

“It’s What You Wear That Counts”
Colossians 3:12-17
All Saints’ Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

A number of years ago, I was reading a book by Philip Yancey—many of you know that name, a former Heritage Lecturer here at Westminster—and in his book, Yancey related a story about the father of the great cellist, Yo-Yo Ma.

Yancey describes how Yo-Yo Ma used to play—
(maybe he still does, I don’t know)—
a Bach suite from memory every night before going to bed.

It wasn’t because he needed the practice.
It was a spiritual discipline.

“This isn’t practicing, it’s contemplating,” Yo-Yo Ma remarked.
“You’re alone with your soul.”

Now where did Yo-Yo Ma get this idea, this nighttime ritual, if you will?

He got it from his father.

Yo-Yo Ma’s father “spent World War II in Paris, where he lived alone in a garret throughout the German occupation.

“In order to restore sanity to his world, he [Yo-Yo Ma’s dad] would practice violin pieces by Bach during the day and at night, during blackout hours, [he would] play them alone, in the dark.”

Writes Yancey:

“The sounds made by the reverberating strings [in the bleakest of times] held out the promise of order...of hope...of beauty...”¹

That’s not just a story about Yo-Yo Ma and his father. It’s a story that tells us something about ourselves. It says that even in the darkest of times, the most difficult moments of life, one of the most essential human needs...is beauty.

Do you believe that’s true?

Our topic today is beauty.

What do Presbyterians believe about beauty?

It may sound like an unusual topic.

After all, beauty isn’t a very controversial topic.

And yet, on this particular All Saints’ Sunday,

I would submit that it’s a very timely topic.

As one of my colleagues recently wrote:

“We are experiencing a season of deflation [in this country]. This is not an [economic insight]...This is a comment about [how the weariness and stress of our individual and corporate [lives deflates our trust in God and raises] doubts about the power of God in a world like ours.”²

Whether it’s gruesome violence in the Middle East,

or a grueling war in Ukraine,

or just a parent sitting in this sanctuary,

concerned about the emotional

and mental health of their child—

I get what my colleague is talking about.

¹ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

² Mark Ramsey, “Deflated,” The Ministry Collaborative, October 24, 2023.

And it raises an important question:

Is the beauty of God an “extra”...something nice, or even something breathtaking, but ultimately something that we can live without?

The question reminds me of something that Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote. Dostoevsky, of course, did NOT live in a gentler or more uplifting time than we live in today.

And in the words of one of the characters in one of his novels—and one gets the sense that maybe it wasn’t just this character who believed it, but Dostoevsky who believed it—

the great Russian novelist wrote:

“...the world will be saved by beauty.”³

What do Presbyterians believe...about beauty?

On the one hand, that’s an easy question to answer.

Consider, for a moment...

what is it like to be captured by beauty,
to be moved by beauty?

Think about the images from the James Webb telescope that were released in the summer of 2022.

Or consider this space.

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*. I became aware of this quote through a book about Dorothy Day written by her granddaughter, Kate Hennessy, *Dorothy Day: The World Will Be Saved by Beauty*, New York: Scribner, 2017.

When you enter this sanctuary on a Sunday morning, how many of you find the space in which you are sitting...beautiful?

Or how many of you have a favorite place in nature that you like to go to in order to get away from it all...at the beach, or in the mountains?

And how many of you feel like those places are THIN places?

Places where the distance between you and God goes like THIS...and God gets really close?

That's the first thing Presbyterians believe about beauty:
 that it comes from OUTSIDE of us,
 that it is God's gift to us.

And at any moment, it can astonish us, take our breath away, and bring us back to God.

And yet, as the Apostle Paul reminds us today, we ALSO believe that God's beauty isn't just found OUTSIDE of us.

God has also planted it WITHIN us.

He writes to the Colossians:

“...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you...

“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

This text is, in my experience, one of the two most popular texts chosen by couples when they get married.

Why do they choose it?

Because what Paul is describing here is BEAUTY...
how to live a beautiful life.

And what's fascinating is that in the Greek, the language in which Paul wrote, the Greek word for "beautiful" is closely related to the Greek word for "call."

Not the same word, but related words.
As the late priest John O'Donohue puts it:

"When we experience beauty, we feel called. The Beautiful stirs passion and urgency in us and calls us forth...Indeed, it is often the whispers and glimpses of beauty which enable people to endure on desperate frontiers."⁴

A few years ago, at the Pelican Bay State Prison in California, a musician named Eric Genuis was scheduled by the prison chaplain to play for the inmates there.

He was going to be there for an hour:
45 minutes of music, and then 15 minutes for Q & A.

Sam, the chaplain at the prison,
recalled that as soon as Eric Genuis began to play,
there was a "reverent stillness thick in the air."

"Inmates and guards alike were held by the music's spell. It was the most glorious thing Sam had ever witnessed at Pelican Bay.

⁴ John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2004.

“He looked at the prisoners and soon they were all sobbing. He saw that the guards were discreetly flicking away tears. The magnificent music had detonated [a] release so welcome and unexpected.

“Eric finished and turned to his stunned audience and asked if there were any questions.”

At first, silence....and then an inmate named Louie stood up,
and he was crying so hard,
he could barely get out his question.

It was a one-word question:
Why?

To which Eric Genuis responded:

“Because you are deserving.
Because you are worthy of beauty and music.
And because...there is no difference between you and me.”⁵

What we’re talking about now is MORAL BEAUTY.
The clothing, as the Apostle Paul puts it, that God asks us to wear.
The call that God places on our lives—not just to live efficiently,
not just to live
productively...but to live beautifully—
with kindness, patience, meekness, humility...

But there’s another thing we believe about beauty, and let me get at it this way.

⁵ Gregory Boyle, *Forgive Everyone Everything*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 2022.

This past summer, our family took a vacation to New York. We went to the Met, and there was a van Gogh exhibit on display.

The Starry Night was one of the paintings, and it was gorgeous. Absolutely stunning to be so close to such a masterpiece.

What I did not know at the time, but learned a short time thereafter, was that van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* not when he was experiencing great joy and pleasure in his life, but when he was going through great difficulty.

He was in an asylum, struggling with mental illness, and he was there for a year. And during the course of that year, some of van Gogh's most celebrated works:

*Irises, The Starry Night,
Wheat Field with Cypresses—*
were created on the grounds of that asylum.

In other words, the beauty with which van Gogh gifted the world did not come from a time of perfection in his own life. It came during a time of brokenness.

A time of suffering.⁶

Which leads me to the third thing Presbyterians believe about beauty:

It can ALSO be found in the broken places of our lives.

⁶ Russ Ramsey, *Rembrandt Is In the Wind*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022.

Not because the broken places are beautiful, but because God is beautiful, and it is in precisely those places where God promises that the risen Christ will be revealed.

Parker Palmer is a Quaker and a writer and the author of numerous, widely-read books on the Christian spiritual life. He is the founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. He has led, by almost any standard, a very successful life.

But a number of years ago, when he was in his forties and publishing books and making a name for himself, Palmer was overcome with a crippling depression.

It left him, needless to say, feeling a profound loss of control...

He says that many people would try to help him.
But most would inadvertently say or do the wrong thing.

Something like:

'Gosh, Parker, why are you sitting in here being depressed?
It's a beautiful day outside.
Go...feel the sunshine and smell the flowers.'

“And that, of course, leaves a depressed person even more depressed, because while you know intellectually that it's sunny out and that the flowers are lovely and fragrant, you can't really feel any of that in your body....

“And then other people would come and say something along the lines of, 'Gosh, Parker, why are you depressed? You're such a good person. You've helped so many people...You're so successful, and you've written so well.'

“And that would leave me feeling more depressed, because I would feel, 'I've just defrauded another person...’

What made the difference in Parker Palmer’s life?

Palmer says:

“There was this one friend who came to me...every afternoon about four o'clock, sat me down in a chair in the living room, took off my shoes and socks and massaged my feet.

“He hardly ever said anything....He would give no advice.

“What he mainly did for me, of course, was...be present to me in my suffering. And I've never really been able to find the words to fully express my gratitude for that....”⁷

Why couldn't he find the words?

Because what his friend did was beautiful,

and when we encounter something truly beautiful...

we are at a loss for words.

Today is All Saints' Sunday, and in just a few moments, you will be invited to remember those saints of your life who have been truly beautiful to you. That great cloud of witnesses, who are God's gift to you.

Which leads to the fourth thing we believe about Beauty:

Not all of it is visible to us right now.

Getting back to John O'Donohue:

⁷ From Krista Tippett's interview with Palmer on her podcast, *On Being*, February 26, 2009, a transcript of which can be found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program/soul-depression/transcript/1332>.

“The dead are not distant or absent. [Just] because we cannot see them does not mean that they are not there. Transfigured into eternal form...they continue to be near us...”⁸

In our Presbyterian tradition, we call that the communion of the saints. It means that death changes, but does not end, our relationship with those we love.

The recently retired President of Austin Seminary, Ted Wardlaw, describes a visit that he took to a cathedral in England years ago. It’s a modern cathedral, a church that was constructed during the 20th century. One of the outstanding features of this cathedral is that it has one wall made entirely of glass!

On that wall, etched into the glass are huge figures—four feet wide and ten feet tall—figures of saints and angels.

What are the giant angels and saints doing?

They're having a party!

Blowing trumpets and making merry and swinging from the chandeliers and dancing across that massive wall of glass.

The more one looks at it, however, it’s a bit disconcerting.

As Dr. Wardlaw puts it, “if that were that the only thing you saw when looking at that glass wall, you might justifiably conclude that there's something taunting and irrelevant and downright immoral about such fun going on in the heights of heaven while there are a host of us suffering here [in God’s world].

⁸ John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2004.

“You might look at that glass wall,” Ted says, “and wonder what sort of God would have the nerve to throw a party like that in times like these...”

How could they build a cathedral in the 20th century, the bloodiest century humanity has ever known...with THAT kind of glass wall?

But then Ted goes on to point out where the cathedral stands. The cathedral is located in Coventry, which makes all the difference in the world.

“For, in November of 1940, Coventry suffered the longest air raid endured in any one night by any city in England during World War II. It was an air raid which killed and destroyed and reduced the whole city to ruins, including its cathedral.

“When they built the new cathedral, they chose, as the purpose of its ministry, **the theme of ‘resurrection through sacrifice.’**”

So to look through that modern glass wall,
beyond all the saints dancing in heaven, is...
to see the painful ruins—
of the old bombed-out church.”

And the beauty of standing in the new cathedral and peering through the glass wall is that those ruins “cannot be seen...except in light of...the promise from beyond time...”

As Ted puts it:

“Such a visual encounter with God's promise for the future permeates that pile of rubble with meaning
[with beauty]

that is not otherwise there...⁹

Which is what God does not just for piles of rubble.
It's what God does with each of our lives, and the lives of those we
love.

Through the love and grace of Christ,
God gives each of our lives meaning and beauty
that would not otherwise be there...
both in this life, and the life to come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw in his sermon "Living in the Middle of Time," September 21, 1997, on www.day1.org.