

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Beauty”
Sunday, June 2, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “Beauty will save the world.”
~Prince Myskin, *The Idiot (or The Adolescent)*, Dostoevsky

Sermon “Beauty Saves” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Mary Oliver offers this meditation on “The Sweetness of Dogs:”

What do you say, Percy? I am thinking
of sitting out on the sand to watch
the moon rise. It’s full tonight.

So we go

and the moon rises, so beautiful it
makes me shudder, makes me think about
time and space, makes me take
measure of myself: one iota
pondering heaven. Thus we sit, myself

thinking how grateful I am for the moon’s
perfect beauty and also, oh! How rich
it is to love the world. Percy, meanwhile,
leans against me and gazes up into
my face. As though I were just as wonderful
as the perfect moon.¹

Plato was probably the first to identify beauty as part of the triad of beauty,
goodness and truth, the fundamentals of the good life, what he called the
transcendentals. One observer notes that Plato in this way connects “the human

capacities to think, wish, and feel. They also, in the ancient conception, corresponded to studies: science (truth), religion (goodness), arts (beauty).”² In classical philosophy, these three are intertwined and mutually supportive, so that where there is truth there is also beauty and goodness and where there is beauty, there is also goodness and truth. We speak, for example, of the beauty of the soul, which is good and true, and the beauty of an elegant scientific theory or a mathematical theorem, which are both true and good. The poet John Keats captures the intertwining of two of them in his “Ode to a Grecian Urn:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty’—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

We often think that the perception of beauty is a simple thing, that we know what is beautiful when we see it in the majesty of the mountains, the grandeur of the ocean, the awe we feel as the sun gloriously departs from the sky it goes down over horizon. Surely some of this sense of beauty is innate, but it is also learned. Parents and friends point out what is beautiful to a child, and all our lives we are on the lookout for the satisfaction and pleasure that beauty brings us in new and unexpected places. Beauty pleases the body, the mind, and the soul.

In our own time, we may wonder whether truth and goodness are being undermined. Especially in our public life, truth sometimes seems to be overwhelmed by lies repeated over and over. Truth becomes partisan, so that my truth is incompatible with yours and vice versa. The way of goodness, likewise,

can be difficult to discern in the complexities of our postmodern world as the almost infinite varieties of choices we face overwhelm the limits of our time and our minds. Novelists and screenwriters excel at creating moral and ethical dilemmas that challenge simple and naïve notions of what is good, what is right or wrong. I find this particularly perplexing in considering how to walk lightly on the earth, how to most responsibly make choices that conserve Mother Earth rather than exploiting her.

Perhaps beauty alone can save us from the degeneration of truth and the complexity of goodness. Alexander Solzhenitsyn considered this possibility in his address on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. He says:

One day Dostoevsky threw out the enigmatic remark: “Beauty will save the world”. What sort of a statement is that? For a long time I considered it mere words. How could that be possible? When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes – but whom has it saved?

There is, however, a certain peculiarity in the essence of beauty, a peculiarity in the status of art: namely, the convincingness of a true work of art is completely irrefutable and it forces even an opposing heart to surrender....

[A] work of art bears within itself its own verification.... Those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force –

they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.

So perhaps that ancient trinity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is not simply an empty, faded formula as we thought in the days of our self-confident, materialistic youth? If the tops of these three trees converge, as the scholars maintained, but the too blatant, too direct stems of Truth and Goodness are crushed, cut down, not allowed through – then perhaps the fantastic, unpredictable, unexpected stems of Beauty will push through and soar TO THAT VERY SAME PLACE, and in so doing will fulfil the work of all three?

In that case Dostoevsky's remark, "Beauty will save the world," was not a careless phrase but a prophecy? After all HE was granted to see much, a man of fantastic illumination.

And in that case art, literature might really be able to help the world today? [Writers and artists] can CONQUER FALSEHOOD! In the struggle with falsehood art always did win and it always does win! Openly, irrefutably for everyone! Falsehood can hold out against much in this world, but not against art.³

We might add to Solzhenitsyn's conclusion: Not against Beauty.

So perhaps beauty can in fact save the world. But if this is to be so, it cannot be merely be conventional beauty. If we only learn what is beautiful from our

parents and friends in our childhood, then our sense of beauty will be constricted to what they consider beautiful. If our conception of beauty is defined by our cultural inheritance, then it will be a very limited conception indeed. Dostoevsky wrote the maxim “Beauty will save the world” in his novel *The Adolescent*, but browsing through the rest of the novel we find that the word “beauty” is almost always attached to a woman. Traditional standards of feminine beauty are narrow and constricted, as a tour of most art museums will show. Then again, most art and most literature before our time has been created by white cisgender males, so what is beautiful is defined by the male gaze. Rev. Leslie Takahashi in our meditation this morning speaks about the beauty found in “the fractions, the spectrum, the margins,” and asserts that

“The day is coming when all will know

That the rainbow world is more gorgeous than monochrome...”⁴

June 28th marks the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riot in Greenwich Village. This is an opportunity to celebrate the beauty of people banding together to throw off the chains of oppression. Juneteenth likewise celebrates the emancipation of African Americans from slavery – or at least the beginnings of liberation, for stony is the road that has been trod since that beautiful and hopeful day. Still, even the beginnings of liberation are beautiful. Consider the strength of the ancient prejudices that associate white with beauty and black with ugliness and the need to assert the truth that Black is Beautiful as African Americans

began to assert in the same years as the Stonewall Riot. Consider the beauty of our Gay Pride Parades to be celebrated over the next two weekends of June – beauty that was hidden and suppressed for far too long. Consider the many forms of beauty we find in all people of all genders. Consider that beauty can be found in nooks and crannies that seem unpromising, that beautiful flowers can sometimes spring up in the cracks of ugly cement.

Solzhenitsyn asserts that “work of art bears within itself its own verification.” That is to say, beauty contains its own verification – but there is ugliness as well, especially in the works of our own hands. The Navajo blessing we shared in our unison reading says that “Beauty is before me, and beauty behind me”⁵ – but it was most likely written in a place and at a time when natural beauty predominated in the landscape, before uranium mining scarred the landscape of the Navajo lands. The mountains and hills of Appalachia are stunningly beautiful when preserved in the Shenandoah and Blue Ridge national parks – but far more have had their tops removed and turned into slag that scars the landscape and poisons the water. Too many of our inner cities are places desolate of beauty. Too many of our plains are given over to mining and drilling, and too many of our forests are given over to clear cutting.

We must surely expand our appreciation for beauty beyond the merely conventional, but we must also fight to preserve beauty from the rapacity of wealth and power. The love of beauty is one of the ways we are inspired to fight

against the expanding exploitation that threatens the web of life of which we are a part. UU minister Sean Parker Dennison writes, “The ability to see beauty is the beginning of our moral sensibility. What we believe is beautiful we will not wantonly destroy.”⁶

Beauty may be found in many places and can indeed save the world; but *truth* compels us to acknowledge that our conceptions of beauty have too often been bounded by the narrowness of too limited a circle of those who may declare what is beautiful and what ugly, by prejudices that exclude too much of the beauty we may find before us and behind us. Beauty, too, needs liberation. And *goodness* calls on us to act, to preserve beauty, to liberate beauty from the many places in which it is not yet seen, and to preserve it from destruction.

We began with the beauty of the moon and of a loving relationship between the poet’s dog and the poet. It is fitting that we end with Mary Oliver’s ode to “The Sun:”

Have you ever seen
anything
in your life
more wonderful

than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon

and into the clouds or the hills,
or the rumpled sea,
and is gone—
and how it slides again

out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance—
and have you ever felt for anything
such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in any language,
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure

that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you

as you stand there,
empty-handed —
or have you too

turned from this world –

or have you too

gone crazy

for power,

for things?⁷

May we become aware of all of the beauty that surrounds us, may we immerse ourselves in beauty, and may we defend and show forth beauty in all that we do.

AMEN

¹ Mary Oliver, *Dog Songs*, New York: Penguin Press, 2013, p. 61.

² <https://www.simplyconvivial.com/2017/truth-goodness-beauty/>

³ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "Nobel Lecture, Prize in Literature 1970,"

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/>

⁴ Leslie Takahashi, "Marginal Wisdom,"

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/marginal-wisdom>

⁵ A Blessing from the Navajo Tradition, Reading No. 682 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

⁶ Sean Parker Dennison, "What Does It Mean To Be A People of Beauty?", Soul Matters Small Group Packet, June 2019

⁷ <http://www.poetseers.org/contemporary-poets/mary-oliver/mary-oliver-poems/the-sun/>