"Beauty as Our Guide"

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

May 11, 2025

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/.

Readings

"Good Bones" by Maggie Smith[1]

Excerpt from *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* by John O'Donohue
"The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere – in landscape, music, art, clothes, furniture, gardening, companionship, love, religion and in ourselves…When we experience the Beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming….We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul…Without any of the usual calculation, we can slip into the Beautiful with the same ease as we slip into the seamless embrace of water; something ancient within us already trusts that this embrace will hold us."

Sermon

In one of his many acts of humble service, the late Pope Francis sat at the feet of twelve women in the Rebibbia women's prison to wash their feet. It was Holy Thursday. Like other Popes before him, he came to model Jesus's revolutionary gesture, turning power upside down when the teacher became the servant stooping low to wash the feet of his disciples centuries before.

At the Rebibbia prison, it was the first time a Pope had washed the feet of all women. Papa Francis, the people's Pope, took each woman's foot in his hand, poured water over it, and then bent his face down to plant a gentle kiss before moving onto to the next.

"The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere…"

[1] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones

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We are longing for exemplars of beauty in an age saturated with grotesque displays of power, cruelty, and lies. We don't need memes of pretend popes but real-life, flesh-and- bone acts of beauty.

Writing in 2004, John O'Donohue's words resonate more than a decade later. He writes, "These times are riven with anxiety and uncertainty…In the hearts of people some natural ease has been broken. It is astounding how this has reached deep into the heart. Our trust in the future has lost its innocence…Politics, religion and economics and the institutions of family and community, all have become abruptly unsure. At first, it sounds completely naive to suggest that now might be the time to invoke and awaken beauty. Yet…there is nowhere else to turn and we are desperate; furthermore, it is because we have so disastrously neglected the Beautiful that we now find ourselves in such terrible crisis."[2]

Indeed, beauty has been neglected.
The beauty of this Earth we breathe and move upon—its forests stripped, its creatures threatened by warming ocean waters.
The beauty of the migrant mother, child, grandfather, laborer—searching for somewhere safe and welcoming to call home.

How we regard the people, places, and material world shapes how we treat them.

In his encyclical letter, Laudato Si', 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."[3]

We must learn to appreciate beauty so that we learn how to move beyond self-interest.

One form of beauty is aesthetic. The beauty of form, color, sound. The kind that engages and delights the senses, found in the natural world, so evident at this time of year here in Vermont, as well as in art and design. Appreciating this kind of beauty can enliven the spirit.

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[2] John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (HarperCollins, 2004), 2-3.

[3] Pope Francis, Encylical Letter, Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home, May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

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But today, I want to speak about a different kind of beauty: moral beauty—beauty that arises from goodness, when we act in service, sacrifice, and care, and when we witness others doing the same. The kind of beauty in the washing of feet in an Italian prison.

Psychologist Maria Srios writes, "Goodness toward others is one of humanity's highest virtues. Captured as moral excellence in the field of psychology it is understood to be essential to the survival of our species and essential also to living a life of meaning and value. In this same field of study, moral excellence is also seen as a form of beauty—the beauty of the inner essence of humanity. It is a transcendent quality of our humanness, moving us beyond the self-centered concern for personal survival and wellbeing in the larger realms of kinship."[4]

The beauty of moral excellence isn't about perfection and getting it right one hundred percent of the time. Of course, we fall short. We fail to act with kindness and generosity over and over again. But, aiming towards it puts us in touch with our own inherent beauty and goodness.

Think back to the last kind thing you did. I am sure that each of us here can think of some way we have acted with kindness whether it was holding the door for someone else, making yourself a warm cup of tea at the end of a long day, speaking a kind word to your child or to a friend.

How did you feel when you acted from that place of wholeness and goodness within you?

Such acts toward others and toward ourselves remind us of the mutuality of our relations, that we are deeply interconnected with others in simple and profound ways. Acting with moral excellence—that is with good intent—connects us with our inner beauty. The intent isn't to gain admiration or to prove ourselves worthy. Instead, there is a deeper feeling of aliveness and harmony that can come from acting in concert with the interconnected web of mutuality.

Maria Sirois writes that moral beauty is about, "…seeing one's place in life as a conduit of goodness—of choosing to see and act on behalf of others. For some of us, this is where and how we feel most alive, connected to the larger ineffable forces which ensure that we are part of the interdependent flow, a flow that necessarily must include all races, identities, geographies, circumstances of living."[5]

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[4] Maria Sirois, *The Generous Exchange: How Attention to Beauty, Goodness and Excellence Restores Us and Our World* (Green Fire Press, 2025), 88.

[5] Maria Sirois, The Generous Exchange, 89-90.

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Too often we can become closed off from one another, but what aliveness can emerge when we act as a conduit of goodness, when we become attuned to the interdependent flow of life that includes all people and all beings upon this planet.

The words from our opening hymn inspired by Rev. Toribio Quimada, founder of the UU Church of the Philippines ring so true:

"O, the beauty in a life that illumines honor anew,
that models wise and gracious ways to every seeker;
that every day shall serve in joy and do the right.
O, praise the life whose beauty shows a justice true."

And, the effects of acting with moral excellence and beauty don't stop with ourselves. They ripple outward. When we witness it in others, it shifts something in us. This can both move us into a more positive outlook on life and also catalyze something in our psyches that changes how we behave. It can inspire us to become more generous, more courageous, more compassionate.

On May 1st, International Workers Day, I joined close to two thousand other people in Williston for a May Day rally and march. I have been to many protests and on many marches, but what stood out that day were the young safety marshals—mostly in their 20s, vests brightly shining, some on bikes. As we marched on the sidewalk along Route 7 they paced up and down the road, keeping us in one formation, gently guiding the crowd, watching the traffic, keeping us safe.

The care of these marshals gave me greater purpose and mindfulness. I found myself looking out for others, alerting the people behind me to a dip in the sidewalk, making sure I wasn't moving too quickly or to slowly so we could all stay together. Their moral beauty was contagious.

And then there are those who endure immense suffering and injustice and still act with grace and generosity.

I think of Mohsen Mahdawi who was recently arrested and detained by ICE and then released by federal court ruling after sixteen days in prison. Even through this ordeal, he showed moral beauty.

He describes being led with his hands cuffed and feet shackled into the vehicle that would take him to the Northwest Correctional Facility and imagining he was doing walking meditation.

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He wrote inspiring and love-filled words to his community at First UU in Hartland. These are his words shared a few days before his release:

"To My dear family and community at the UU church of Hartland. My heart is overflowing with joy and love.

I feel your love and support cutting through the barbed wire.

I feel your love penetrating the prison's cold walls, and igniting hope across America…

As I sit in my cell I can see the lighting of the chalice and hear the prayers you read that bring in the spirit of justice.

I assure you that I am in good spirits. Speaking of spirits, I will be connecting with you today, this very Sunday by singing one of my favorite songs from our tradition, "Spirit of Life, come unto me, sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. Blow in the Wind. Rise in the Sea…"

Your Love is a Light in Dark Times

May that Spirit of Light bring Peace and Justice for Palestine, for the People of America and for all humanity."

And, when he was released, he asked to sing Spirit of Life and did so outside the federal court building alongside my colleagues the Rev. Paul Sawyer from Hartland and the Rev. Leon Dunkley from Woodstock.

Now, Mohsen is a human being just like you and me. I do not wish to idolize him. But his example stands in stark contrast to the ugliness around us that led him to be unjustly detained and imprisoned. And just as he can act with moral beauty, so can we.

And, I witness this moral beauty in this community all the time. This community is awash in beauty.

In the warmth of our community lunch volunteers serving plate after plate of food on Mondays and other days of the week,

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In the quiet support given to asylum-seekers new to the community in need of friendship and help acclimating to a new environment,
In the care and reverence shown to the flowers, grass, and trees that grace our bit of land here in downtown Montpelier.

You all are so beautiful.

In a time when the terrible threatens to overtake the good, we can let beauty shine through.
With each kind word.
Each loving act.
Each courageous risk.
Each generous gift.

The poet asks, “This place could be beautiful, right?”

Yes.
Yes, we will make this place beautiful.

May it be so.

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