Trying Hard . . .
Not To Be Ugly

Brian Zahnd

We live in an ugly time. That's how I see it anyway. Racism is on the rise, xenophobia is in vogue, and mercy walks the plank. Children are imprisoned, journalists are dismembered, and rage is all the rage. It's an ugly time.

So, I'm trying hard not to be ugly. But it's not easy. To be ugly about all the ugliness is easy. Of course, when I insert my own ugliness into the fray I don't call it being ugly, I call it being right. I tell myself that my rage is like the whip-wielding, table-flipping Christ in the temple.

But in my more contemplative moments, I have to admit that most of the time my rage is more like Peter cutting off an ear than Jesus cleansing the temple. Just because Jesus did something doesn't mean that I should try to do it. After all, Jesus walked on water too.

So I want to resist the ugliness, not by being ugly about it, not by raging against it, not by hurling insults at those caught up in mimetic ugliness, but by being something other.

What I'm saying is that I want to try to be beautiful. I'm not sure I'm called to imitate Christ in his rage, but I know I'm called to imitate Christ on the cross. It's the cruciform that is the definitive form of Christian beauty. Crucifixion is ugly unless we imitate Christ and pray,
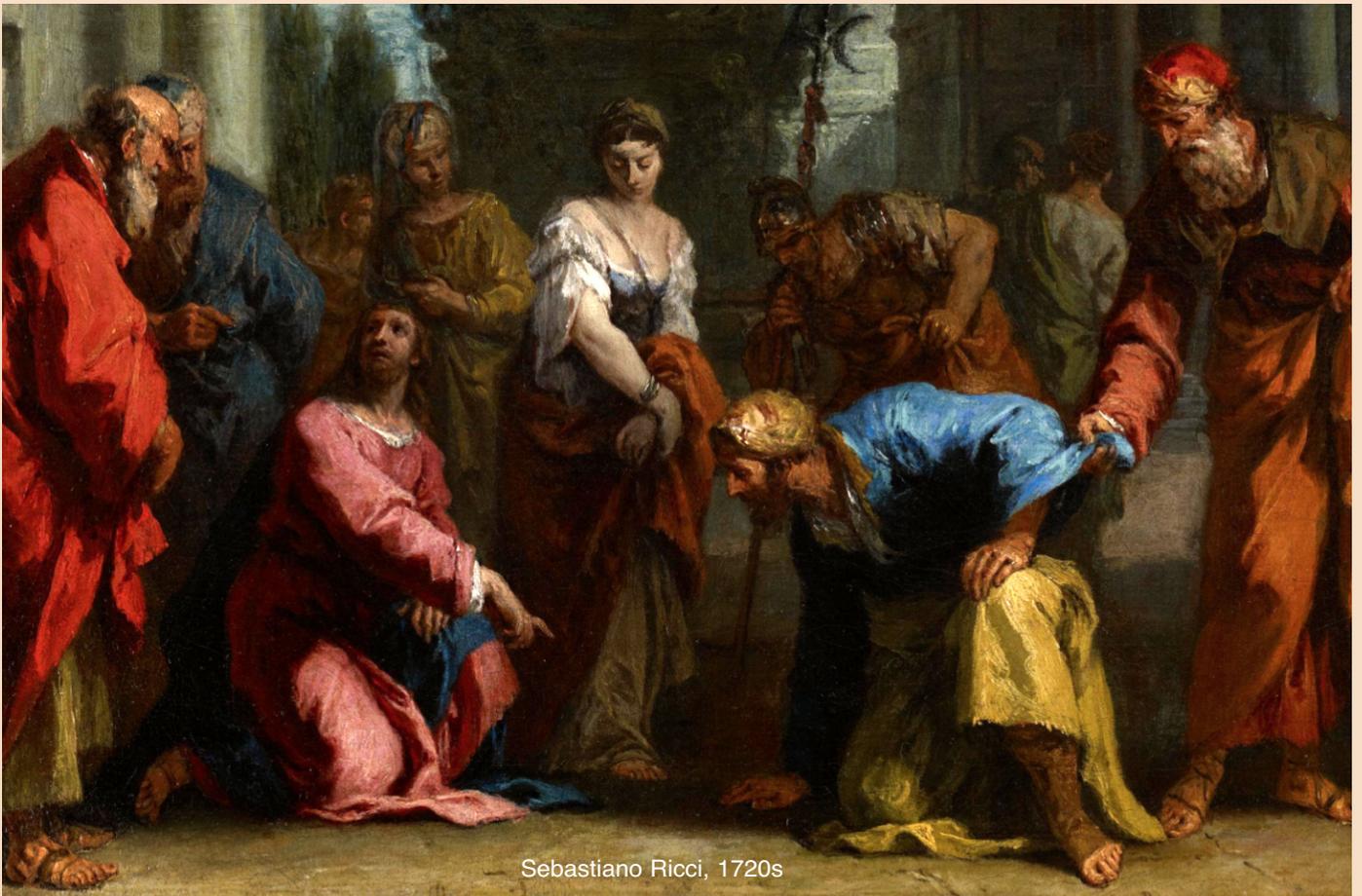
Sebastiano Ricci, 1720s

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is the beauty that saves the world.

THE BOUNTY OF THE CROSS

At the Cross, the sin of the world coalesced into a monstrous singularity of *deicide*—the murder of God. But God in Christ absorbed the singularity of sin and forgave the world. This is why we depict the crucifixion in terms of artistic beauty. **Good Friday was simultaneously the ugliest moment and the most beautiful moment in history.**

The scapegoating, the mockery, the cruelty, the barbarism, the violence was all ugly. But the ugliness was overcome by the beauty of Jesus forgiving it all. In the collision of human ugliness and divine beauty, beauty wins. Beauty will save the world.

Maybe you can be trusted to wield rage righteously, but I'm pretty sure I can't. My rage will most likely do little more than add to the ugliness. In trying hard not to be ugly, I need to choose a posture of compassion. I don't mean a quietism or passivity that avoids prophetic confrontation, rather I mean a prophetic confrontation that comes from a place of genuine love for all—love not just for the victims, but for the victimizers as well.

When we decide that some sinners are unworthy of being loved, we have sided with the crowd against Christ. The phenomenon of the satan can operate just as diabolically among those who are on the right side of the issue.

When the crowd of cruel Pharisees was ready to stone the woman caught in adultery, Jesus didn't incite a righteous crowd to stone the cruel crowd—that's how the satan wins. What Jesus did was to break the spell of the mob with a call to individual self-reflection.

"Jesus said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' ... When they heard it they went away one by one, beginning with the elders" (John 8:7, 9).

THROWING ROCKS IS UGLY

This is a beautiful story because Jesus took the ugliness of the mob out of it. They came as a blood-thirsty mob, but they dispersed as individuals contemplating their own sin.

> **"... throwing stones at stone-throwers isn't the Jesus Way, because it isn't the way of love.."**

Rage, no matter how justified, could not have done this. The crowd ready to stone the woman knew they were right—they had Bible verses to prove it. And I'm sure Jesus could have assembled a second crowd that knew they were right to stone the first crowd. (*We are never more self-righteous than when we are attacking the self-righteous.*)

But throwing stones at stone throwers isn't the Jesus way, because it's not the way of love. Jesus wasn't just trying to save the woman caught in adultery from being stoned, Jesus was also trying to save the individuals caught up in the satanic *mimesis* [mutual mimicry] of the crowd. Righteous rage would have ended with the ugliness of someone being stoned. But Jesus saved everyone involved through acts of contemplation and forgiveness. This is beautiful. And this is the beauty I want to imitate.

LEAVING RAGE BEHIND

Instead of imitating the enraged—who may very well be right in what they are raging about—I want to imitate Jesus who in a beautiful way defused a mob and forgave a sinner.

I'm going to make a concentrated effort to avoid the perpetuation of rage. I'm going to give more time to contemplative prayer and long walks in quiet places. I'm going to read more Thomas Merton.

I really want to give up on rage. I want to try to become a sage. That probably sounds pretentious, but it really is what I humbly aspire to. As I approach sixty, I might as well at least try to become a sage. What else am I going to do? As the French poet Charles Péguy said, *"There is only one tragedy in the end: Not to have been a saint."*

I'm trying hard not to be ugly.

I want to live a more beautiful life. I know I can't trust myself with rage.

On the edge of sixty, I want to try to become a sage. If you think of it, pray for me. ❏

Brian Zahnd is the pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri and the author of Postcards from Babylon.