

Beauty, Contemplation, and Compassion

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, October 18, 2020)

The Beauty of God within me acknowledges and honours the beauty of God within you.

Today we begin a new five-week contemplative series entitled, "Beguiled by Beauty." During this time, we will explore the theology of beauty, and perhaps acquire a new appreciation for beauty, seeing it as God sees it and even come to experience it as the first step toward a divine way of seeing.

Throughout the series, I will draw on insights from theologian Dr. Wendy Farley, whose book "Beguiled by Beauty," will be available this fall. We will come to understand that all things are beautiful—not by a standard of "pretty" as seen by our eyes, but by an essence of sacred worth that is sensed by the spirit. Farley sees beauty as the root and heart of compassion and justice, the threshold to Divine Goodness, and contemplation allows us to more profoundly see this deeper truth, to see beauty as God sees it. Farley shows how beauty, contemplation, and compassion when intertwined enable us to be resilient and strong, more faithful, and more loving.

The title, "Beguiled by Beauty," comes from the writings of an ancient monk named Pseudo-Dionysius. He believed that the beauty of creation beguiled God, that God fell in love with the cosmos, was charmed by all life's interrelatedness, and held deep love and affection for all beings.

Dionysius held that while the Creator created all things and existed outside of it that he was so intrigued by its goodness and beauty that he yearned to connect with it. God was enticed to leave his eternal dwelling place and come to abide in all things even as he could abide outside all things. In other words, the Creator is so deeply and completely in love with the cosmos and creation that God decides to dwell in it and outside of it for all eternity.

This theology of beauty suggests that the Holy One holds tremendous affection for all created life, and it believes that all life has its individual integrity and beauty. This theology teaches that for humanity, beauty can become the threshold into a divine way of seeing. But how God sees beauty is not how we typically see it.

Our modern society has definitions of beauty that are based on assumptions of how something should look and how it is perceived. For example, if you google the word beauty, what often comes up are pictures of thin women and men with symmetrical facial features and perfect hair.

Altered by computer technology, these photos define for us what beauty is supposed to look like. Society determines what is and what is not beautiful.

The loveliness that beguiled God is precisely the opposite. To see beauty as God sees it is to see with the heart; it is a function of our spiritual selves. Spiritual guru Osho teaches that “real beauty has nothing to do with the face but with the luminosity that comes from within. It has nothing to do with the body but rather with the inner divine presence that vibrates throughout the body.”

In our lives, we are absorbed in our minds and experiences. Our emotions and bodies and ego pre-occupations are most vivid to us, so they are most present to us. Our lives, with their busyness, with their doing, being, accomplishing, struggling, and their challenges are what is most present to us, consequently, we stop noticing the depth of things. People and the wonders of life become less present to us so that we are unable to see the true beauty that delights God.

Farley suggests that when we see as God sees, we are distracted from our ego pre-occupations. When we are beguiled by beauty, we see something that takes us beyond all the things that fight for our attention. We fall in love with something deeper than ourselves, our energy is drawn to something other, something authentic and real.

Farley encourages people to watch the “Waste Land Movie,” to comprehend the meaning of divine beauty fully. It is a story of the garbage pickers of the world's largest landfill located in Rio de Janeiro. Through the eyes of the world, these trash pickers, who rifle through garbage to find items to recycle for money, are considered lepers of the modern world. They are smelly, dirty, and many of them are homeless. When people look at these trash pickers, they judge them and despise them, and many people are incapable of seeing the individual integrity and beauty of these garbage pickers.

Artist Vic Muniz visits the landfill and creates stunning works of art from what the trash pickers find. He does not create beauty; instead, he uncovers it, he reveals it. When these humble people see the works of art, they weep, because what they see changes them. For the first time they see themselves in a new way. They see themselves through the eye of the Holy One who has great affection and love for them. They see their individual beauty and dignity. Moniz invites people to see the humanity and beauty of the ‘least of these’ on earth: beauty that is always there, but often invisible to those who might judge and only see ugliness, rot, and filth.

We are so often distracted with superficial notions of beauty, and humans hold so tightly to prejudice, judgment, and hate that we do not see

the depth of beauty in others that God so loves. How do we learn to see the beauty that is present in all life? How can we be beguiled? According to Farley, contemplation practices help us to begin that process. They enable us to open more doors and windows into ourselves that lead us to an awareness of the divine beauty within and around us.

For some people, when they hear the word contemplation, they immediately think about sitting in a room trying to calm their thoughts and breathing correctly, and for some people, these are valued practices.

Farley sees contemplation as a way of experiencing the world in the moment rather than a practice done in a specific way. It is taking everyday moments or letting everything around us be an opportunity for contemplative prayer. So, for example, you feel yourself getting more irritated as you listen to the news, hear your child crying, see the dishes piled in the sink, and smell the garbage that needs to be taken out.

So, you take the garbage out, and you simply stand for 10 seconds and breath in the air, look at the sky, see the stars or the sun, take in the silence, and be fully present in the moment. For 10 seconds, you intentionally pay attention to your surroundings; you open your mind, you awaken your heart— suddenly, you are refreshed.

Tiny micro-slices of time, switching one's intention and attention, can change one's perspective even for a few seconds. You go back into the house, and you notice how much you love your child even as she continues to cry. You turn off the news and put the dishes to wash. You feel refreshed and renewed.

Farley suggests that these 10 second moments can strengthen our inner resources, and the more you practice them, the greater the reward. You become less stressed, calmer, more at ease in the face of turmoil and more present to others and yourself. Life's challenges and struggles do not disappear but are put aside for a while. These contemplative moments renew and sustain us because they enable us to put down deep roots that stabilize us.

In our scripture video we heard about how the Cedar of Lebanon roots itself deep in the water. Roots are designed to feed and stabilize a tree. Contemplation allows us to put down deep roots into divine goodness and give us a bottomless well from which to draw strength and resilience. The more we nourish ourselves, the more able we become to move beyond our ego-preoccupations, our anger, our judgments, and see beauty as God sees. We become more compassionate.

When we perceive the world as beautiful, we cannot harm it and be indifferent. We can be more compassionate because we fall in love with life in a new way.

When mothers and fathers hear their baby crying for the first time at night, most do not engage in a moral calculus of what they should do. They jump out of bed and go to the baby. They are in love with this baby, in love with the wonder and beauty of this being.

It is easy to love nature and our families and friends. It is more challenging to love everything and everyone. When you fall in love, you do not engage in a moral calculus. You respond to suffering or pain or prejudice. When you fall in love with life, you can't want to destroy it. If you find yourself in a difficult encounter and take a 10 second contemplative moment, and if then you perceive in that moment, that the person standing in front of you is beautiful, is human, his or her joy and suffering matter to you.

As we allow ourselves to be fascinated by beauty and open our hearts to love we will see that there is a lot of suffering out there. Contemplation nourishes and strengthens us in our inmost being, in the depths of our inside places so that we have the bandwidth to be present as we need to be for ourselves and others.

My friends, life throws so much at us that can lead to imbalance. Often, we find ourselves in situations that are just too difficult, and we are being maimed and twisted. Hopefully, in stressful and challenging times, we will realize how important it is to take micro-slices of time to refresh, to feed ourselves on divine goodness, and to set down our roots in the wellspring of love.

When life gets tough, know that you are loved, cherished, and that your beauty beguiles the divine one. Through this series, I hope that you are refreshed, renewed, and become more present.

Through this series, I hope that you are refreshed, renewed, and become more present, and in so doing awaken fully to divine beauty.

Paul encourages us, be strengthened, Be rooted and grounded In love...Because you're going to need it...Because this beauty...It will change everything, and change is hard...Even when it's good...Be strengthened...

Because your heart...just might break open...To wondrous new possibilities...

And you may find yourself...opening up to impossible people...And impossible situations...that are possible now. Be strengthen. Amen.

