

In the early days of the pandemic when many parts of the world were in lockdown, lots of people took to social media to find community and company. While some posts tried to rally us with humor or sharing how they were adapting, many posts had an edge of anger or resentment. Into that milieu, an artist in Great Britain named Charlie Mackesy intentionally presented a very different message. Charlie has been a professional artist for over two decades, yet his art is not a thing unto itself; it is an extension of himself and his chosen mode of communication. Longtime friend Bear Grylls said when he was going through some of the most difficult times of his life, Charlie sent him little drawings that were a source of comfort for him because they made him feel less alone.

It was similar drawings, simple pictures with a few words, that Charlie Mackesy put on his social media. The pictures mostly featured four recurring characters: a young boy, a small mole, a shy fox, and a big horse. They didn't have adventures as much as they simply talked to each other in gentle affirming conversations.

That, said Charlie, was the point of his drawings, to start positive conversations with one another. The drawings did much more, they seemed to resonate, to be just what the world needed at the time. Soon people were sharing them with friends and before long people were leaving lovely comments about how the drawings were helping them get through a difficult time. The comments also asked when Charlie was going to publish a book.

Those comments were not missed by publishers, who reached out to Charlie and eventually published the book of his drawings aptly titled *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse*. Perhaps you are familiar with it. The book became a best-seller, with everyone from schoolteachers to celebrities reading the book to their students or audiences in person and online. Not surprisingly, the book was adapted into a lovely, animated movie recently nominated for an Academy Award.

Neither the book nor the movie is dramatic. There are no car chases, no explosions, no swearing, no cleverness, no villain to defeat. They are instead gentle conversations that center around love. Not romantic love, not love of possession, but the kind of love Jesus showed in his life, death, and resurrection, the love of God that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, which we heard a section of in our Gospel today.

The trouble with the Sermon on the Mount is that it can be either so familiar it loses its impact, or so unfamiliar it is difficult to relate to or understand. What was Jesus talking about when he said things like, “Blessed are those who mourn,” and “blessed are the meek”? Jesus seemed to be calling out the suffering or outcast in society and reversing their role as those cast aside for their inability to produce or conform to certain societal expectations. Usually when a person calls themselves blessed, they mean they are fortunate, they have what they want, they are happy, they are eating at expensive restaurants, going on exotic vacations, have a nice house, car, and family. They can pay all their bills and their bodies are in good shape, attractive even. But the people Jesus called blessed don’t seem to fit that definition. And that, biblical scholars and commentators agree, was most likely, the point.

The Beatitudes are like the Magnificat in they turn the values we are most familiar with upside down. They challenge the assumption that humankind exists to consume and produce things to be consumed, and our value only comes from our physicality, abilities, or status. In God’s kingdom, through God’s eyes, value comes not from what we look like, or how physically fit we are, how much money we have, how many degrees we have, our age, if we are married or single, if we have children or grandchildren, or even how good we feel. What gives us value in God’s eyes simply, like the message of Charlie Mackesy’s drawings states and the Beatitudes describe, is being loved by God.

The Beatitudes are a message of comfort for the people who are grieving, who suffer from illness of body, mind, and spirit, who are frustrated by the lack of equality and justice in society, who are quiet, who seek to end conflicts instead of create drama. The comfort of the Beatitudes is the assurance suffering is not a punishment from God, nor what anyone deserves. In the Beatitudes there is the powerful and beautiful truth that suffering is the place where God and humanity can meet, that through Jesus, God meets us where we are, even when we suffer.

The Beatitudes can also be mistaken as a forecast of what life after death is like, which is sometimes used to justify unnecessary suffering in this life. That was not Jesus’ intention. For example, Jesus wasn’t saying if you grieve now, you won’t grieve after you go to heaven. Instead, Jesus was lifting grief up by showing grief to be part of and an expression of love. The comfort promised is not the removal of sadness, it is the promise to come along side and be in the sadness together. Which is hard for people to do, even the most empathetic person. But it is part of Incarnation, of God becoming human to dwell with us. God did not become incarnate to punish us or recreate the world in our image, making what we want it to be, but to be with us in this world as it is, to remind us God’s love is not for a few, but for us all.

There are sermons on the Beatitudes that direct us to look to those who suffer with compassion, which falsely assumes that those listening to or reading those sermons don't need the comfort of the Beatitudes. If the past few years have taught us anything, it is that we all have suffered, perhaps differently or for different reasons, and in that suffering we can find a commonality, or a solidarity that can manifest in care for each other, empathy, and love. Perhaps there are times when we all need the comfort that is expressed in *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse* that the greatest strength is gentleness, that courage is asking for help, because that means we aren't giving up, or as Jesus said in the Beatitudes, the meek inheriting the earth. The book's success is defined as love, and Jesus said the same thing when he said the pure in heart will see or recognize God. We all can give and receive such much-needed comfort and when we do, God's Kingdom comes a little closer.

I know the world isn't yet a place where the merciful receive mercy and are instead often taken advantage of. I know at times life is difficult, unfair, unjust, and can be cruel. But that doesn't mean we have to be. We can, like in Micah 6:8, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. To help us figure out how to do this, we have, among the many gifts of God, Jesus' teaching called the Beatitudes, the blessings that can help us look for and identify when love really does manifest in the world. It can come from anywhere, like a kind and humble artist posting his drawings on social media, and from any of us. Even if this love doesn't mention God or Jesus directly, we can recognize it as holy by how it can ease the burdens or fears of life, making life a little less difficult and a little more beautiful because it reveals God is not far away, but is here with us. The way Charlie Mackesy said it, "Sometimes all you hear about is the hate, but there is more love in this world than you could possibly imagine."