

“The Call of Beauty”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

You can also find on that webpage a separate PDF of the slideshow that accompanied this sermon.

Reading

“What to do with beauty?” by Rev. Karen Johnston

<http://blog.awakeandwitness.net/wp/2015/12/what-do-we-do-with-beauty/>

Sermon

I invite you for a moment to bring to mind something of beauty that you observed or experienced in the last 24 hours.

This time of year, this is a pretty easy thing to reflect on. Our worship theme of “beauty” is almost perfectly timed to this month of May as the world around us awakens to new life again - with crocuses, tulips, and daffodils in bloom, with the leaves of trees unfurling, with birds in song, and peepers peeping, with bright sunshine to warm our days.

Perhaps you called to mind something you experienced right in this worship service as we try to cultivate this place as one that is infused with beauty that heals and that inspires.

Beauty, wherever we find it, calls for our attention.

Despite the glory of this season, it can be easy to feel pulled in many directions. Our days can start to fill up with outdoor chores and gatherings of family and friends and all the things happening at once.

In all of this fullness, we need beauty to demand our attention.

I love that on the Montpelier Police Department Facebook page just yesterday they shared a photo taken by an officer on an early morning shift of the gorgeous sunrise. [slide of sunrise photo]

Even amidst a work day, we can experience those moments when beauty calls out to us.

Beauty has that power to stop us in our tracks. [slide of red flower on stone walkway]

To make us take notice.

The author John O'Donohue writes: "When we experience beauty, we feel called. The Beautiful stirs passion and urgency in us and calls us forth from aloneness into the warmth and wonder of an eternal embrace. It unites us again with the neglected and forgotten grandeur of life. The call of beauty is not a cold call into the dark or the unknown; in some instinctive way we know that beauty is no stranger. We respond with joy because in an instant it can awaken under the layers of the heart a forgotten brightness."¹

It can take just a brief second to recognize beauty, to feel awake again to, as O'Donohue calls it, "the grandeur of life," or "a forgotten brightness."

Several years ago, the Montblanc company (they're probably best known for making very fancy pens) and Leo Burnett, a communications firm, teamed up with the German director, Wim Wenders for a short film challenge called "The Beauty of a Second." Contestants were invited to submit one second of video that illustrated beauty. Wenders chose the winners and created several videos of 60 submissions each. Each video being a minute long. I want to share with you one of the compilations, which they entitled, "Instant Bliss."²

[play video from slideshow]

¹ John O'Donohue, Beauty: The Invisible Embrace (Harper Collins, 2004) p. 13

² <https://vimeo.com/36897783>

As this video shows, it can take just a moment to recognize beauty.

Whether it's in the smiling face of a friend,
a gurgling brook,
joyful laughter,
a field of red poppies,
your paddle moving through calm, lake waters,
or a butterfly flapping its wings.

We recognize beauty mostly by how it makes us feel.

When we encounter something beautiful, we are often filled with a sense of awe or wonder. [slide of yellow aspens]

Beauty can feel healing or soothing.

It can make us feel happy and full of delight.

Beauty can be poignant - holding both our feelings of sadness and joy at the same time.

Beauty can remind us of our deeper connection to one another and the world around us.

Beauty engages all of our senses and ways of being in the world.

We can find beauty in our built environment and objects, in nature, in the arts, and in people.

We can also find beauty in actions and experiences.

During my sophomore year of high school, I had a geometry teacher who was very passionate about geometry. One of the things that most excited her was when a student would find a solution to a problem that was simple yet effective. My teacher would call these solutions elegant, and by this, I think she really meant, beautiful. She found these elegant solutions to be beautiful, and there were moments when it would literally take her breath away.

We all need beauty.

I think we know this instinctively.

We can feel it in our gut, in our bones, in our souls.

I think this is why many of us dedicate this hour or so a week to being in worship - to experience the beauty of music, of poetry, of community.

As my colleague the Rev. Darcey Laine puts it, “Beauty stirs something deep in us.” And, that stirring is a life-awakening, life-affirming, life-giving connection to something deep within us as well as to the world around us.

We need this connection to inspire both a sense of care for ourselves - to seek the beauty that can be a balm to our souls - and also to inspire a sense of care for others and the world around us.

For those of you who are more empirical in your way of being, you will especially appreciate that evolutionary biologists also say that it is the case that we need beauty.

In his TED Talk, “The Darwinian Theory of Beauty,” the philosopher Dennis Dutton says, “...the experience of beauty is one of the ways that evolution has of arousing and sustaining interest or fascination...in order to encourage us toward making the most adaptive decisions for survival and reproduction.”³

He then gives the example of beautiful landscapes. He says, “People in very different cultures all over the world tend to like a particular kind of landscape, a landscape that just happens to be similar to the pleistocene savannas where we evolved...It’s a kind of Hudson River school landscape featuring open spaces of low grasses interspersed with copses of trees. The trees, by the way, are often preferred if they fork near the ground, that is to say, if they’re trees you could scramble up if you were in a tight fix. The landscape shows the presence of water directly in view, or evidence of water in a bluish distance, indications of animal or bird life as well as diverse greenery and finally...a path or a road, perhaps a riverbank or a shoreline, that extends into the distance, almost inviting you to follow it. This landscape type is regarded as beautiful, even by people in countries that don’t have it. The ideal savanna landscape is one of the clearest examples where human beings everywhere find beauty in similar visual experience.”⁴

We need beauty not just in a spiritual sense, but also in a biological sense. Our very survival depends on recognizing and seeking the beautiful.

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/denis_dutton_a_darwinian_theory_of_beauty/transcript#t-430446

⁴ Ibid.

The challenges that we face in this age are distinct from those of our human ancestors in the pleistocene age, but we still need beauty.

We need beauty in the evolutionary sense that recognizing beauty can perhaps help us to make choices that will further our survival on this planet.

(I, for one, find wind turbines and solar panels a lot more beautiful than oil refineries, gas pipelines, and coal-fired power plants, for example.)

We also need what might feel like the extravagance of beauty in a harsh world where so many of the images we see and the words we hear are vulgar and disheartening. This is especially true when we allow ourselves to over-consume media - when we become inundated by the news of the day, by the nonstop updates of our social media feeds. There are so many reminders that beauty exists alongside the crude, the terrible, the hateful. We, human beings, are capable of so much beauty as well as ugliness.

Beauty's call is to be participants in that which makes beauty more present, to goodness and kindness and justice.

Tomorrow here in Vermont and around the country the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival kicks off a season of actions. What has inspired me about this movement is not just the essential message that we need to revive a sense of morality in our nation as all of us are impacted by poverty, by systemic racism, by ecological devastation, and by a war economy. I have also been inspired by the infusion of music and the arts into this movement - by the recognition that we need beauty even in our justice-making.

Even as we seek to reform the world and to make change on the societal level, we need beauty. John O'Donohue writes, "When we lose sight of beauty our struggle becomes tired and functional."⁵

Beauty can enliven us and reconnect us with our sense of purpose.

In our appreciation of beauty, we learn how to recognize worth in ourselves and others and to demonstrate care and reverence.

⁵ John O'Donohue, Beauty: The Invisible Embrace (Harper Collins, 2004) p. 6

In his encyclical on the environment and human ecology Pope Francis writes, “By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple.”⁶

To recognize beauty, to give beauty our attention, isn’t only a matter of self-interested delight or happiness. It can also cultivate within us much-needed virtues of love, empathy, and kindness.

I think there is a lot in our world that attempts to take on the shape of beauty or to evoke beauty. [slide of Gucci store]

But, there can be a falseness in it. The glitz and glamour can try to mask itself as beauty or even to try to make us feel beautiful. But, this, in fact, lures us away from noticing the suffering in our midst.

(You might be able to see that in this photo a man sits near the entrance to the store under its bright lights with a small bag of his possessions by his side as shoppers pass him by.)

True beauty, even in its simplicity, calls us, instead, to notice. [slide of hands holding small flower]

It calls us to notice the unexpected or the overlooked beauty in our presence.

My colleague the Rev. Emily Wright-Magoon has said: “Beauty takes our hand and invites us into the heart of the world, all of its aching rawness, its tenderness, its possibility and potential. [slide of hands holding bird]

Beauty focuses us, engages us, calls us — calls us in the religious or ethical sense of calling, in that it moves us to create more beauty, the deep beauty that is justice, that is peace, that is hope and love and forgiveness.”

How can you accept beauty’s invitation today?

Where can you find the sources of beauty in your own life?

⁶ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

How might you seek to create beauty?

And, how can you reflect the beauty around you back out into the world?

The words again of Karen Johnston:

“What to do with beauty?

or joy, for that matter —

in the midst of tragedy, of violence, of cruelty?

What do we do with the living?

Give each their due.

Do not lose ourselves in any of it,

but find ourselves anew.

Where there is beauty,

amplify it.

Where beauty is hidden,

reveal it.

Where beauty is ruined,

restore it.

Where beauty is absent,

create it:

This will be our gift to our aching world.”

May it be so.