

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Beguiled by Beauty week 5

July 19, 2020

Scripture:
Song of Songs 4:1-7

Beauty without a Why

The title created by Marcia McFee for today's worship is "The beauty of the world without a "why." At first I didn't like it or entirely "get it" and then I read the scripture and a few other notes she made around the series and I thought - wow. I don't know why I haven't thought about this much before and suddenly I couldn't get my mind off it.

I started to think about one of my favourite flowers that grows in my garden every year. I planted these Iris' three years ago because they remind me of my grandmother - she loved Iris's and when I was a child we would often find Easter eggs hidden amongst their long green shoots but the beautiful purple flower at the top has always mesmerized me. Unlike me however those Iris don't grow hoping someone one day will appreciate them in their splendour they are just happy to be alive to be beauty.

Outside my office window these days I have ornamental grass peeking through my window, waving at me throughout the day. I find myself constantly looking up to see who is there and it makes me smile every time and then I start to hear the birds chirp and I find myself on a journey of beauty recognizing that all creation lives in its beauty. The mountains bask in their magnificence, the waves crash upon the ocean shore in a rush of abundance, while our world has slowed down in pandemic the wildlife has begun to surface just grateful to be alive, not wondering what we think of it, not offering its beauty to get accolades just living in brilliance because that is how it was created.

This beauty exists completely for itself, not for any reason other than the joy of existence, that is the purpose of life. What if we were to tune into the raw delight in the world. As we let go of how everything relates to us, serves us, benefits us, we begin to appreciate all things for their own worth and beauty, and our desire for their flourishing intensifies. When we turn this idea onto our own selves, we can let go of the expectations of others and the societal standards of beauty in regard to our own worth.

Today's scripture written much like a love song is how the holy sees us:

[Look at you—so beautiful, my dearest! Look at you—so beautiful!]

Look at your eyes, sweet as doves

[You are utterly beautiful, my dearest; there's not a single flaw in you.]

Now I am not one for sappy love lines and oozing of mushy, drippy admiration - unless perhaps it is absolutely authentic and has no purpose but to adore and praise the one you adore - like a

true love not one who is trying to impress to get somewhere or something but authentic love and admiration. I honestly believe that if all of us could see ourselves and one another with that kind of beauty we would be transformed and all of creation would be transformed with it.

Professor Allie Utley writes the “Song of Songs invites the reader to listen in on a dialogue between two lovers. It is as if we are in our favourite coffee shop overhearing the whispers of a couple two tables down. As we listen in, we learn something about love, intimacy, desire, mutuality, longing, vulnerability, mystery” In this Song of Songs, there is a mutuality, beauty, and respect for the other that allows us to read the authenticity of it.

The Holy longs for us to know that kind of love for ourselves and from our creator. It can take a lot of contemplative practice to get there. Stop and imagine for a moment what if we were to simply see the beauty in creation, in others, in ourselves without having to get something out of it.

What if we woke every morning pondering not what will I accomplish but what beauty will I experience today.

The beauty in others, their life, is not something we can possess or make complete sense of. Dr. Farley says, “The capacity for beauty requires that we adore the mystery of others and recognize it as sacred and deserving of protection.”

How are we adoring the mystery of others? How are we recognizing the sacredness of others? What gets in our way?

What if I were to look at my child and not wonder what will she accomplish but simply give thanks for the gift she is - every day, every moment? What if I looked at my mother, my father, my partner, my neighbour, my friend that way? With eyes of love.

“That we can feel pleasure in beauty is good: in this difficult world, we need relief. We need the momentary ease of being in the presence of something that exists simply for itself. But the relief we feel in beauty is already opening us to something beyond ourselves. Beauty reminds us of a world that exists beyond our concerns. And this is the beginning of an awakening to beauty – but not the end.

The adventure of the spirit is not only reprieve. It is awakening to the reality of others as existing for themselves, in the integrity of their own being and communities of being. Creatures inhabiting different kingdoms (fungi and alga) marry and become lichen. The roots of trees form an extended family of support and – perhaps, who knows? – mutual affection, in some tree-form we will never know anything about. We are all bound together in the great dance of existence, nothing apart and separate. We are in the lineage of the star dust billions of years old. We are aunts and uncles to whatever unimaginable life forms might dwell somewhere in a galaxy a billion years hence.

The beauty of nature and of all beautiful things lets us experience the world “without a why.” It has no reason other than itself. 1 Chronicles 16 says “Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice...let the sea roar and all that fills it, let the field exult and everything in it! Then shall the trees of the wood sing for joy” This joyfulness is not for something else, it is the purpose of life. Tuning into the raw delight in the world is an opening onto the truth of beings: in brooks, blades of grass, the patterns of clouds, the freshness of rain on a city street, the last dangling leaf, whose radiant red concentrates its entire existence before it falls to the ground.”¹

Just as many of you I was raised to accomplish, succeed, behave appropriately and although it was never the intention of my well intended parents I have never felt I have done any of those things quite to the caliber I should have. I preach ‘you are enough, you are beloved’ because in my heart of hearts I know it is true for you and even for me but I have to go deep every day to remember how beloved I am and some days I forget. I am easily shaken when put down or criticized because I forget these things.

“Beauty decenters our ego by helping us realize that life is its own justification.” ...As our self-centeredness diminishes, the world appears in ever more intense colors, sounds, scents, movements, shapes, interactions, changes. There is nothing static in beauty. It is ever changing, moment by moment.

Moving through time and ever-changing relationships, beauty is always in motion... Beauty is not the security of possession because it is not possessable. As soon as we try to grasp it, it flies away...Awakening to this realization, “without a why.” That creation has no purpose other than itself. It is to recognize and participate in what is – not to change it, interpret it, care for it, adjust it. Being awake is to participate in the flow of what is as it exists for itself. As Sug says to Celie, “God must be pissed off if we pass the color purple in a field without noticing it.” (Walker, *The Color Purple*, 197) This aspect of beauty is important because it emphasizes that other beings in their particularity and in their interconnections exist for themselves, with their own inner life, desires, and relationships. “Useless” beauty frees us from the tyranny of self-centeredness and utilitarian greed – not absolutely, but in glimpses. We wake up to reality in its loveliness, fragility, conflicts, vitality and realize this is the sacred and holy truth of everything that exists. It matters, not because it matters to me, but because it shimmers with sacred worth.”²

Contemplative life invites us to set on mind on wisdom, peace, beauty so that we may be released from the desire or expectation to control everything. Relinquishing control is not easy for our ego centred world and society but it is essential for our inner peace, it is critical so that we may see the beauty within and around us. Once we are able to let go of constant attachments to outcomes, we will begin to live a life of contemplative appreciation. Life becomes a practice for the sake of the practice itself. We begin to live “without a why.” (This lovely expression is found in a number of beguines’ writing. Marguerite Porete uses it, as does Meister Eckhart.)

¹ Farley, Wendy *Beguiled by Beauty*

Still, there is a deep paradox at the heart of contemplation and prayer. It does require energy, devotion, attention, commitment. But it also is transformative as we let go of certain outcomes. This is a kind of renunciation that is subtle – because it is not the renunciation of effort or of a burning desire for the good of beings. Life is still full of trials, of complications and ups and downs. When we see things go badly astray, regardless of our deep commitments, it is painful. But when we are able to let go of every outcome we find a reservoir of peace even in the midst of turmoil.

Before Christianity emerged as a distinct religion, people simply said they followed the Way or “the way of life.” It was an intentional commitment that reorganized their entire lives. Then and now, people have discovered that this simple “way” is actually very difficult to put into practice. Early followers of Christ understood these commandments as descriptions of a fully human life that they were called to live it with all seriousness. Christianity and faith was never set up to be a worship service in a building for an hour a week. Followers of the way were to be people of love, compassion, peace and justice for all.

Ancient Christians believed that practice was necessary because the way of life was not simply a matter of believing certain things. When they thought of practice, they had in mind chanting the psalms, prayer, Eucharist so that they would experience a spiritual transformation of the mind. It was not enough to go through the motions of chant, prayer, Eucharist. The mind-set one brings to prayer is as important as the prayer itself. Origen, insisted that one must approach prayer with a pure mind, stretching “out ‘holy hands’ by thoroughly purging the passion of ‘anger’ from his soul and harbouring no rage against anyone and by forgiving each the sins he has committed against him. (Origen, “On Prayer,” Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works, 98)

For many of us, loving and forgiving everyone while putting aside our needs, anxieties, and desires is well not even something we entirely long for. That will take a lot of prayer. But we can also understand how seriously earlier Christians took the Christian path and why. If our lives could truly be transformed inwardly into lives of love and peace and mercy would that contemplative path not be worth the journey?

Hear the words anew

[Look at you—so beautiful, my dearest! Look at you—so beautiful!]

Look at your eyes, sweet as doves

[You are utterly beautiful, my dearest; there’s not a single flaw in you.] Amen.