

“Beauty Multiplied”
April 18, 2021

Matthew 6:25-33

Setting aside the snowstorm two days ago, this is one of my favorite times of the year. The latter part of April into May. The grass starts to look green and lush but it hasn't grown long enough yet to have to mow it. Vibrant flowers start to bloom and if you pause long enough, you can catch their fragrant aroma. The trees that have stood up to snow and ice and high wind for months now are finally beginning to bud. And there are no leaves to rake.

People take off their heavy winter jackets and trade them in for a pair of shorts. Even though I did that personally a couple of months ago. People fire up the grill on their back deck to make sure things are in order for the first barbecue cookout. The sun stays higher and longer in the sky each day. One inadvertent spring sunburn reminds us to put sunscreen on the grocery list again. Even the potholes start to bloom on our town roads and streets.

When the threat of snow is truly behind us and before we get to oppressive heat and rising humidity, you look around and everything feels fresh and new. With the added bonus this spring that more and more people are being vaccinated and the long-awaited promise of gathering with small groups of family and friends finally feels like it might come to fruition.

It's a beautiful time of year. Not so much “beautiful” as in “pretty,” the way we often use that word. I'm really talking about “beautiful” as in “awe-inspiring.” The kind of beauty that stops you right where you are. And takes your breath away. And causes you to get so caught up in what you are seeing that you completely lose track of time.

Do you ever get so mesmerized by a glorious sunset that you forget what you're supposed to do next? Or even what you were doing prior to the moment you gazed up at the horizon? Have you ever sat down in a public garden and become so enchanted by the plants and the flowers and the birds that you don't even notice the people who are marveling the same way you are only a few feet away? Do you find yourself captivated by the soothing sound of the nearby stream this time of year as the water cascades over smooth stones and fills up little pools?

With Easter just behind us and Earth Day coming up this week, I find myself contemplating beauty. Or more accurately, noticing beauty. Appreciating beauty in our world is as close as human beings come to re-imagining the story of God's creation in the Biblical Book of Genesis. A story where God reminds us to be co-creators of the world, along with all the beauty we find therein.

I'm not only interested in God's perspective on beauty this morning, however. I'm also curious what Jesus thinks about beauty. Which leads us into this morning's Scripture lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew.

This morning's Gospel lesson falls somewhere towards the back end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As far as his teaching and preaching goes, today's words are among the most poetic Jesus ever spoke. And in his words, Jesus referred to two separate things, both of which are noted for their exemplary beauty. Birds that fly swiftly and majestically through the air and lilies that bloom vividly and aromatically in the ground.

What birds and lilies have to do with causing you and me to stop worrying is a question we will come back to. For right now, however, it suffices to say that this morning's Gospel lesson warms the hearts of all of us who are nature lovers. If you are a person or you've ever talked to a person who said, "the place where I feel closest to God is out in nature," then this Scripture passage is a good one for you.

What we rarely hear in this world, ironically, is the person who claims they feel closest to God when they are peacefully protesting in the streets in the wake of another black man or Asian-American person killed senselessly. Or the person who feels closest to God picketing outside a border detention center where hundreds of children have been separated from their parents. Or the person who feels especially connected to God when they're handing out clean needles to IV drug users living on the streets.

Beauty and justice. It's hard to sort out where the two intersect...if they intersect at all. I'm not sure I've ever thought about beauty and justice together until this past week when I read a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor in her newest book entitled, *Always a Guest: Speaking of Faith Far From Home*. And in that sermon, Barbara Brown Taylor mentions a book that I had never heard of nor seen. (1)

The book referenced in the sermon is called *On Beauty and Being Just*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) and it's written by a woman named Elaine Scarry. Although I haven't read Elaine Scarry's book, Barbara Brown Taylor summarizes three of her central points.

Scarry's first point is that beauty "prompts a copy of itself." "When you see something beautiful, it stops you in your tracks. And it makes you want to replicate it somehow—draw it, write a song about it, tell someone about it." How true is this first point? I could stop right now in my sermon, pull out my cellphone, scroll through my Facebook or Instagram feed, and find one picture after another that someone posted on social media because they did not want to keep whatever beautiful thing they witnessed to themselves.

When a person sees something beautiful, however, they are simultaneously awakened or re-awakened to what is not beautiful. And that is Scarry's second point. If you see a lily out in a vast green meadow it's different from seeing a lily growing in front of a maximum-security prison. Yet, the beauty of the lily in the meadow makes the

beauty of the lily in front of the impenetrable fortress that is the penitentiary that much more poignant.

Scarry's third crucial point is that beauty has the power to remove human beings from the center of the universe. People from various walks of life might describe the phenomenon of being transfixed by beauty using their own vocabulary. Call it "de-centering" or "transformation" or "redemption." Some might go so far as to call that phenomenon "salvation." The point is that when we move beyond our own self-absorption, we coincidentally feel more engaged with the world around us.

I credit Elaine Scarry and Barbara Brown Taylor both for their insight into this morning's Scripture reading from Matthew's Gospel. By telling us to stop and notice the birds and the lilies long enough to set aside our worries, Jesus urges you and me to get over ourselves. To move beyond our own self-centeredness and see the world through an "other-centered" point of view.

Beauty can do that for human beings in a way that few other things can. Beauty makes us feel small, in the best way possible. Beauty forces us to welcome and embrace interruption, in the best way possible. Beauty takes our breath away, in the best way possible. And beauty opens us up to what is grand and mysterious and lovely and generous and holy. In the best way possible.

When you and I see something so beautiful that we are transfixed, we want to find a way to capture it and pass it on. And even if it's only for a short time, beauty widens our eyes and our hearts to embrace something greater than us.

The only remaining question is whether we can take the beauty we see and want to replicate it. Can we take all the beauty we feel reminding us we are not the center of all living things? And can we do the work we need to do to make life in our world more beautiful and more just for all of God's people and for all life in God's creation.

Yes, justice happens when you and I create more beauty in the world. Particularly, in the places and among the people not typically deemed beautiful. That's what beauty multiplied means in the name of Jesus Christ. On behalf of all God's creation. Amen.

(1) Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest: Speaking of Faith Far From Home* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020) pg. 13.