

**GRATITUDE IN EVERY ACTION: WORSHIP MUSIC AND ARTS; MARK 10:17-31;  
COMMISSIONING OF CHOIRS; 10/18/15; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

There's a painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on the second floor, in the gallery where the works of the Hudson River School are kept. The painting is of an Adirondack trout pond, secluded and still, somewhere deep in the lush forest.

When I stand before that painting the calm and peace of it descend over me; my racing mind begins to slow and let go of the orbiting obligations and burdens big and small. My heart comes to a contented watchful, openness. Landscape, said the Chinese poet Weng Wei, smooths the rough edges of the soul.

This is our first "Gratitude in Action" Sunday. We celebrate and give thanks today for the role beauty plays in our lives as people of faith. Specifically, I want to lift up the inseparable connection between beauty – music and art specifically this morning – in the life of God's people in general and in our worship life in particular.

Hard as it is to believe there is a long and studied ambivalence toward art and religious faith in the Christian tradition. While the church has been from its earliest beginning a patron of the arts there is another side of our history starting with Augustine, echoed in Aquinas, and reinforced during the Reformation that looked with skepticism on any role for music and art in the life of the church.

Aquinas, for example, said preachers and teachers should not be involved in singing lest they neglect "greater things." During the Reformation, many towns and villages witnessed the destruction of church art by zealous Reformers who interpreted literally the injunction of Torah that "thou shalt have no other gods before me or make graven images of me."

It was not a proud moment in our history and rather than a righteous faith, reveals a deep fear that beauty will displace God, that it will become an idol, and that religion will be reduced to what merely brings pleasure to the senses.

Tom Troeger of Yale Divinity School says that even those who have widened their concept of beauty to include moral and spiritual beauty often fail to relate these to natural and artistic beauty. They tend to depreciate the latter – the beauty of the earth and works of art created by human hands and minds – rather than see these tangible forms as a means for the expression, nurture, and deepening of faith.

But there is another vision of the role beauty plays in the life of faith and the ministry of the church. It is a counter cultural vision, a prophetic vision that speaks to the image of God within us and the innate ability to recognize what is true and right and good.

Through music and art – and I pause here to acknowledge the wealth of both that we are privileged to enjoy and sustain here at Westminster—from the glory of this room and building and campus to our historic and current excellence of music ministry – through music and art we are drawn to what is good and true in a world filled with terrors and injustice.

Without beauty the life of faith becomes grim and onerous; we distort the image of God within us and in our understanding of God's character, concentrating on God's power and might and missing the plethora of divine attributes that enhance and sustain the human experience.

An unimaginative and artistically starved faith diminishes both God and us. The great preacher Fred Craddock said, "Extract from a person's life a healthy portion of songs and flowers and you have reduced to something less than human 'the creature the Lord God has made to have dominion over land and sea.'"

In a society that commercializes beauty and sells it as "the beautiful life" intended for a privileged social and economic elite who think of beauty as being young, fit, rich and glamorous – true beauty embodied in music and art contradicts the inhuman and provides alternative visions to visions that oppress. Beauty redeems. Art does not simply mirror reality it challenges its destructive and alienating tendencies."

Today's Gospel tells of a rich, young ruler. He is a man whose heart is starved and whose life is enslaved. His capacity to present a 'successful' image – "all these things I have done from my youth" – is the goal of his every waking moment, conforming as he does to outward appearance and expectations and discounting the voice inside, the voice that knows he is unhappy and longs for true joy.

Jesus sees through the man and loves him Mark says. He does not wish to expose or judge the man, only to offer him the path of life. And just as rescue workers seek to get the gun out of the hand of a suicidal person, Jesus tells the man to let go of that which is killing him – his possessions. Which, sadly the man is unable to do because, Mark says, he had many possessions.

This story reveals the tension between the possession of material things and faith; the rich young ruler has lived a rule-based vs. a principle-guided life; his faith has been reduced to a formula for passing what he thinks is life's religious test to get to some promised land of worry-free comfort and happiness.

Sadly, the man's soul has not been awakened by beauty; the image of God within him has been starved by his pursuit of material things; a recent article on the workplace observed that financial reward does not tap into the essence of human motivation so much as transform it. When money is made the measure of all things, it becomes the measure of all things – a self-justifying, self-fulfilling philosophy that leads to despair and loneliness.

But we are more complicated creatures; there is something within us – call it the image of God or the intrinsic power of life – that recognizes and realizes what we are made for; that understands the innate oneness of life; that we find our true joy in connection with one another, with God and with all living things; and that knows there is nothing in this life, no disgrace or calamity, as one writer said that God and nature cannot repair.

The power and beauty of life does not reside in nature or humans alone but the harmony of both.

Little wonder then that music and art return us to ourselves. Harmony of colors in painting or movement in dance or sound in music embody and point to the deep harmony we find when we give ourselves away; when we treat the neighbor as we would ourselves, when the last become first and the first, last.

Is it any wonder that the stained glass in this room, the blended earth colors of the walls, the sublime music that wafts over us from the choir loft take us to a place where words alone struggle to reach?

I was speaking with a wise, retired pastor of this presbytery recently and she said, "I have always believed that after a minister the second person a church must hire is not an educator or youth worker but a musician because music is transcendent and feeds the soul of the congregation. A good sermon"" she said "might be partly transcendent, but music consistently lifts us into the realm of the holy, the realm of eternal life."

Friends, we have much to be thankful for today – a robust ministry of worship, music and the arts.

It is strange how we can take even these remarkable gifts for granted. I remember one of the first Sundays I sat in this chancel seventeen years ago; the reader had to elbow me because it was my turn to lead worship, yet I had become enraptured by the windows, especially the ethereal blue that I was just sitting, blissfully staring at while the congregation waited for the order of worship to proceed. Now, I can walk through this sanctuary on a busy day and barely notice them.

Let us not take the beauty that surrounds us in this sanctuary for granted; let us relish and embrace in the soaring chorus, the sturdy hymns, the silence, the prayers and all that points to the innate oneness of life. A oneness too often obscured in a world where wealth is a highly cherished and honored value and where our neighbor too often lies hungry and sick, like Lazarus, at the door.

We have work to do. A new world to bring into being. If gratitude in action means anything, it means that you and I have the power to embody, to enact, to express not just in our words but in our deeds the oneness of life, the harmony in which God made us and intends all things to flourish.

Just as there is harmony in a Bach fugue or African American spiritual so there is harmony when we share from our abundance with a world in want; harmony and beauty when we fall on our knees to praise and thank the Source of Life.

Nothing else, as the rich ruler failed to realize, can feed the inherent and essential need of our souls – nothing else makes us at one with one another and world God made. Amen.