

From Beauty to Compassion

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, November 22, 2020)

God's beauty within me acknowledges and honors God's beauty within you.

On this final Sunday of our contemplative series, 'Beguiled by Beauty,' we recall the ancient understanding of the theology of beauty -- the Creator set in motion a world of immense beauty filled with diversity and goodness. Beguiled by its beauty the Creator entered Creation and in so doing everything came to hold the essence of divine beauty.

In her book *Beguiled by Beauty*, Dr. Wendy Farley suggests that "we are made for the Beloved and created with a capacity to recognize the profound beauty of all creation," and while all life holds boundless beauty, the great irony of human life is how alienated we have become from it. In other words, humanity has lost sight of and become disconnected from the divine beauty that resides within us, others, and nature. This disconnection has resulted in much harmful woundedness, dehumanizing injustice and brutal disregard of life.

Last week I spoke about the importance of reaffirming that everyone of us, with all our particularities, is beautifully made and wonderfully loved. The theology of beauty teaches that when we recognize our own inner beauty and know that we are Beloved of God, our hearts open and we understand that all people are Beloveds of God and that all people hold within them divine beauty and goodness. This is important because an inability to see and value goodness and beauty in others can cause tremendous harm.

My reflection this morning is perhaps the most essential message of the series. It reminds us of our call to be followers of Jesus, to be compassionate and to seek justice. Compassion and justice cannot exist in a world in which people fail to see divine beauty in all created life. If we are to be compassionate followers of Jesus, we must awaken to this beauty.

Living in a world in which there is so much violence and loathing, we can become extremely disheartened and forget that life is beautiful. How can we keep from forgetting? How can we remain courageous and caring? How can we stay interested in the world when we feel powerless, overwhelmed, and hopeless? How can we orient ourselves toward a life of compassion and justice?

Throughout this series we have been leaning that contemplation enables us to remember that life is good, beautiful and worthwhile. Contemplative practices, like those shared during this series, help us to open our awareness to our beautiful humanity and that of others, to

discover the courage we need to face the truth of injustice and suffering and gain the inner resources we need not to become discouraged.

The more attuned to God's beauty in life we become, the more we value and honor all humanity. We see that people are real, that they suffer as we do, they love as we do, they laugh and celebrate as we do. When we recognize the beauty in others, compassion arises, and we see what causes so much of the harm and injustice that exists. We see that fear of difference is so often the cause of racism, brutality and hate. We see how cruelty, blatant destruction, greed and exploitation painfully denies human dignity and life's richness.

Dr. Farley believes that many of the injustices in life occur because we categorize people all the time. A person is brutalized, a Black person or First Nations woman killed because they are a category, not a real individual. Those who would bomb or gun down people in their places of worship or on the streets are directing their hatred toward, what Farley calls a "delusional category," unaware that they are harming precious individual sacred beings.

When we understand that people are real, beloveds of God, beautifully made and wonderfully loved, this breaks through our consciousness, through our categories and prejudice, and awakens our compassion. "You notice that the man, who is cold and hungry, standing in front of you exists as much as you do, and is really cold and hungry—that is enough. The rest follows itself."

I recall an email I received from a person who wanted to share the story of her homeless alcoholic friend who had just died. She said that her friend probably drank herself to death because she had no one to advocate for her. But, "I don't give up on people," she said. This person's ability to see beauty and goodness in her friend helped to ensure that her friend's family was with their mom at the end, even if they had not seen their mother for years.

"When we see the beauty of beings, of community, and of creation, we desire for them the right to have their own inherent beauty acknowledged" and valued and we mourn deeply the assaults on them. We feel compassion, a genuine desire to walk with them in whatever way we are able. Jesus lived compassion. I can imagine that he recognized the sacredness and beauty of the oppressed and ostracized and therefore was able to connect with their suffering. He bore up the other, embraced and loved them. It was as if his own well-being was bound up in the well-being of the other.

While we cannot respond to every bad thing that happens to others, we can allow ourselves to feel it, and in feeling it to begin to think about what our response might be. Dr. Farley says that the “greater divine beauty of life is helping to alleviate the suffering of others in whatever way we feel capable of doing that”. You can ask yourself, ‘how can I continue to position myself toward the good and the beauty in this particular situation?’

Civil rights activist Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Each of us must figure out what makes us come alive in our response to suffering and injustice. Farley says that “we cannot understand ourselves as Christian if we do not dedicate ourselves to the well-being of others.”

We are created with the capacity to recognize the profound beauty in life so we must continue to open our awareness to that beauty through contemplative practice and action. The more we perceive the world as beautiful, we cannot harm it and be indifferent to its pain. We become compassionate because we fall in love with life in a new way.

To live with compassion and courage we must nourish ourselves in whatever ways we can. You do not go into nature, your garden, your quiet room, to escape life, but to discover a more authentic life. You go into these places to be nurtured, to open your awareness to beauty and to infinite goodness. Contemplation strengthens and sustains us in the depths of our inside places so that when we leave those special places, we have the resources to be courageous and to respond to life’s injustices with daring compassion.

When Isaiah writes, "how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good news." What is beautiful is the whole message of release from suffering that creates a welcomed peace. This image of a messenger bringing good news is a transforming sight and cause for joy. As Christians we are called to be messengers of good news, to help restore justice and bring peace, to unveil more beauty in the world through our earnest compassion.

Each one of you, given your resources and challenges, can discover for yourself what makes you come alive so that you can contribute to all that makes life fair and just. It is my prayer that as we close this series we commit to practicing “a way of beauty” that makes life “rich, courageous, generous, and joyful” and that we never stop being active compassionate agents of Divine Beauty in the world.