to both as well, even if the history of its interpretation indicates otherwise.

TWO MITES, TWO INTERPRETATIONS

The story of the widow’s mites (Mark 12:38–44) is well-known and deceptively straightforward. In Mark’s account, Jesus and his disciples are in the temple courtyard when in the midst of wealthy worshipers offering their gifts to God, a widow places two small coins in the receptacle. Then Jesus says, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to

the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (Mark 12:43-44).

While the narrative describes what happened, Jesus’ response provides an interpretive lens by which to understand the event. “Truly, I tell you, [a Greek construction stressing the significance of what follows] this poor widow [something of a redundancy given the status of widows] has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.” He adds that the wealthy have given “out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” In this one sentence is the heart of Mark’s narrative.

Until fairly recently the story has been interpreted as an example of stewardship, period. And why not? The woman has given her all, and Jesus takes notice of her generosity. Scholars refer to the account as a “beautiful story” or the widow’s offering as “a beautiful act.” Over the centuries, a countless number of preachers have placed this woman’s story before the congregation during stewardship campaigns, and in the spirit of Jesus, asked the congregation to give sacrificially.

Many commentators think the story speaks for itself even if a range of interpretations have been offered over the years: “The true measure of gifts is not how much is given but how much remains behind,” or “It is not the amount one gives that matters but the *spirit* in which the gift is given,” or “The true gift is to give everything we have.”⁹ Most likely, one or more of these traditional interpretations sound familiar, either something you have preached or heard proclaimed growing up in church.

But biblical scholar Addison Wright’s own work with this story signaled a change in its interpretation, one followed by many interpreters today. For him, the words of Jesus are not commendation but condemnation. He points to two contexts in particular: Jesus’ strong words against withholding support for one’s parents even if the money is given to God (teachings on Corban in Mark 7:10-13) and the more immediate context in which Jesus has just warned against religious leaders who “devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40).¹⁰ According to Wright, “Jesus’ saying is not a penetrating insight on the

measuring of gifts; it is a lament.”¹¹ No wonder, then, as they leave the temple with the disciples gawking at its splendor and beauty, Jesus warns them that every stone will come tumbling down (Mark 13:1-2). Although some contemporary scholars are not persuaded,¹² many persons now follow Wright’s lead.¹³

So what shall we do with this story? If we interpret the narrative as an act of beautiful worship, what shall we say about the apparent injustice, widows neglected and a place of worship built on the backs of the poor? If we interpret the story as lament over injustice, what does that say about the church’s penchant for beauty and this woman’s gift? As preachers we are presented with such interpretive decisions all the time, and most weeks we simply decide. It’s hard to imagine an alternative, but perhaps Mark’s own approach in the crafting of his Gospel can offer some insights.

LET THE READER UNDERSTAND: MARK’S ARTISTRY AND OURS

Robert Fowler argues that indirection is the standard mode of communication for Mark, more so than any other Gospel. For instance, Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). What he does not do is clarify which things are which. In the story of the widow, does Jesus commend her for giving “all she had to live on” or for giving “her whole life”? Both readings are possible.

Fowler demonstrates how this pattern of indirection invites readers into a narrative event, a happening. He writes, “Indirect language works predominantly along the rhetorical axis of language to affect the reader rather than predominantly along the referential axis of language to convey information.”¹⁴

Similarly, indirection is part and parcel of the narrative preaching movement, a strategy we might consider when preaching this text. For centuries most preachers preferred sermons that use more periods and exclamation points than question marks and ellipses. Sermons sprinkled with “dot, dot, dot” were viewed as less than persuasive. But ever since Fred Craddock’s *Overhearing the Gospel* was published in the late 1970s, the notion of

indirection has been a key part of homiletics.¹⁵ Perhaps Mark's penchant for ambiguity suggests a preaching strategy for us here, namely exploring the tensions between beauty and justice rather than resolving those tensions. What if we do not have to pick between beauty and justice? How might we explore this topic in light of the church's current debate on beauty and justice?

These were some of the questions I wrestled with in this text as I prepared to preach it last summer. The church, which I had served as interim minister some ten years earlier, was a congregation committed to beauty and justice. While I served there, we dedicated their refurbished sanctuary. I also knew of the church's active role in justice issues. What follows, then, is the sermon I preached from this passage. I offer it here in hopes of providing an example of how we might use ambiguity and questioning in our own preaching as we wrestle with beauty *and* justice.

A SAMPLE SERMON

“The Voice of Fairness”

Mark 12:41–44

It's a short story, and I do mean short. This passage is only four verses in our English translations, only seventy-five words in the Greek text. That's short, but what an amazing story. You heard it, and you've likely heard it before. Jesus is in the temple—not the synagogue, the weekly place of Sabbath worship—the grand and glorious temple, where God resides, where sacrifices and ceremonies take place. This is the place of offerings and tithes, religious giving. This is a place that takes your breath away with its splendor.

The scene unfolds in an area that was most likely the temple court, an outer court where the receptacles were placed for worshipers to make their offerings. Those who wished could see what was happening, which sometimes led to public displays of wealth. Among those who see this scene unfold is none other than Jesus, who is sitting opposite the treasury. In the line of folks are several wealthy people. Then, as now, you could probably

identify them by what they wore. You've been to a church where Brooks Bros. suits were the dress code, haven't you. And while today we drop in bills and checks so that it's nearly impossible to know the amount of anyone's gift, they put in coins, large amounts of coins, no doubt. In a play on words, Mark says many of them put in much. And then in the midst of all this wealth, a poor widow (which is a redundant expression, to be sure) puts in two small coins, adding up to a penny or so.

And for everyone who has ever passed the plate in Christian worship—taking it from the woman in the fur coat and handing it to the little girl with the nickel in her sweaty palm—and thought, *I wonder what God thinks about this whole religious enterprise of giving*, here is your answer. Mark lets us in on the mindset of Jesus. He says, “Truly I tell you (which means this is really important), this widow has put in more than anyone else, because the others gave out of abundance, while she has contributed out of her poverty.” If we didn't have the words of Jesus here, we'd have to draw our own conclusions. But with his words here in red

letters and all, the mystery is solved.

Or maybe not. Turns out, this story is short but it's not simple. There is an age-old interpretation, one you're probably familiar with, that here Jesus commends the widow for her sacrifice. Read that way, he can be paraphrased to say, “Wow (that's close to the Greek expression), what this woman has done is amazing. All these rich folks gave a portion of their wealth, but she gave it all (her whole livelihood).” That's the interpretation most of us are probably familiar with, a beautiful act of sacrifice.

There is another way to interpret this scene, however—an alternative way to hear Jesus' voice. It comes from paying attention to the immediate context, in which just a few verses earlier he warned about religious leaders who among other things devour widows' houses. If you hear this not as commendation but condemnation, the very same words of Jesus come out completely different. The voice of Jesus sounds disappointed, maybe even disgusted, “This poor widow has put in more than

Perhaps Mark's penchant for ambiguity suggests a preaching strategy for us here, namely exploring the tensions between beauty and justice rather than resolving those tensions.

anyone (a kind of ‘that’s not right’), all she had to live on (or ‘her whole life’).”

If you hear it the first way, the traditional sort of reading, then you probably hear the voices of ministers you have known. It’s stewardship time, time to figure out how to support the ministries of the church. So the pastor reads this story and says something like, “Following the example of this widow’s beautiful act of sacrifice, we too are called to give sacrificially.”

But if you hear it the other way, then it becomes a very different story. I remember a few years ago there was a large church in the Kansas City area that was building an even larger sanctuary. This is one of those churches Garrison Keillor describes as “Six Flags over Jesus.” One Sunday the minister held up a wedding ring that had belonged to one of the widows in the church before she donated it to the building fund. The pastor held it up as an example to be followed, a model of sacrifice; but I know some folks who heard it the other way, that the pastor ought to be ashamed of accepting such a gift.

These competing interpretations, these competing voices, are the voices of beauty and justice. The church, of course, has always cared about both, and for good reason because both describe the very nature of God. And so it’s in our DNA to build beautiful places of worship and to feed the poor. I think about the ministry you have to the Congolese refugees these days, and the refurbishing of this sanctuary in the late ’90s. Beauty and justice. Justice and beauty. That is the church’s inheritance.

Unfortunately, we have sometimes acted as if we had to choose between the two. We’re like a highschooler stuck on a question during the ACT exam, trying to decide between A and C, knowing only one can be right. So what will it be, beauty or justice? It’s like that scene just a few pages later in chapter 14 of Mark’s Gospel, when a woman anoints Jesus with costly perfume. The bystanders call it a waste, noting how the money could have been given to the poor; but Jesus calls it a good thing (“beautiful” in Greek). For some reason the church thinks it has to choose.

A couple of weeks ago we went to “Shakespeare in the Park,” just across the way from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art on the Country Club Plaza. It was their summer production of *Othello*. Shakespeare in the Park is just what you might expect, beautiful people in a beautiful setting, most

of them with beautiful baskets—wine and cheese enjoyed on a blanket in the summer evening. Contrast that with most soup kitchens run by churches. I know lots of churches that feed the poor, even the homeless, but I know of very few who do so with beauty. No, if the church decides to help migrant farm workers, it’s usually a PB & J in a paper bag with a bottle of water. Justice, sure, but with little or no attention to beauty. If a congregation decides to participate in Habitat for Humanity, is crown molding too extravagant?

It was Elton Trueblood who suggested that the most important word in the Bible is *and*. What if it’s possible to hear this Gospel story both ways, beauty *and* justice? The immediate context does seem to condemn the religious leaders, but Jesus also appears to commend the widow for her generous gift. As some scholars have noted, she does what Jesus has been asking folks to do all along—she gives her all. For twelve chapters now Jesus has been asking potential followers to surrender everything. The rich man didn’t want to do that. Jesus’ disciples weren’t so sure either, “Uh, Lord, we’ve given up everything. What’s in it for us?” But for this woman, this is her offering to God.

What if this story stresses both, beauty and justice? And what if the best way to fight injustice is with beauty? I don’t know if you heard about what happened last winter up in Vermont. Some two dozen high school students broke into the home where Robert Frost spent many of his summers. They threw a party, smashing china, soiling the carpets with urine, even burning some furniture to keep warm. The damage was more than \$10,000. Part of the court-ordered punishment was for them to take a class on Frost’s poetry at nearby Middlebury College. Maybe fighting injustice with beauty is the best road to take. So if you’re sick of an unjust war that never seems to end, you can make a crude poster and stand on the street corner, or you can write a song or make a piece of pottery, practicing random acts of beauty in an ugly world.

Or maybe the relationship between beauty and justice is such that what counts for beauty gets redefined in the face of injustice. Not the Hollywood version of beauty but something else entirely. I read a fascinating book earlier this summer, *How Starbucks Saved My Life*.¹⁶ It’s not about some nut who couldn’t live without his grande lattes; it’s about something else entirely.

Michael Gates Gill was a 50-something advertising guru who worked in Manhattan. Making six figures and wearing Brooks Bros. suits, a \$4 cup of coffee was the way to start his day. But he lost his job, and although he tried to make a go of it on his own, by the time he was 60, his life had come apart. Divorced, diagnosed with a brain tumor, unemployed, and broke, he did something he couldn't afford—he stepped into a Starbucks for what would surely be his last little treat in life. The manager, an African-American woman, was conducting a job fair, and jokingly she asked if he wanted a job. And in his own joking way he said he did. But what started out as a joke between them became a real offer.

And so this Yale-educated executive humbled himself and became a wage-earner at a Starbucks. Before he ever learned to make all those fancy drinks, his first job was to keep the restrooms clean. He came to have a sense of pride in his work. On one occasion he spied a homeless man heading toward the men's room. He intercepted him and lied, saying the restroom was closed for cleaning. His supervisor called him into her office and chewed him out. She said that everyone who enters the store is a guest worthy of being shown hospitality. Over time, Michael Gates Gill came to see people differently, the mostly African Americans he worked with and whom he had never noticed when he was a customer, but also all the people of Manhattan, the folks in suits and the ones covered in tattoos. He came to see everything differently. He came to see cleaning the restroom as his one crazy act of restoring beauty to the world. A new worldview.

That's what happens in the Gospels, and in this little story in Mark's Gospel—it challenges our worldview. If it's both—beauty and justice—then the voice we hear in this story is what poet Alice Fulton calls the voice of fairness. Fair, she says, is the perfect word—fair as in lovely and beautiful; fair as in just and right.

This really is an amazing story, and for at least one other reason—because it's a kind of microcosm of the whole Gospel story. In the face of injustice this widow lays down her all, just like Jesus will do only a few pages later in his crucifixion. And somehow the cross, the ultimate symbol of cruelty and injustice, becomes beautiful in the eyes of those who believe. May it be so. Amen.¹⁷

Notes

1. Feodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans., Eva M. Martin. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1868), 395.
2. Elton Trueblood, cited in James Forbes, "Sounding the trumpet today: Changing lives and redeeming the soul of society in the 21st century church," in Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, ed., Paul Raushenbush (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 277.
3. H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958).
4. W.E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951).
5. See Beverly Zink-Sawyer's helpful overview of this topic in her essay, "A match made in heaven: The intersection of gender and narrative preaching," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry*, Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 41-54.
6. See Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).
7. Although both Craddock and Lowry authored many influential books, their two pioneering works are Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); and Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980). Both have been revised and updated, further testimony of their impact on the craft of preaching.
8. For example, see Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).
9. Addison G. Wright, S.S., "The widow's mites: Praise or lament?—A matter of context," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 257-58; emphasis his.
10. *Ibid.*, 260-62.
11. *Ibid.*, 262.
12. For instance, see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: Harper, 2006), 149-52, who notes that Jesus' warning was directed at scribes who devour widow's houses in Mark 12:38-40, while scribes would not have served in the temple where this scene takes place. M. Eugene Boring, *Mark in The New Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 352, believes that liberation theologies have clouded the judgment of some scholars, resulting in a diminishment of the widow's exemplary giving.

13. André Resner Jr., follows this approach in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed., Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 272-76. Resner also views the story as good news for those who give despite abuses by religious leaders.
14. Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Fortress, 1991), 222-23.
15. Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).
16. Michael Gill Gates, *How Starbucks Saved My Life* (New York: Gotham, 2007).
17. In addition to Fowler's commentary, the following resources were especially helpful in the preparation of this sermon: Alice Fulton, online interview at www.theatlantic.com, accessed July 13, 2004; Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark in Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); and Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).