



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“The Beauty of Holiness, the Holiness of Beauty”

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The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Mark 14:3-9

I have long loved this little vignette from Mark’s account of Jesus’ life. The time is the last days before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, and as he so often did, he is eating at the home of someone most folks wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. He’s at the house of a man called Simon, a leper, eating for heaven’s sake. As was the custom then, only men would have been present at the meal, probably in this instance, Simon, Jesus, and the disciples. But comes a woman into that circle of masculinity, a woman of enormous courage and insight, of love and generosity. Imagine being a woman and entering a room full of men, most of whom look down on women at best and are more than comfortable in their assumed superiority. Perhaps some of you women know the feeling from firsthand experience. Imagine breaking into a dinner party where you’ve not been invited. Imagine loving someone so much that you could do such a thing. Such is this woman. She enters the house, enters the dining room full of men, and goes directly over to the Jesus whom she alone understands.

She brings with her what is perhaps her most cherished and valuable possession, an alabaster jar full of a fragrant ointment, called nard, the kind of ointment used to anoint the bodies of the dead. This alabaster jar has a permanent seal which must be broken if the ointment is to be used. This the woman does without hesitation. She anoints Jesus with the ointment; its fragrance fills the house.

The men are, of course, indignant because we’ve lost control of the situation. They righteously announce that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. They speak as if her treasure is theirs by some right or another. And notice how eager they are to help the poor, as long as they can do so with someone else’s resources. Such a jar of ointment is worth three hundred denarii; and it’s just been wasted, wasted anointing Jesus, they say. Three hundred denarii. Back then, a member of the Jewish working class could expect to make one denarius a day. They worked six days a week. So, doing the math, three hundred denarii represent nothing less than one entire year’s earnings. How many of us have ever made such a sacrifice, a gift worth one year’s income, even for someone we love?

The men get on the women’s case about her foolish behavior, but Jesus rebukes them, telling them to leave her alone. He says, “Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing for me. You can always help the poor with your own resources, but she has anointed me before my burial. And what she has done will always be told in memory of her.” Well, the influence of patriarchy over the centuries has been such that the story has not always been told in memory of her, even her name has been forgotten. But such an act of beauty is never lost. It was certainly not lost on Jesus. He was, I believe, immensely moved by her lavish gift and by her understanding, alone among all those present, that his rendezvous with death was drawing near.

She has done a beautiful thing for me, said Jesus. Not the right thing. Not a good thing. But a beautiful thing. Plotinus was a Neoplatonist philosopher of the third century of the Common Era. He once said, “The

soul that beholds beauty, becomes beautiful.” And at this point in my life and spiritual journey, those words ring profoundly true to me. Perhaps it’s my age; one of the big birthdays is coming up soon on the birthday Budge and I share. But whatever the reason, I find at this point in life I’m somewhat less concerned about what is true. As a young man, the pursuit of ultimate truth was a passion for me, but as I’ve aged, the multifaceted nature of truth has become clearer to me. I’ve come to accept the coexistence of alternate truths as expressions of the limitation of our language and experience. I find I’m now more concerned with the timely than the timeless, more moved by the particular than the general, more taken with the local than the universal. My passion for THE truth has cooled a bit over the years.

Likewise, the good. I still care deeply about ethics and morality, of course. But I’ve come to see the human problem is not that we don’t know what is right, but that we consistently subvert it for our own self-interest and spend far too much of our creativity rationalizing that subversion. I am, after all, an inheritor of the Calvinist tradition, and old John knew a thing or two about the human condition. One thing he was certain of is our almost infinite capacity to place our interests, our agenda before that of others, even God.

But beauty calls to me. In fact, I wonder if perhaps the experience of true beauty might not finally be what could put an end to our good-subverting-self-interest. Seeing or hearing the truly beautiful can be transforming, so much so that when one comes away from great music or great art or dance or theater, one feels an inner urging to be good, to do good. It even happens when we go to church. We come out of a beautiful worship service filled with the desire to do better, to be better. Perhaps I’m not saying it so very well, but I trust you’ve all had that experience and know what I’m trying to say. We experience the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness, and we experience God. And we are changed for the better.

I have the manuscript of a yet-to-be-published novel written by a close friend of mine, and I want to share with you, with his permission, a passage from it. In it, a very spunky, older woman who is the mayor of a small town named Anne’s Mill which is on the shore of Lake Michigan, has been invited to give the sermon at the community Martin Luther King Day worship service which is being held at an African-American church. And here are her words:

“Back in the nineteen sixties – and I am well old enough to remember them well – a phrase came into our language that had been far too long in coming. It was this: Black is beautiful. Black is beautiful. I remember hearing it for the first time on a newscast. I thought of the black people in our town, and from somewhere within me came to consciousness the thought, ‘why, yes, of course, black is beautiful.’ I thought of Alva Elliott who sang the national anthem at the homecoming football game many a year, and of her beautiful voice and face. I thought of Lorraine McPherson who shared the beauty of language with so many students as she taught literature for so many years at the high school. I thought of Albert Michael – I’m sorry I never knew his last name - and how beautiful were his hands as he worked on cars at this garage on Center Street. I thought of James Donaldson with his exquisite white hair and manners as he ushered in this sanctuary for so many years. I thought of beautiful black children and youth and mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers. Yes, I thought, black is beautiful. Like learning a new word, this truth appeared everywhere around me. And I began to look at black faces beyond our community, on television, in the paper, and again and again it came to me, black is beautiful.”

“And in the years since I have to come to think it was that phrase that began to make clear to me how important, how crucial, how imperative is beauty to our lives and world. Perhaps especially to our young people. I wonder if they’re learning enough about beauty. I wonder if that isn’t really what Lorraine McPherson taught all those years. Do our kids have enough of the truly beautiful in their lives? I know they have more than enough of the ugly, the violent, the tawdry, the sensational, but do they have enough beauty? Are they starving for beauty so severely they don’t even know that’s what they’re hungry for?”

“I say all that because something happens to me, to us, when we are in the presence of true beauty. When I hear this choir sing, it is as if time stops and I am for a moment in the eternal. When I gaze upon the beauty of the Grand Tetons, my favorite place on earth outside Anne’s Mill, something in that majesty heals the broken in me.

When I see Michal Jordan rise up for a dunk, when I watch Meryl Streep create a character, when I sit in the dark and listen to Bach, when I swim in our lake at night beneath the stars, when my five year old granddaughter hands me a crayon drawing, when I bite into a perfectly ripe peach from our orchards, something good and true happens to me. Something that makes me more whole, more healed, more human. Something beautiful.”

“And I think God is beautiful even though I am hard put to say exactly what I think God is. But still I feel sure that when we behold beauty or create beauty, the heart of God overflows with delight, and yet more beauty comes into the world. I think Dr. King’s most famous speech was not only great, it was beautiful.”

“And because of all that, I believe we are to be about beauty. I believe the beauty of this town should be preserved. Oh, I know jobs and security and all the rest of it are important. But if we achieve those and have not beauty, I’m not sure we will have what we most essentially need. What St. Paul said about love goes for beauty, too. ‘If I have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.’”

“I wasn’t told what I was supposed to talk about today. So I have told you what I have come most deeply to believe. Not only is black beautiful; beauty is essential to life worth living. I have been told that the Navajo translation of ‘amen’ means ‘it is finished in beauty.’ Now I am finished, and I pray it is so. Thank you.”

I think she is exactly right. When we experience true beauty, it is a holy experience. And when we experience true holiness, it is always a beautiful experience. They are made for one another, beauty and holiness. The one is the sure guide to the presence of the other. Oh, of course, the pursuit of beauty alone can, and does, become a dangerous and self-indulgent obsession. Think super model. Human nature hasn’t exhausted its capacity to misuse the good things in life. But if we sense, and sense deeply and openly, the interconnection between beauty and holiness, we will be on safe, dare I say holy, ground.

And this matters immensely in our current context for we are living in an age that I am tempted to call the age of ‘whatever’ or the age of ‘good enough’ or the age of ‘the least common denominator.’ It is an age when the garish and flashy substitute for the lovely and inviting. Hollywood cranks out dozens of bubble gum romantic comedies or violent action films for every film that takes us truly into the beautiful depths of the human experience. In recent years, our exquisitely beautiful National Park System has been financially starved almost out of existence, and too many look upon wilderness only as a source of more energy for us to waste. Because we see the arts not as core but as extracurricular, the audiences as the theater and symphony are increasingly gray. Maybe part of the cause of all this is that we have sundered beauty and holiness, and so both fade from our reality and we are lost to their transforming power. We need to recall, and better yet live, Mother Theresa’s words: Let my every action be something beautiful for God.

Let me close with an experience in which I knew beauty and holiness joined. September a year ago, my wife Pat and I and two dear friends went over to the beach at Lake Michigan for a picnic on a Sunday afternoon. It was a gloriously sunny day, and the Lake was still summer warm for swimming. We swam and sunned and read and talked, and ate wonderful food – bread and cheese and fruit and olives – and drank wine we’d brought in a thermos so as not to draw the ranger’s attention. It was a Sunday and we all had to work the next day, but the day was so exquisitely beautiful that we just couldn’t seem to get started packing up to go home. Evening came, and still we lingered.

And then at last the sun began to set over the great and lovely lake. There were perhaps four hundred people still on the beach. Some were swimming, some were tossing a Frisbee, children were splashing in the shallows, radios were playing. But as the sun settled into its nighttime home, slowly making its way between a few bands of clouds it turned purple and orange and pink and every shade in between, something remarkable happened. All the children, without anyone calling to them, came up out of the water and settled onto blankets, snuggling close to their parents. The Frisbee players stopped and found a place to sit. The radios were all turned off. And a great quiet descended on that beach. And in that great silence, four hundred people became a community shaped and

entranced by the spectacular beauty before us. Holiness descended with the night, and only in the twilight did we at last, with many quiet others, make our way to our cars to head home.

It was beautiful. It was holy. And no one there will forget that moment, nor ever be quite the same. Plotinus said, "The soul that beholds beauty, becomes beautiful." And Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing for me." And they were both right.

Amen +