

We Seek Beauty
Ephesians 1:11-23
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First Central Congregational UCC
7 November 2010

A month ago, after the wonderful installation weekend, Michael and I had returned our guests to the airport and were headed back into the city. It was a lovely, warm, sunny day and the leaves had just begun to turn. As you exit the airport, if you turn left you head back towards downtown, but if you drive straight through the intersection you enter Levi Carter Park, which sits along Carter Lake. On this particular day the trees and the sunlight beckoned us into the park.

We had not visited Levi Carter Park before, but were surprised at its size, much as we have been surprised at the wonderful system of parks throughout the city of Omaha. We enjoyed driving through the park and then walking along the lakeshore taking pictures of the downtown skyline across the water in the afternoon light.

Next to the beauty, one also realizes that this park has seen better days. Clearly early in the twentieth century it had been more splendid, and the ruins of bathhouses and concession stands sit there evoking another era and inspiring future potential.

As we walked around the ruins, we came upon a sign, oddly placed, discussing the history of the Omaha Park system. Here is some of what we learned.

In 1889 Omaha formed its first Board of Park Commissioners. Immediately those commissioners hired Horace Cleveland to design a series of parks and boulevards for the young city. Cleveland had worked with Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of New York's Central Park, and had himself become one of the nation's premier landscape architects and urban planners. Prior to arriving in Omaha, he had designed areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Cleveland's chief interest was the "art of arranging land' for efficiency and beauty in the newly developing cities of the Midwestern region."

For Omaha, Cleveland designed a series of green spaces to be anchored by large parks like Hanscom and Elmwood, and he linked these parks with broad, landscaped boulevards and parkways. Unfortunately, some of those roads no longer exist in their original glory, but some do, and the parks, of course, have remained a significant contribution to life in Omaha.

Now, as I was reading this sign and enjoying its historical and design tidbits, I got most excited when I read the sidebar at the bottom and learned that the chair of the first Omaha Board of Park Commissioners and the person who led the Park Commissioners in hiring Horace Cleveland was none other than Dr. George Miller, the first Trustee of the First Congregational Church!

You can imagine how thrilled I was to learn that one of the lasting legacies to this city of one of our church's prominent early members was this glorious park system.

It was obviously a tradition that continued. Very recently I discovered, at Carolyn Baldwin's recommendation, the Mount Vernon Gardens which are south of the zoo on 13th St. I

think this is one of the prettiest spots in Omaha. It sits atop a bluff overlooking the Missouri river just before it bends east at Bellevue. The Gardens are a 50% to scale replica of the gardens of Mt. Vernon, the estate of George and Martha Washington. The gardens are sadly not of the grandeur they clearly were when the park was designed in 1928 as a living memorial to our first President. While enjoying this park two weekends ago, I came across the dedicatory plaque and was again excited to learn that the person who organized the park was a member of this congregation, Mrs. Elsie Jane Troup, the wife of District Judge A. C. Troup. Mrs. Troup was a member from 1900 to her death in 1950.

In designing this sermon series, which will conclude this month, on features of the faith we proclaim here at First Central and in the United Church of Christ which might appeal to those in our culture seeking a Christianity different from what they were used to, it was important for me to include seeking beauty alongside other important traits. We have emphasized our welcome and inclusion, our service activities, our impulse to mission, our educational ministries, and our intellectual embrace of science, among other attributes. It was important for me to include alongside these, an appreciation for beauty – in music, art, literature, dance, architecture, and design. So, you can realize how very excited I was to discover the contributions of this congregation to creating beauty not only in this building but in and for the city as a whole.

First, let me say a little bit about my “theology of beauty,” if you will. I believe that the religious impulse is most akin to the aesthetic, to our appreciation of and experience of the beautiful. Experiencing the sublime and the ecstatic are openings to transcendent, spiritual reality. Worship, then, should evoke in us mystery, awe, and wonder. And it should stir our imaginations. Many think I take an intellectual approach in my preaching, and in some ways I do. Clearly I want intellectual content and hopefully you leave thinking about something.

But for me, it is less important to communicate concepts. Instead, it is far more important to excite the imagination. For us, in worship, to have some encounter beyond ourselves which inspires. Through sights and sounds and tastes and smells. Through the words read, the hymns sung, the music listened to, and the sermon preached, something will stir and excite your imagination, leaving you with that childlike sense of wonder. I believe that in these moments we experience the glory of God.

But rather than give a general sermon on the theology of beauty, today we have a specific purpose, one that on the face of it is not obviously tied to an experience of the beautiful. Today we observe All Saints Sunday, in which we remember those who have gone before us and are now dead – the great heroes and martyrs of the church, all Christians in every place and time, the particular individuals who have influenced our lives, and especially those who have died in the past year.

In this Ephesians passage, offered as one of the lections for All Saints Day, we read of the saints and of “our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of God’s glory” and also of “the hope to which God has called you . . . the riches of Christ’s glorious inheritance among the saints.”

This entire passage is a rich one, with, I believe, many shades of meaning. But particularly on this All Saints Sunday, as we remember the deceased, I believe it draws our eyes to behold what God desires for creation, and that divine desire is a vision of glory and beauty.

Thus, our Christian remembrance of the dead calls forth our recognition and praise of the beauty and the glory of God.

Let me begin to explain by pointing out a few features of the biblical view of last things, or the theological category of “eschatology.” These doctrines contain our views on death and the afterlife and the reign of God. Let me focus on the perspective of St. Paul. Now, the majority, scholarly opinion is that Paul did not write the letter to the Ephesians, our text today. But what was a once a consensus is currently being questioned again in some scholarly circles. Even if it is not written by Paul himself, the letter clearly stands within Paul’s broader school of thought, so an understanding of his eschatology can help to illuminate the passage for us.

First off, for Paul, we are not talking about doctrine or theological categories. For Paul, we are telling a story. In Paul’s perspective God was at work in Jesus Christ to bring our story to completion. In the Jewish faith narrative, God had created the people so that they might be a blessing to all nations, even a blessing for the entire creation. But the people had gone away from God’s purpose and were now exiled. For first century Jews the exile was not simply some historical event that had occurred centuries before when actual Jews had lived in Babylon. Exile itself was an on-going experience, as the people were not experiencing the fullness of the promise of God.

Note: I think that the grieving person might identify here with this feeling of exile and not experiencing the fullness of life.

Paul believed that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was God’s act, in human history, to end that time of exile and bring about the fullness of God’s reign. Thus, in Jesus we get the end of the story.

Paul used a variety of images to explore what this end of the story meant for us. And it is important we understand them as that – images, metaphors, pictures. These are not literal descriptions of some future reality; they are meant, as biblical scholar N. T. Wrights says, to “educate [our] imagination[s], to lift [our] eyes beyond the small horizons of [our] previous worldviews.”

One image is of the appearance of Jesus among us. Unfortunately, the Greek word for this has often been mis-translated and mis-interpreted to refer to a “Second Coming.” As Bishop Wright clarifies, for Paul there was not some future coming at which Jesus would arrive from some great distance. Rather, it would become apparent that Jesus is already here among us. Quoting from N. T. Wright:

It would be more like drawing back a previously unnoticed curtain to reveal what had been there all along. Granted, that revelation would be literally earth-shattering, but that is simply the necessary and inevitable effect of the final coming together of heaven and earth.

Wright says that the point is not humanity going off to some other place, but that God, through Jesus, will transform the earth, turning it into heaven. Our world and our lives will be, and are in the process of being, transformed by the fullness of God.

Another image Paul uses is of judgment. Now, we might think that judgment is not a very hopeful or helpful notion. Of course, the image of a wrathful, judging God has done great damage to many people. But, you’ll be glad to know, that emphasizing wrathful judgment is a misunderstanding of the justice that will be and is being worked by God.

The great contemporary German theologian Jurgen Moltmann has been most helpful in clarifying the judgment of God for my own understanding. He writes:

The justice which Christ will bring about for all and everything is not . . . the retributive justice which rewards the good and punishes the wicked. It is *God's creative justice*, which brings the victims justice and puts the perpetrators right. . . . As the coming judge of victims and perpetrators, the risen Christ will do away with the suffering of the one and the burden of the other, and will bring both out of the dominion of evil into the community of God's righteousness and justice. The purpose of his judgment is not reward or punishment, but the victory of the divine creative righteousness and justice.

God's judgment, understood this way, is an act of transformation and reconciliation, not an act of punishment. It is tied to God's power and will as Creator, and God's desire to re-create a broken world. As such, the judgment of God is much more an artful and beautiful image, than it is one of wrath.

And this consideration leads to a final image St. Paul uses to discuss the end of the story, that is the renewal of creation. When Jesus is revealed as fully present among us and victims and perpetrators are transformed into new persons by the justice of God, then God will be working to make all things new. N. T. Wright, again, explains for us:

For God to be all in all, it is necessary that, through the Messiah's victory over death itself, the ultimate corruption of the present world and its inhabitants, creation can be set free from its bondage to decay and share the freedom of the glory of God's children.

For God to be all in all, for the divine glory to be fully manifest, God must complete this story. And God will do it through God's creative, re-creative power.

In all these pictures of the end of the story, God is at work in Jesus Christ to bring our story to completion. And that God's story comes to an end in a vision of glory and beauty. Therefore, we can live in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection that our deceased loved ones share in this glory of God, And we can dedicate ourselves to this vision of last things by seeking beauty in our own time. Thus, our Christian remembrance of the dead calls forth our recognition and praise of the beauty manifest in God's glory.

The pursuit and creation of beauty is, therefore, itself an act of praise and worship which helps to reveal the *present* reality of God's reign among us. We understand how our spiritual practice or our ethical actions or our advocating for social justice helps to bring about the reign of God and the new creation. But so too do our acts of artistic creation, or, for those of us who are not talented, our experiences of beauty created by others. Music, art, literature, dance, architecture, and design are part of God's on-going work to transform the world. And I believe have been and will continue to be key elements of our spiritual experience at First Central.

But aside from all the theologizing, let me share one more story of the connection between death, beauty, hope, praise and worship, and the coming reign of God. It is from *The Last Battle*, the seventh book of the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. Narnia has been destroyed after a final battle between good and evil. Aslan, the lion and Christ-figure in the stories, has appeared and opened a door into another world, and all of the story's heroes have

fled the destruction of the world that they have loved. As they travel through this new land on the other side of the door, they realize that they recognize it. It looks so very like Narnia, yet bigger and better and different.

The Lord Digory, who was present at the creation of Narnia, explains, “the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia, which has always been here and always will be here. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream.”

Once the characters realize that they are in a new and better and more beautiful country, they are caught up in the wonder around them. And we read:

The new [Narnia] was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there, you will know what I mean.

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed and then cried:

“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. . . . Come further up, come further in!”

He shook his mane and sprang forward into a great gallop – a Unicorn's gallop which, in our world, would have carried him out of sight in a few moments. But now a most strange thing happened. Everyone else began to run, and they found, to their astonishment, that they could keep up with him: not only the Dogs and the humans but even fat little Puzzle and the short-legged Poggin the Dwarf. The air flew in their faces as if they were driving fast in a car without a windscreen. The country flew past as if they were seeing it from the windows of an express train. Faster and faster they raced, but no one got hot or tired or out of breath.

I was in sixth grade the first time I read those words. It was right before recess, and when I got outside I ran. I ran all over the place. I was so full of energy and joy and hope and peace. It was probably the single greatest recess of my life.

Now, even as an adult, every time I read that chapter I feel exactly the same way – wild and free and filled with energy, spirit, and the possibility of a new and better world.

And that, to me, is what, as we remember our dead on this All Saints Sunday, it means to “set our hope on Christ,” “to live for the praise of his glory,” and to seek beauty.