

Remembering.....

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, November 1 2020)

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

On this third Sunday of our contemplative series "Beguiled by Beauty," we continue to explore the theology of beauty, seeking to acquire an understanding of beauty as a divine way of seeing. The series itself is a contemplative practice that brings us again and again into the awareness of ourselves as being beautifully created and wholly loved by God.

The fifth-century monk Dionysius believed that the Creator set in motion a world of immense beauty filled with diversity and goodness. The Creator was so beguiled by creation's beauty and held such deep love and affection for all beings, that the Divine entered creation and became one with it. In so doing, all life became permeated with beauty, and this beauty was saturated with the Divine. Everything came to hold the essence of divine beauty that enriches and nourishes us, but unfortunately, we can become disconnected from it. If we remain disconnected, we can forget that we hold divine beauty within us and that we are held in love by the Holy One.

According to theologian Wendy Farley, "when we disconnect from God's beauty within us, we become confused and lose our way. She writes, "If there is such a thing as sin, it is not the stain of guilt, we cannot wash out but forgetfulness that we are held with tender mercy by our Beloved." In our world, with all its trauma, suffering, and struggle, we need to remember that we are divinely made and held in the warmth and comfort of love.

This morning, I will reflect on what causes us to forget our intimate connection with the beauty of the Divine, what helps us to remember that connection, and then, in remembering, how to find comfort in it.

The 16th-century mystic Teresa of Avila describes the soul as a "wonderful, beautiful, diamond-like structure with many chambers winding toward a center of inexplicable beauty." For Teresa, "humanity's deepest problem is that we have forgotten the great beauty of our soul and who dwells there." What might cause us to forget this 'inexplicable beauty' of our soul and who dwells there?

Farley teaches that our identities are formed by our society, by our relationships, work, school, and by the larger cultural narrative within which we live. God becomes an appendage to this identity. It is not that we do not believe in God. "It may be that even in our believing, our primary experience of ourselves is as ordinary people trying to survive in the

modern world." We forget that we are divine beings because our primary experience of ourselves is not as beautiful beings who hold the Divine within us, but human beings living life and endeavoring to survive.

The forgetting of our connection to divine beauty occurs as well because, when we think of life as beautiful, we imagine it to be peaceful, good and loving. But our reality of life is that it is a mess. We struggle to hold these two truths together as one. We walk in the beauty of nature to forget about the world's problems. When we listen to the news and all the world's troubles, we see that life is messy and complicated and not very beautiful at all.

We suffer greatly. We must deal with pandemics, complicated political situations, grief and moral turmoil, and much cruelty and destruction. Episcopal Priest and a modern-day mystic Cynthia Bourgeault, in an interview, was asked what breaks her heart. She said that what breaks her heart is seeing wanton violence crushing out hope in people. It is seeing the number of people who feel boxed in a system that is repressing them and seeing the devastating results of carelessness and cruelty. For Jesuit priest Richard Rohr, what breaks his heart is how all life's tragedies pile up and overflow into one big, clumped-together sadness and suffering that seems inescapable.

It is heartbreaking to see endless illness, death, war, loss, and grief. Violence and corruption are deeply troubling. The pandemic, natural disasters, abuse, and prejudice discourage the heart. It is understandable that all this suffering can cause us to lose sight of the Holy Goodness and loveliness of God, to forget the beauty of our soul and who dwells there.

14th Century English Christian mystic Julian of Norwich likened "humanity to people who have fallen into a ditch and cannot see where they are. Their bodies are full of pain and distraction. They feel isolated because they cannot see that they are intimately connected to God and to all beings." Cynthia Bourgeault says, "The wonderful possibility that exists in each one of us to be a transparent mirror of the Divine gets crushed, and you watch it get covered over with a hard edge and it seems to happen to all of us in some way. We put armor over our hearts to help us get through life."

There is good news. The early Christian and modern-day mystics talk about the importance of remembering, remembering that we are beautifully made and held in the loving arms of the divine so we can feel hopeful and be comforted.

Julian of Norwich survived an illness that took her to the brink of death. She witnessed the Hundred Years' War and saw brutal peasant

revolts, her community ravaged by the Black Death, and unprecedented floods and famine. Despite all that she saw and experienced, she held a deep and abiding trust in God's presence and love.

According to Farley, "even as every sphere of life was under intense assault, Julian was known to say, 'all will be well.' "Saying 'all will be well,' can sound trivial in the face of death, illness, and injustice because we know that, things are not going to be well. When Julian says, 'all will be well,' she does not say that none of this suffering is happening or that this horror does not matter."

Julian believed that it was essential to hold together as one both beauty and suffering. For Julian, suffering is part of the human experience and has many causes. What makes it hard is forgetting our being's beauty, how beloved we are, and knowing that God is good and holds us in our suffering. In the Christian mystic tradition, the image of Jesus on the cross is a dramatic symbol of how God fully enters our suffering and dwells within that anguish.

Farley says that when we remember the beauty of our being and whose we are, when we remember that we are deeply loved and cherished by the Creator, and although this does not make suffering go away, it will make the experience of it very different. Cynthia Bourgeault puts it this way, "With danger all around us we take the armor off our hearts knowing someone holds us."

The Hebrew people held fast to the belief that they were always held by God. Throughout the series, we are reading the Psalms. This poetry expresses a deep trust in God amid much horror and difficulty. In their creative and beautiful way, the psalms show that the world is not good but celebrates that God is always good. The psalms come from the lament tradition, where people in their suffering cry out in deep pain, but their faith in God never failed. God is good, God abides in their grief, God holds them with great love. When the people sang these psalms or prayed them, they were comforted and sustained.

Our ultimate Christian story is one of being loved. No pandemic, no suffering, no worldly upheaval can change that we are beautifully made and wonderfully cherished and held in love by the Creator.

My niece just had a baby. In the first few months of Audrey's life, Michelle would wrap her tightly in a blanket, giving Audrey the womb's continued experience where she had been wrapped in warmth and love. This is a beautiful image of how the Holy One holds us with warmth and love.

More than ever, we need to remember that life is good, that God is good, and that Holy Goodness dwells with us, making bearable what at times feels so unbearable. For Farley, contemplative practice helps us to remember who we truly are, and in remembering to awaken again to our soul's beauty and to the joy that Holy Goodness dwells within and with us. In whatever form they may take, contemplative practices enable us to know that all of life, its suffering and its beauty, is enfolded in God's love.

For our own well-being we need to take moments to wrap ourselves with the warmth of God's comfort and love. Farley suggests that you take some time each day to sit quietly with a blanket wrapped around you. As you sit, you drop your attention into your heart space, the organ of spiritual awareness. While in that heart space, you imagine yourself being surrounded by the soft, warm light of love. You let yourself reside in that warmth. As you rest in that heart space you may find yourself reconnecting with the beauty of your soul and who dwells there. You can close this contemplative quiet with a body prayer that was used by Julian of Norwich.

She emphasized the importance of praying with the whole self, including the body. This prayer, with its four movements, await, allow, accept, attend, done with sacred intention and slowness, gave her a sense of deep peace.

To begin, you close your eyes and breathe. You hold your hands cupped in front of you, waiting to receive. You sweep your hands above your head, beginning to feel for God's presence without agenda. You bring your hands inward, placing them over your heart, you bow your head, and rest in that warm and comforting presence. You can repeat this prayer as often as you need to bring peace and comfort.

Matthew 12:47 says, "Come to me all who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest." My friends, may you find moments to rest in the sweetness of divine goodness, to rest in the knowledge that you hold divine beauty within you all the time and that you are held by the Holy One in love and in comfort. Even as we reside in a world full of suffering, let us remember that life is permeated with beauty and goodness and saturated with the divine. In our remembering, let us hold ourselves and others with compassion, kindness, and love. May this be so for us all.