

## Our Needs are Holy to God: The Need for Beauty

Psalm 19: 1-2; Psalm 29:2; Philippians 1: 4-8

One of the seven needs of children, said Dr. Seuss, is the need for beauty, so Dr. Seuss's books were full of colors which he carefully chose. Every color, every shade and hue had to be perfect. The child's eye is drawn to color. I'd say more: the child's soul is drawn to color, to beauty, and so is ours.

When I say the word beauty, what comes first to mind? There are a thousand kinds of beauty. This is because our God is a being of infinite beauty.

I

When I was growing up in Southern Baptist land, the main form of beauty was music. It filled my awareness because my father was a minister of music. And because the music was most often accompanied by words, the love of language came too. I experienced what Augustine said: When you sing you *pray twice*. This was beauty taken in through the ear.

But there is also the kind of beauty taken in through the eye, visual beauty, and this kind of beauty took second place. Part of the reason came from the Hebrew commandment against making graven images, that is images of any human or creaturely form. They believed that the eye was more easily seduced than the ear. Our Muslim cousins took it so seriously that the only form of beauty allowed was the beauty of calligraphy, which they perfected, the beauty of the word.

You might divide Christianity into two, those who emphasized beauty and those who minimized it. Medieval Cathedrals maximized the beauty of architectural space, but the stained glass windows and sculpture were there mainly to tell the Biblical story and stories.

Protestantism preferred a sparer form of church buildings, it's emphasis on the spoken word. Churches were "meeting houses", where Christians met to be together and hear God's word. Their buildings were "auditoriums" where the word of God could be *heard*.

As I said, the main form of beauty in my growing up years was music, the hymns, the anthem, the piano, the organ. Most of the poetry

I learned as a young person was the poetry of sacred music, no small boon. We sang “Beautiful Savior”, and “For the Beauty of the Earth”. Even the gospel song “How Great Thou Art”, had a verse about the beauty of the God’s world.

But beauty as a spiritual reality was not part of our theology. God is Great, and God is Good, and of course God is Love, but God is Beauty? That may be going too far.

But things are changing in our religious world today. We are recognizing that beauty itself is an avenue to God, and that beauty is an avenue of God into our lives.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity has always believed so. Their sanctuaries are a visual feast, representations of the heavenly realm. And icons, painted representations of Jesus, Mary and the saints, are windows into the realm of the Spirit. Protestants stress *listening*. As Paul said, “faith comes by *hearing*”, but the Orthodox teach us to *gaze*. Art is a portal into the spiritual realm.

Children's books are filled with art and illustration. A Newberry Award is given every year for the art and illustration of children's books.

The child's eye is drawn to beauty for we are created in the divine image of a God of infinite beauty. Perhaps our first lesson in beauty is the world God has made. John O'Donahue, Irish poet, philosopher and theologian says, "The beauty of the earth is the first beauty." John Calvin wrote that creation is the theatre of the glory of God. But too many Christians have given up their season tickets.

Years ago I went with a friend who was a missionary in Egypt on an overnight camping trip to the Red Sea and Mt. Sinai. First we traveled to the Red Sea, to a shore famous for snorkeling. I'd never been snorkeling, so I was bit timid as I inched out on the shelf of the reef to the place where we plunged ourselves into the deep. Finally I screwed up my courage and plunged in. I was instantly entranced by the unimaginable beauty of the deeps with fish of every size and hue. It seemed as if time had stood still.

Then we traveled to the base of Mt. Sinai, where Moses had been given the Ten Commandments. We slept on bed rolls under the desert sky. The night sky was more radiant with stars than I had ever seen or imagined. Shooting stars crossed the night sky, which seemed as if it were pulsing. I could scarcely close my eyes to sleep I was so filled with excitement over its beauty.

Psalm 19 came to life in me:

The heavens are telling the glory of God

And the firmament proclaims God's handiwork

Day unto day takes up the story

And night unto night makes known the message.

I was ready for season tickets to the theater of God's glory.

Psalm 29:2 in the King James version—the version I grew up with—goes: “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” I'd seen the words inscribed over doors leading into sanctuaries. I'd heard choirs sing the words as a Call to Worship. As I've gone through life I've

discovered the reversal is also true: We worship God in the *holiness of beauty*.

John O'Donohue writes of beauty as a calling. This is true for artists, poets, musicians, writers. It is also true for us all, as we create beauty out of anything at hand: textiles, paint, words, music, food, and the making a home a place of beauty. Mathematical theorems and scientific theories have a simplicity and beauty about them.

Pascal the French mathematician and spiritual writer said, "You should always keep something beautiful in your mind." What beautiful things do you carry with you in your mind?

O'Donohue says

The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere....When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming.

I think this is true.

We have all come from God who is not only great and good and true and just and love but is also beauty. Beauty is our home in the presence of God.

#### IV

We sing Micah's words after every communion: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God." We could add, seek Beauty and walk in beauty.

Paul wrote:

Whatsoever things are true

Whatsoever things are honorable

Whatsoever things are just

Whatsoever things are lovely

Whatsoever things are gracious...

If there is any excellence,

anything worthy of praise,

think on these things (Phil. 4:8)

It is so easy to let our minds be flooded with what is false, dishonorable, unjust, ugly and ingracious. So let's dwell on what is true, honorable, just, on what is beautiful and full of grace.

God wants us to cultivate a beautiful mind, to tend it as we would tend a garden.

Not the fake beauty of glamour

not the pimped beauty of advertising

not the manufactured beauty of beauty magazines

not the tinselled beauty of glittering objects

but true beauty which is united with truth, goodness and love.

There is the beauty of a smiling face. There is the beauty of the human face filled with compassion and love. I once was in a restaurant, and as I was checking out to leave I saw a man with a ravaged face, disfigured with some abnormality or disease. I turned my head quickly to avoid looking at him and passed him. As I did I saw a woman whom I knew who was a physician. She looked past my face to look at this man behind me and her face was filled with compassion



and love for this man, her face radiant with love. It brought me up short. She *understood* him and his condition and loved him. I think had I turned back to the man I would have seen him differently, seen the beauty of him.

John O'Donahue speaks of having "graced eyes":

The graced eye can glimpse beauty anywhere...When we beautify our gaze, the grace of hidden beauty becomes our joy and our sanctuary.

Yes, our sanctuary, for our soul is also a temple of beauty.

I think Jesus showed us how to have graced eyes, as he looked at everything and everyone as something of beauty. Artists and poets help give us graced eyes. They train our eyes to see beauty everywhere. And poets, like the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins. He wrote:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God...

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil. <sup>2</sup>

And this:

Glory be to God for dappled things--

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow....

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how.)

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.<sup>3</sup>

(This is a poem for people with freckles!)

God could have given us a drab colorless world, but listen to this poem by Robinson Jeffers:

“The Excesses of God”

Is it not by his high superfluousness we know

Our God? For to equal a need

Is natural, animal, mineral: but to fling

Rainbows over the rain

And beauty above the moon, and secret rainbows

On the dome of deep sea-shells,

And make the necessary embrace of breeding

Beautiful also as fire,

Not even the weeds to multiply without blossom

Nor the birds without music....

The extravagant kindness....<sup>4</sup>

So, as Hopkins cries,

Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God  
beauty's self and beauty's giver.<sup>5</sup>

We can do this, you know, for God is beauty too, and so are we in  
uncountable ways.

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1. The quotes from John O'Donohue are taken from his interview with  
Krista Tippett, on her program *On Being*.

2. Gerard Manly Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" *The Poems of Gerard  
Manly Hopkins*. eds. Gardner and Mackenzie (Oxford: Oxford  
University press, 1970), p. 66

3. Hopkins, "Pied Beauty", *op cit*, p. 69-70

4. Robinson Jeffers, "The Excesses of God," in the *Questing Spirit*  
(New York: Coward-McCann, 1942), p.293.

5. Hopkins, "The Leader Echo and the Golden Echo", *op.cit.* p.92.