
Troubling Beauty

Sermon preached by the Rev. Stephanie Nagley, PhD at St. Luke's Bethesda on Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016

<https://www.facebook.com/stlukesbethesda/videos/457804121011107/>

“Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing that thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since it only dances as an uncontrolled splendor around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another”.

These are the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, a 20th theologian and priest. He was expressing the three in one nature of God that we call the Trinity. When we experience Beauty we experience God. “Beauty is last thing the thinking intellect dares to approach...” those moments fling us into the unexplored wonder of imagination, the untapped wells of the heart, and casts us into the place of dreams, the place of God’s dream.

We are transported. We are blessed. The moment is hallowed. The experience made holy. Beauty is communion bread and wine. It is prayer. It is a blessing. It is holy oil anointing us.

Choir Sings: *"I have been anointed with the song of the Lord"*

In the theology of von Balthasar God is the dance of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Truth is the law, the commandments. Goodness the presence of God in world to be mercy, peace, justice, compassion and love. And Beauty is the Holy Spirit.

Beauty is essential, so essential von Balthasar writes: “Whoever sneers at her name as if she was an ornament...can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love”.

It’s no wonder that over the centuries the church has been the sanctuary for the arts. It’s no wonder that our great cathedrals shelter and promote the arts.

It’s no wonder we continue to play out our story with God in the ritual of Holy Eucharist. When done with purpose and care the liturgy is good drama. Like any really good play, the liturgy is intended to leave us different than before. We remember. The prayer, the words and music, the ritual of bread and wine refuses to leave us alone. We remember some piece of it: the hymn that keeps playing in our head, the taste of the wine, the crunch of the bread, the person who gave a hug when we exchanged the peace. We remember because Beauty refused to leave us alone.

Today we celebrate the gift of music in our worship. We celebrate the people the choir and all the St. Luke’s musicians who make it possible. They have given the gift of a holy drama that

takes us to places in our souls we haven't been before or returns us to a places where need to go.

In the 10th century Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent out ten good and wise men to go and see how faith was practiced among the Germans, Greeks, Muslims and Jews. When the men returned they said they had seen no glory in most of the places they visited but in Constantinople, in the Cathedral of the Hagia Sophia, they were spellbound and told him:

"We knew not whether we were in heaven or earth, and we at a loss to describe it. We only know that God dwells there...and that their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty". (Suzann Massie, *Land of the Firebird*, pp. 21-22)

Choir Sings: "I have been anointed with the song of the Lord"

"A song of love and compassion. A song to set me free"

"God is my rock of salvation, a beacon for my soul"

The sound of those voices. There's something haunting in that music. Yes, its pleasant to the ear but there's an evocative quality for Beauty is more than what is soothing.

A beautiful sunset, a rainbow, a piece of music, a great book, with all its splendor, stirs in us both joy and longing, both happiness and melancholy. We see a rainbow and are filled with hope while at the same knowing the problems that surround us on every side. We see a sunset, hear music and something in us, something very deep is touched. We are happy and at the same time aware of something missing. We long for wholeness, understanding, integrity, and even unity with God.

Lasting beauty exposes the truth about life, the simultaneity of life's hard and hallowed moments. A magnificent rainbow fills the sky of world that knows the worst and the best of the human condition. A glorious rainbow, a sunset, a piece of music comes into our world and makes us happy, and sad, and hopeful all at once. It is a troubling beauty that finds us.

In worship, as in life, our approach to the altar in the words of hymns, scripture and prayer is that kind of Troubling Beauty. When we finally arrive at Holy Communion we realize that this is what we've been reckoning with since we entered the sanctuary. What we've been trying to hold at once and in the same time is both life and death. We call it the passion of Jesus.

This Passion is also our lives. Our lives our filled with stories of life and death that lead to resurrection. On the altar is his life and his death and his resurrection. On the altar is our life and our death and our resurrection. It is a troubling beauty this story that we tell, this drama we play out week after week.

One of the best descriptions of such beauty I know is in the book [Talk Before Sleep](#) by Elizabeth Berg. At first you think it's a book about her experience with a friend who is dying. At the end you realize it's so much more. It is a book about death and life and resurrection.

In the novel Ruth is dying of cancer. She's had several surgeries and wicked treatments. Ann and five other friends chose to be with Ruth through it all. One night Ann is staying with Ruth. Ann restlessly thumbs a magazine while Ruth sleeps in the other room. Ann thinks to herself,

"I want some tea, but I don't want to wake Ruth up by running water. Assuming she is still alive. I stand up, then sit back down. Then I stand up again, tiptoe into her bedroom. She is turned away from me, but I can hear her breathing. I see moonlight lying against the back of her bald head, pooled in the small valley at the top of her neck. They are so graceful and beautiful, necks, so full of a kind and combined strength and vulnerability. I wish we could get over the horror of baldness and appreciate instead the tender revelations it provides"

On the surface there is nothing about cancer or chemo-baldness or a dying friend that should be described so eloquently. But looking at her friend and through the reality of all that was wrong, Ann saw Beauty and that beauty brought her to a truth and that truth joined her with a transforming sense of Goodness.

After Ruth died, Ann thought to herself that she liked to think that Ruth "looked out the window one last time on the night she died and saw with new understanding the placement of the stars". Ann hope that Ruth had "..something incomprehensibly vast and complex moved into her soul at that moment, and that it, not pathology was what took her breath away".

Every night, after Ruth's death, Ann opened the window near her bed and pulled the drapes not so that she can watch the stars but in case a breeze comes by and Ruth finds her.

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"God is my rock of salvation, a beacon for my soul"

"Hallelujah! Amen! Hallelujah! Amen!"

"Praise to the rock and the wellspring, creator of my soul"

When Jesus talked the disciples about sending them the Spirit of Truth he was, at that moment, peering into his own upcoming death. He was giving them a path through the troubling Beauty that would help them navigate their journey of Truth and Goodness. He was helping them open a window into the vast place of mystery that is life.

And, so, it is for us, in this time together. We look at the cross and the life of Jesus and appreciate the tender revelations provided. We open a window through what we do in prayer, and song and bread and wine so the Spirit can find us.

It is out of this story, out of his life, death and resurrection, and out of the courage of those who followed him, we come to the church.

Sometimes I sit with objectivity and consider what we do in worship. With intellectual detachments I think no one in his or her right mind would gather around a table to feast on death and find life. But then this isn't about the intellect --- beauty is the last thing the thinking intellect dares to approach --what we do is re-approach what intellect alone cannot see or feel or make sense of.

What has survived over thousands of years has survived because it is the truth and with it goodness flows; the troubling Beauty from the betrayal and the blood, the death and all that was broken.

The world is filled with such as this, disturbing realities that by some alchemy are transforming and transformed. In our hymns, in the stories we tell, the prayer for communion we reclaim the passion of Jesus and put our passions within his.

Life invites us to rumble with what is good and right and true. Life invites us to leave the window open, so we can see the stars and find let the vast and incomprehensible enter our souls. Life invites us to let something greater find us. It is Beauty and that the word that shall be our last. She is the uncontrolled splendor in our lives that dance with truth and goodness. It is God. We are anointed with its splendor. Hallelujah.

Choir Sings the Anthem

Follow this link to hear the Notre Dame Folk Choir sing the anthem

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZwUyWC5Cvo>