

## **Dear-Worthy Souls**

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, November 15, 2020)

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

On this fourth 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.

I remind us of this series framework that comes to us from the fifth-century monk Dionysius who 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 and if we remain disconnected, we can forget that we hold divine beauty within us and 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."

This morning's reflection is an invitation to become aware of this disconnection and remember that we are beautifully made and wonderfully loved. This may be the most challenging theme of the series. We are being asked to remember our beauty and how profoundly the Creator of life loves us without any judgment, requirements, or expectation, but it can be challenging for many of us to accept this beauty of our being and to allow ourselves to believe that we are loved simply for who you are.

Some ancient Hebrew and Christian prophets and teachers and later the Christian mystics believed that we were created worthy of being loved, and that this worthiness always exists. Julian of Norwich often referred to humanity as dear-worthy souls. For her, this was one way to describe the intimate relationship between the created and the Creator, God's way of speaking to each one of us. The 'worthy' that Julian uses is not about earning something or doing something as a means by which to become worthy of God's love. Instead, she believed that we are worthy of being loved simply by being; our fundamental nature, part of God's beautiful creation, is worth loving. This is how God loves us; God claims us as dear-worthy souls.

As I mentioned earlier, it can be difficult for many of us to acknowledge our own beauty and innate worthiness because we live in a world that yields great power to disconnect us from the truth of who and

whose we are. We lose sight of this truth, filling our minds with self-defeating messages as citizens of a society that glorifies external perfection, productivity, achievement, and success. Many of us grew up in environments that taught us that worthiness must be achieved by being smart, successful, useful, and productive. We will be worthy of being loved if we fulfill certain obligations and meet parental or societal expectations, but for many children and adults alike, there is not enough accomplishment in the world that will make them feel worthy of love.

We all know that many things in this life can cause people to feel unloved, unworthy, unwanted, judged, and devalued. Most of us have experienced this to some degree. Many of us know people and love people who struggle to believe in themselves and to love themselves.

It is essential to recognize that we all want to engage the world with energy and purpose. We want to have vocations, honest work, be charitable, be passionate about work that we love to do, and fulfill our professions' and families' obligations. All of what we do and contribute to life can make us feel good about who we are, but none of this necessarily will make us feel worthy of being loved, accepted, cherished, and valued.

The result of our distortion occurs when we confuse vocation, commitments, accomplishment, success, and external beauty with worth. When we attach our worthiness to what we do, accomplish, or achieve, and life goes awry with outcomes we would not wish, we can become anxious, deflated, defeated, and depressed. We judge ourselves harshly, feel unloved, get angry with the world, suffer from stress-related illnesses, and float about in a scary, untethered reality.

We all have our challenges: our own personal physical and emotional struggles, our own insecurities, fears, and sadness. Hopefully, we recognize when we might need help to work through these challenges when they become debilitating. As we continue to face the many coronavirus pandemic challenges, many people feel increased fear, worry, and stress. Since the pandemic began, I have felt a greater sense of anxiety and self-doubt and find myself falling into old patterns of self-judgment and harsh criticism.

Preparing for this morning's worship has been a profound blessing to me. To hear the message that we are all beautifully made and wonderfully loved and to acknowledge that the Creator loves us because we are worthy of being loved, cherished, and valued can be transforming. I discovered many remarkable scriptural testimonies describing the beauty of humanity and God's love of it.

The Song of Songs in the Hebrew scripture is one of the most stunning expressions of intimate love. On its most literal level, it is about two people who love each other with no judgment. Metaphorically, the entire book is like a love letter from the Creator to the created. One of its most powerful statements, "look at how beautiful you are!" can be difficult for us to hear and to believe.

This week as I reflected on both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, it was inspiring to experience how our ancestors understood that they were beautiful and beloved of God.

Dr. Farley talks about how the early Christians took the love commandments seriously. These were not just statements of belief. They recognized that loving God, neighbor, and self was their core calling, but an extraordinarily difficult calling to live out. Love of self was an integral part of that calling because there could be no benevolence toward one's neighbor without it. It was essential to do the work of learning to love one's self. The contemplative practice of savoring sacred texts with mindful intention was one way to learn how to love oneself. To savor was to "save the taste" in their memory.

For example, one might read the words, "you are fearfully and wonderfully made" from Psalm 139, or "the imperishable beauty of your gentle spirits is precious in God's sight," from 1 Peter 3. You save these words in your memory and in that contemplative place, you focus on what might be blocking your ability to love yourself. These practices involved watching one's mind and sitting with one's self-judgment, hostility, temper, or anxiety in a loving, non-judgmental way.

"If you notice your unease, anger, fear, dissatisfaction with benevolence," the ancient texts would say, "bring this to Christ, let him help you interpret it." Contemplative practices enable us to take 'a time out' when we are angry or anxious to sit quietly and notice the mental patterns with the Beloved who does not judge. These practices help us reduce the influence of negative mental patterns, enabling us to accept ourselves and be at peace with ourselves and subsequently accepting of others.

The ancient texts and Christian mystics teach that it can be challenging to trust that who we are is exactly who we are supposed to be, and that we are beautifully and wonderfully loved. But it is true. No matter how different or broken you may be, and no matter what your struggles and challenges, you don't have to try to be beautiful or be loved; you just are.

My friends, I invite you this day to hear the Creator say, Look at you—so beautiful, my dearest! Look at you—so beautiful! You are utterly beautiful, my dearest. You are beautifully made and wonderfully loved." It is

remarkable to think of ourselves as being loved because we have been created to be loved. How amazing is that? No matter the imperfections, flaws, and failings, we are and always will be God's dear-worthy souls. Amen and amen.