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May 18, 2008

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The Power of Beauty

Mark 14: 3-9

After twenty-five years in the pastorate, my habit of never going out on a Saturday night is so engrained that even during my sabbatical I only broke with custom once. One evening, when all the kids had plans to be away, I actually took Melissa to the movies. We saw *Charlie Wilson's War*. Fairly interesting. But the best part came afterward: we emerged from the theatre into a cold night, with a light snow falling. The world was wondrously muted and still, creating an enchanting scene that made you want to pull your lover to you in the parking lot and give her a kiss as snowflakes fell into your hair and shoulders.

(Yes, young people, even old folks are drawn to such moments from time to time.)

It was the kind of evening where you go back to the house and light the candles and put on Carole King's *Tapestry* and talk early into the morning.

It was the kind of evening that makes you realize we live to experience the power of beauty.

To be captivated by moments where all circumstances conspire to create the power of beauty is a primary, if unconscious, motivation of our lives.

We are made to enjoy the power of beauty.

We are designed to hunger and thirst for moments of beauty that inspire and enchant us.

The very next day I was sitting in church, in a darkened auditorium equipped with a small stage upon which were four guitarists, some of whom looked like they had just finished a particularly hard bar gig a few hours earlier.

The lead singer, who might have been twenty-five, t-shirted, tattooed, and earringed, had cut loose with a couple of rocking songs. Then he stepped to the mike to speak in utter sincerity. "I was reading in Psalms 141 this week, and pondering this verse: 'Let my prayer be counted as aroma before thee, Lord.'

The Scripture reminded me that our prayers are truly incense unto God. That thought struck me so powerfully that I did some research and found that you have to crush thousands of petals to create an ounce of perfume. I realized that sometimes it is when our lives are crushed that our prayers to God are sweetest.

Sometimes it's when life defeats us and we still lift our prayers up to God that our words take the form of incense unto the Father."

I'm sitting here looking at this unkempt kid from acid band central casting

who has just spoken these profound words, and I am suffused with a sense of beauty,

so taken not only with the profundity of his statement

but in its pouring out from such an unexpected vessel, that I felt such an experience of spiritual beauty --

I felt holy chill bumps all over my body.

Amidst the Nazi death camps, inmates drew butterflies upon the walls of their barracks to counter the squalor and morbidity of their surroundings by the power of beauty.

They drew butterflies to express hope that God might deliver them to a future life that was as beautiful as their present was horrific.

We cannot live without the power of beauty, a fact demonstrated by our Lord as he entered Jerusalem, knowing that people were plotting to arrange his arrest and murder.

Even as he lived under lengthening lethal shadows, our Lord went to enjoy a meal in the house of Simon the leper. As he sits at a table, a woman brings a bottle of nard, an expensive, imported fragrant ointment extracted from the roots of an Indian herb, breaks it and pours it on Jesus' head

in an extravagant act of tribute. The entire room must have been instantly redolent of that sweet scent.

Church tradition says that this woman was a prostitute. I'm not sure upon what basis this tradition rests. The truth is, there were, and are, a lot of ways to mess your life up besides sex.

For all we know, she could have been guilty of bank fraud. But one thing we know for sure.

She had done something in her past for which she was greatly ashamed.

She went to enormous expense to create a moment of beauty.

Who knows how many crushed petals of sadness she was expressing in that gesture of pouring perfume upon the head of our Lord?

But she went to great lengths to create a moment of beauty that surprised and uplifted the Christ.

Ladies and gentlemen, this woman's example provides us with the key to understanding what we do this morning as we dedicate our sanctuary and organ to God's service.

We must allow the beauty of the world to feed our souls.

But we also have a responsibility as God's creatures to respond to the presence of beauty by striving to create opportunities for beauty in God's world.

By the hard work of a few and the hard dollars of many, we have managed to create a beautiful sanctuary and a lovely organ that represent our ambition to create instruments that communicate the power of beauty.

As we seek to dedicate this sanctuary and organ,

we strive to employ them as instruments to create the power of beauty in others' lives.

We seek through these instruments to create moments that can enliven, enchant and inspire the lives of any who come within these walls.

Before expounding further on this point it seems right and proper to ask a strange but fruitful question: "What's in this act of beauty for the woman?"

I think we can assume that indeed this woman bears a past of failure and transgression.

Great was her sin. Great was her sorrow. Great was her remorse.

Great was her desperation to create a beautiful moment that could surprise and delight our Lord.

But great also must have been her experience of God's Good News. Great was her liberation.

Great was her joy. Great was her sense of freedom that came from being made a new creature in Christ.

Accordingly, great was her gratitude unto God, so she went to extraordinary lengths

and incurred extravagant cost to do something beautiful unto Jesus for the blessing she had received.

Did this woman act so that she might win the applause of others?

No: most everyone around her criticized her act as wasteful.

But her gratitude to God moved her to endure great expense and risk ridicule

to create this moment of beauty as a form of thanks to the redemption that had changed her life.

So, too, that is why we act to dedicate this sanctuary and organ unto God.

We have acted purely and simply out of gratitude to God for the profundity of blessings we have enjoyed.

We who have been touched by God's beauty cannot help but want to create instruments that can touch others with the power of beauty as well.

Our acts of dedication this morning are nothing less than our responses of thanks unto God for touching us with joy. We dedicate this sanctuary and organ as instruments of beauty because God's beauty

has had a transforming influence upon our lives and upon our community of faith.

When you boil the truth down to simplest terms, the sanctuary is an instrument of beauty.

The organ is an instrument of beauty. Our lives are meant to be instruments of beauty.

We dedicate ourselves to creating moments of beauty in response to the beauty that God has created within us.

Yet I remind you of Shakespeare's insight: beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
I regard Augusta National as what heaven is supposed to look like,
whereas my daughter can walk by a broadcast of the Masters' golf tournament and ask,
"Dad, when does *Top Chef* come on?"
There is no accounting for such craziness!
But not all forms of beauty strike everyone similarly.
Likewise, this woman's act of beauty was not universally cheered.
In truth she was roundly criticized.
Even Jesus' disciples asked, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?"
Only our Lord saw clearly. He said, "Do not trouble her. She has done a beautiful thing."
If church tradition has been quick to impugn this woman's reputation,
it has been slow to credit her prescience.
For she alone seems to have sensed the purpose of Jesus' mission.
Jesus is in essence saying here, 'I am the poor. I am the one hounded by my enemies.
I am the one who faces the rejection of betrayal, the indignity of arrest, the brutality of the lash,
the humiliation of the thorns, the cruelty of the nails, the degradation of the cross.
I am the poor in spirit. This woman has done a beautiful thing.
Only she has seen in my life and ministry the extravagant love of God unveiled.
One she has seen the extravagant love of God that will be revealed in my death,
and only she has responded in kind. Do not trouble her, she has done a beautiful thing,
in keeping with God's extravagant acts of love.'

Don't you see, my friends, we are not intended to create acts of beauty for beauty's sake.
This woman experienced the beauty of God's liberation in her own life and responded by creating
an act of beauty, not for beauty's sake, but that those around her might peer
through her beautiful act and see the God that lies behind it.
We never seek to create acts of beauty for the sake of beauty.
We have created a lovely sanctuary and a powerful organ capable of creating beautiful music,
so people can peer beyond these surface beauties to seek the God that is the Source of all wonder.
Our hope is that a listener who experiences a moment of beauty through this organ will be moved
to see beyond the power of the instrument, to see beyond the skill of the musician,
to see beyond the creativity of the composer to seek the reality of the One in whom all beauty is grounded.
Whether it's a smile, a sunset, a song, or a well-hit seven iron,
the reality of beauty always feels like a gift, and this gift always points our vision toward the Giver.
We hope to create in this sanctuary moments of beauty that direct people's vision
beyond the surface of beauty to seek the Source from whom all blessings flow.

I told you a few weeks ago about my trip to Mobile,
where I went to see the replica of the *Hundley*, the pioneering Confederate submarine.
While there I passed a wall, where all of Alabama's National Medal of Honor winners
through the 1970's were listed, along with their photographs.
Each name was accompanied by a statement of the heroism
that had won each man our nation's highest award of gratitude.
I was drawn to the faded Army photograph of a black man.
His name was George Mitchell, born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1916.
This was his story:
in 1943, he was serving in the Army aboard a ship in New Guinea that was torpedoed and began to sink.
It seems that the Army had put quite a few folks aboard that ship who couldn't swim,

so that many began to founder in the waters.

George Mitchell, however, was a powerful swimmer

and he started hauling flailing man after man to the rescue rafts.

He saved so many people from drowning that in the process he exhausted himself.

When the ship sank, he was caught in its suction and drowned.

I, of course, never knew George Mitchell, nor any of his family.

But as I stood there pondering his faded photograph, I found tears coming to my eyes.

Here was a black man born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916.

He knew discrimination scarcely even imaginable today.

He had reason to hate.

No one would have blamed him for saving his own skin and letting the white people around him drown.

Yet God had wrought a beautiful love within his soul capable of calling him to do something beautiful.

God had so wrought a beauty in his soul that he responded

by doing a beautiful thing to those around him, regardless of the color of their skin.

Such, my friends, is how we are to invest our lives individually and as a community of faith.

Creating beauty is like cultivating roses: it's a thorny and arduous proposition.

Yet it is worth the cost.

Our God has endowed us with the aptitude to behold beauty, to enjoy beauty, and to create beauty.

By our creation of beauty we are called to move the vision of the world toward the source of all loveliness, the living God.

I leave you this morning with the wisdom of the great poet John Keats ringing in your ears:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are Sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone . . .

“When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe Than ours,

a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' –

that is all Ye know on earth,

and all Ye need to know.”

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