

“Restoring Beauty”

Isaiah 58:1-12, I Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 5, 2023, dedicated to Lavonia Simms, to all who struggle with mental health and battle with addiction and to all who restore beauty in this world and always to the glory of God!

“Restoring Beauty”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, *“Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything as beautiful, for beauty is God’s handwriting.”* In his days at Walden Pond, Emerson would be still and soak in the beauty all around him. He would perch himself on a pumpkin and believe it to be more beautiful than a velvet cushion. He would be still and, in his stillness, know the fullness and beauty of God’s creation was within him.

I was reflecting on Emerson and Walden this week, as we went through the frenetic drama of wondering what a Groundhog in Pennsylvania could tell us at the half-way point of winter. Would Spring come early? Or would we experience six-more weeks of winter? If only this Groundhog had walked the fields and woods

surrounding the young Township or Columbus, Ohio and had taken in the glorious quiet of snow-covered beauty. He would have said, with a microphone to the listening world, “be present and thankful that you have this glorious season to behold God’s landscapes of love.”

When was the last time you read God’s handwriting? When was the last time you heard a Godcast instead of a podcast? George Washington Carver said it beautifully, *“I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in.”*

Everything and everyone have beauty. But not everything and everyone sees it, feels it, and experiences it. Our purpose on this planet and in this beautiful house of worship is to see beauty in everything and everyone. Not until we are silent, until we are truly still, do we have the chance to see beauty, to feel its powerful, purposeful hold on our lives. In the words of Mother Teresa, spoken from the streets of Calcutta, India: *“We need to find God, and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls.”*

We, of all people, located on the corner of Cleveland Avenue and Broad Street in Columbus, should be attuned to beauty. We are surrounded by beauty. To our east is all the beautiful art in the Columbus Museum of Art. To our west is the beautiful Washington Gladden Social Justice Park; and to our west and north and all around us is the beauty of art being created by students and teachers at The Columbus College of Art and Design. And have you seen our neighbors? They are truly beautiful and their hands, and hearts and

eyes and souls are seeking to create even more beauty in this world. And then to our south, just outside our doors and across Broad Street are the women and men who are unsheltered, unhoused and seeking to live under nature's conditions and the under the chiseled words, "Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve." They are beautiful. We are surrounded by beauty. Each of you here is beautiful and shines beautiful light, life, and love within these walls of sacred stone.

Why today am I so concerned about beauty and truth; about restoring beauty in our lives and faith? From our texts of scripture, Isaiah, Paul and Jesus are all calling us to behold what is beautiful and live into beauty's way.

The prophet Isaiah is calling us to see what is beautiful and true – in his own prophetic words and ways. He is calling everyone, everywhere – all the time – to see that all we do must be centered in God. While Israel has an elaborate and passionate religion, the prophet, and our God, are deeply disturbed that it is a religion practiced with complete disregard for the character and intentions that God has in mind. In other words, what is authentic (and beautiful) religion? God and God's prophet are concerned that the people are too busy putting on a show with great devotion and missing the essence of genuine fasting, thoughtful prayer and the urgent needs of "neighbor-engagement." Simply put, in their efforts of looking good, they have lost touch with doing good. Beauty comes into focus when those beside and around us are cared for and healed.

It reminds me of a comment that I heard from an Anglican priest years ago. While serving a parish in Wales, he was told by one of

his parishioners to turn the lights off during communion because she really didn't want to see the people around her in worship. She only wanted to commune alone with God. He reminded her that communion comes from the French "to be in community" and from the Latin, "fellowship and mutual sharing." She replied, *"Father, it isn't my problem that the French and the Romans didn't know what they were talking about. Just turn down the lights."* I wonder if she cared what Jesus and Isaiah were talking about? Probably not.

Jesus is now past the Beatitudes and into the Sermon on the Mount when he speaks of Salt, Light, and the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He is not worried about the things that do not matter. He is pointing to each of us becoming flavor of goodness and light of the world. He is concerned that each of us know and honor Mosaic and Levitical Law and the Hebrew Prophets – and do even better than the religious leaders of our day – in living them out faithfully.

True, we have to know what "the old-time religion" says before we launch into the Law of Love and the Prophecy of Justice and Righteousness. But he is clear – we can all do better. He doesn't say this in a pejorative way. He means it as encouragement for each of us living into the fullness of a beautiful relationship with God and one another.

And our dear Apostle Paul wants us all to remember that faith comes not from elegant speech or the wisdom of human beings, but from God alone. Faith is a gift from God who points to his Son crucified and risen – which scandalizes and offends human wisdom. This isn't to say that faith is anti-intellectual and cuts against thinking Christians. It is simply to say, that faith makes all things possible.

Hope makes all things work together for good. And Love makes all things beautiful.

Each of us is called to restore beauty in this world. I believe this with my whole heart. Years ago, one of my early teachers and mentors, Fr. Henri Nouwen wrote, *“The central question is, Are the leaders of the present and the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness.”*

Are we? Are we people who live in God, have a ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate word, to taste God’s infinite Goodness? Are we these people about whom Henri was writing? On our good days, yes. Let’s make this a good day.

Let us be those who restore beauty in this world. Let us come to the table of grace, the table of blessing, the table of our Lord and here and now – let us taste and see the simple and beautiful gifts which God has prepared for us. Amen.

