

The vitality of life does not exist in books, or in ideas about things. It doesn't live in formulas and replicable experiments. It surely doesn't exist in the amount of money one has or spends. Real life, life that is vital and life sustaining lives inside us and between us---I define "us" broadly to include plants, animals, nature and the cosmos.

Real life is messy, unpredictable, uncontrollable and often happens "to" us. Like love or a beautiful sunset. The joy we experience in being with dear friends, and the time we get to rest and play enlivens us.

So what does this have to do with beauty you might ask? Good question and one I want to explore with you this morning. I was a bit surprised at how much I struggled this week with what could be said about beauty. I had assumed that beauty would be a pretty straight forward subject to get our hands around. That's not been my experience.

One way to think about beauty is that it exists all around us. In many respects, it's commonplace. Maybe so commonplace we fail to notice it most of the time.

Another very real possibility is that beauty is largely a thing of the past. When time passed more slowly, and when the world seemed less dangerous, less violent, maybe we noticed beauty more often. When there was less fear in the world, less ugliness in our interactions, less hatred and condemnation, beauty may have been more available.

However we think about beauty, it seems there is something alive in beauty. Beauty has an inherent vibrancy. It makes us feel alive when we encounter it. I've come to believe there is something that is life enhancing in beauty. Maybe it's a manifestation of life itself.

The dictionary tells us that beauty is the "quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest).

Another definition says, “Beauty is a characteristic of a person, animal, place, object, or idea that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure or satisfaction”. Our chalice lighting words this morning summed it up quite nicely: “A person is beautiful because they are true to themselves.”

The field of mathematics has some very similar concepts of truth in beauty. Edward D. Burger, a mathematics professor at Williams College, has written “The Joy of Thinking; The Beauty and Power of Classical Mathematical Ideas Guidebook”.

Anyone who knows me, knows mathematics and I have never traveled very far together. So I’m not going to go in great detail, but I found his concepts fascinating.

In Lecture Four, he writes: “Often when we see beauty in nature, we are subconsciously sensing hidden order—order that itself has an independent richness and beauty.” He tells us that most pineapples have the same number of spirals; 8 in one direction and 13 in the other. The coneflower floret has 13 spirals in one direction and 21 in the other. The daisy has spirals of 21 and 34 in the opposite direction, and the pinecone has 5 spirals going in one direction with 8 in the other.

He concludes, “The numeric coincidences arising from our spiral counts prompt us to look for an underlying structure”. “We find a number pattern called the Fibonacci numbers. This simple sequence of numbers has surprising structure that leads us not only to mathematical insights but also to issues of aesthetics. Fibonacci numbers touch such diverse fields as architecture and painting.” Who knew?

Moving away from mathematics; thinking about the relationships between the soul, eternity, nature, and art, in 1819, John Keats, wrote a poem called "Ode on a Grecian Urn". It's a narrator's discourse on a series of designs on a Grecian urn. He wrote based on a belief that classical Greek art was idealistic and reflected Greek virtues. The poem ends with the following lines:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all

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

We, like scholars before, can debate the accuracy of such a statement, but there is elegance and simplicity in the words. And they ring true to dictionary definitions and our chalice lighting words.

For eons, religion and the arts have been closely entwined. In writings on Aesthetics, Harry Lee, says, “We tend to classify together our concepts of art and religion as twin institutions,” “since they afford experiences to our inner life which resemble each other much more closely than either resembles our experience of any other social institution. . . . We attend to both as exercises of the spirit; they are alike in being experiences which are noble, passionate, and serene, and which absorb our interest most fully when we turn to them for solace and with a spirit of humility and devotion.” He goes on to say, “earthly beauty, including the artistic, is considered to be but the sensory revelation of transcendental Beauty which is the Divine Name, the Highest Good, God.”

Lee speaks to the words I used in my opening about the vitality of life, the life enhancing, life sustaining nature of beauty. This is why we can refer to Beauty (with a capital B) as a spiritual theme, well deserving of contemplation and reflection.

The “sensory revelation of transcendental beauty”. How powerful is that?

You may have noticed, I often hold up the importance of experience, feeling sensations, as opposed to thoughts and beliefs. There’s a reason that I emphasize sensation over thought. It’s because that’s where the fullness of life exists.

I’m an ideas guy, I love to ponder and think about concepts and ideas. I get a kick out of formulating theories and trying to discern what’s real and true. I observe and study human nature and the world around me. I seek insight and understanding. I’ve learned a great deal that has truly benefited me and others.

The most important thing I've learned is that it's in experience, sensation and feelings where real life is lived. It's in the interplay between self and self, self and other and self and the universe that life is lived.

Our culture tends to reinforce the primacy of thought, concepts, status and money over relationship and quality of life. We encourage selfishness and greed not forgiveness and generosity. We value independence, not interdependence. We breed ugliness, not life and beauty.

We say we value education, but the data suggests that proposition is highly debatable. Our public schools are largely under staffed and underfunded. The teaching of art seems of little concern. Of the developed nations, we are now 14th in the percent of college educated people we produce.

We say we value democracy but make it more and more difficult to vote. We say we value life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but only the fortunate are given paid maternity leave, a relative few have paid vacation. Only now are gay people gaining the right to marry whomever they choose.

Even when we pay attention to beauty, it often seems sordid. Women continue to be valued most often for their youth and looks. You must look this way or that way in order to be perceived as having value. But relax, if not, there are implants and reductions, face lifts and tummy tucks. And to help ensure there are future surgeries, there are these horrible pageants where little girls are made to look and act like sexualized adult women.

I fear we are missing the boat in terms of living the good life. We seem to have misplaced a focus on what is good, healthy and valuable. We seem to have debased that which history has held up as art and beauty.

We need to reclaim the dictionary definition of beauty: the “quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest).

We need to get back to a time and place or move forward to where we truly understand “A person is beautiful because they are true to themselves”; where inherent worth and dignity is seen as a beautiful thing that is vital, life enhancing, life sustaining.

We would do well to view religion as an exercise of the spirit, as Lee says and earthly beauty, including the artistic, as the sensory revelation of transcendental Beauty which is of the Divine Name, the Highest Good.

Lets seek to engage the beauty that is around us, the beauty that “is” us, and the beauty that we can together create. For then, we will have found the Truth in Beauty and be sustained.

Amen