

Delight in Beauty

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Bouquet of Sunflowers" by Claude Monet

Prayer of Illumination

Guide us, O God,
By your Word and Spirit,
That in your light we may see light,
In your truth find freedom,
And in your will discover your peace,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

Beauty. The earth is full of beauty. We see it in our desert mountains, in our incredible Arizona sunsets, in the smile found in another's eyes. In the beauty of a work of art or a film or performance, we find emotions awakened in us we didn't know were there. Beauty ennobles us.

Even God takes in the beauty of creation in the first chapter of Genesis:

"And God saw everything that he made, and behold, it was very good."

When we encounter beauty, we feel more alive, filled with awe, wonder, gratitude, meaning, and reverence. Beauty is even therapeutic. The Japanese have a practice called *shinrin-yoku*, which means forest bathing. It's a deliberate and thoughtful time set aside to be in nature where you take in the sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch of the forest.

Beauty heals and nourishes us—body, mind, and soul. Yet beauty is also elusive. It fades quickly and slips through our fingers. We can photograph a sunset or a child for their 2nd grade picture, but we can't keep the moment or freeze the encounter in time, no matter how many photos we have on our phone. We have only the memory of the moment, not the moment itself.

When we try to capture or pin down beauty, something is lost, like the butterfly we put the pin through in the display box. And then we have our disagreements on what actually is beautiful. One person loves a piece of music, another thinks it's garbage. Tastes, styles, and fashions change about what is beautiful. Think about it. There was a time that gold linoleum flooring was the quintessence of beauty! Well, that might be pushing it, but you get my drift.

Beauty can become disfigured, too:

- The ocean wave we find calming can change into a tsunami that brings about massive death and destruction.
- Oil spills pollute waters and harm sea creatures.

Yet beauty still beckons us beyond ourselves. Beauty is found within us. We know it's there, and we know there's more beauty, but we just can't quite access it or get enough of it.

Our Christian faith teaches us about beauty, that the beauty of canyons and rivers, sunsets and horses, or art created by humans reflects the beauty of our Creator. We don't worship the creation, rather the creation is a signpost to the Creator. And our Creator summons us to enjoy beauty and to create beauty. And our Creator comes to restore and renovate his damaged masterpiece called the universe, and the glorious ruins called human beings. The Apostle Paul in today's Scripture calls us to discern beauty and to delight in beauty. In fact, the pursuit of the beautiful helps us overcome anxiety and to find peace. Ponder what is beautiful. Practice what is beautiful. Pass on what is beautiful.

Scripture: Philippians 4:8-9 (NRSV)

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Delight in Beauty

There is a fascinating teaching in Judaism called *hiddur mitzvah*. *Hiddur* means to make beautiful. *Mitzvah* means commandment or good deed. *Hiddur mitzvah* is a summons to make life and faith beautiful, to express your spirituality artfully.

Don't just live your life with blind obedience. Trust and obey, yes, but also seek to beautify your faith and God's commandments. Let your life be a masterpiece, a work of art, that points people to the great artist, God. The ancient rabbis taught that every opportunity to obey God was also an opportunity to adorn or beautify God. This concept is also found in the New Testament where both Paul and Peter call us to adorn the gospel with our lives lived beautifully to God's glory, decorated with good deeds. Or as Mr. Rogers put it in a [commencement speech](#) at Dartmouth College: *Make goodness attractive again*.

We need beauty now more than ever. It seems like these days there's such artlessness and ugliness in how we treat one another. Rancorous and malicious talk shows, toxic social media posts and viral videos, disturbing church scandals near and far, and even when we're trying, Christian art so often feels cheesy, bland, and lacking substance. Yes, let's make goodness attractive again. But this doesn't just happen by osmosis. It takes real practice and discernment to unearth and express beauty—in us and around us.

Paul encourages us to weed out what doesn't edify and to fill and fix our thoughts and focus our attention on all that is: honorable, just, commendable, worthy of respect. Basically, hone in on that which calls forth love. Learn to discern what's truly good from what only appears to be good. Absorb what's best about the world in light of the cross of Christ. That's our template. Embrace what redeems. Distance yourself from what demeans. Ponder these things. Practice them. Pass them on to others. Listen and learn from beauty. Receive and reflect upon beauty. Inspired by the Spirit of God, express beauty in how you create and relate *hiddur mitzvah*.

In computer science and mathematics, there is an acronym: GIGO – Garbage in, Garbage out. It means the quality of output is determined by the quality of the input. So, if a mathematical equation is improperly stated, the answer is unlikely to be correct. Or if incorrect data is input to a program, the output is unlikely to be informative. Our spiritual lives are like this too. Feed your soul with what's spiritually healthy, and likely you'll find yourself edifying others rather than being corrosive. What has your soul been pigging out on that you need to fast from? What good things do you need to start feasting on?

To put it another way, Paul is saying, "*Don't fall into stinkin' thinkin'.*"

- Stinkin' thinkin' is "all-or-nothing thinking." If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure.
- Stinkin' thinkin' is overgeneralization. "I always get the short end of the stick." You filter out the good and fixate on the bad.
- Stinkin' thinkin' discounts the positive insisting that positives "don't count," they're accidents. Stinkin' thinkin' jumps to conclusions.

- Stinkin' thinkin' is into fortune-telling. You predict that things will turn out badly every time—and you're right!
- Stinkin' thinkin' is irrational. "I am angry and cranky right now. Therefore, I'm being treated unfairly."
- Stinkin' thinkin' is governed by "shoulds," "musts," "oughts," and "have tos." You or others never measure up.
- Stinkin' thinkin' labels. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you say: "I'm a failure." Or you label others.
- Stinkin' thinkin' blames others or takes everything personally.
- Stinkin' thinkin' isn't the mind of Christ.

Proverbs 23:7 says this, "For as a man thinketh in his heart, *so is he.*" You are what you think. So don't let what you thinketh, stinketh. Rather, let your thoughts be focused and fixated on, and filled with everything that's: true, honorable, just, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Let these things inform our attitudes and actions. Be on the lookout for whatever is good and praiseworthy. Think about such things. In other words, be constantly aware and learning from *everything*. Be teachable. *Where can God's truth be found? Everywhere.* Sort out the meat from the bones.

Filling your heart, mind, and soul with these things, then express them wherever you go. Put them into practice. Keep doing them and the peace of God will be with you, says Paul. Always be looking with open, careful, and discerning eyes for God's truth:

- in the Bible and in prayer,
- in discussions and encounters with people,
- in books, experiences, art, nature, TV and movies, music, people, other cultures, other religions.

Learn from your mistakes. Learn from atheists, from liberals, from conservatives. You can learn from people you disagree with! Seek understanding. Cultivate curiosity. But always be anchored to Christ. All truth is God's truth. Or as the early church father Justin Martyr put it,

"The truth which people in all lands have rightly spoken belongs to us."

You'll always find what you're looking for. Or as Rumi said, *"What you seek is seeking you."*

- If you're always looking for problems—you'll find them wherever you go.
- If you're always looking for offenses—you'll find them in every encounter.
- If you're always looking for the good—you'll find it every time, even when circumstances are lousy.

Paul reminds us our *thinking* isn't the only thing that matters. Our *doing* is vital, too. Practice your faith. Practice well and often, because practice makes perfect. Then pass it on to others. Don't keep it to yourself. Jesus put it this way: Be a hearer of the word and doer of the word. By the grace of God, have a show and tell faith. Bring God's beauty to the broken places.

On May 27, 1992, cellist Vedran Smailović played a solo on his cello in the middle of a war zone. It was his way of beautifying a place destroyed by the madness of war. The Bosnian War was raging and he began playing less than 100 yards away from a bombing that killed 22 people waiting in line at a bakery. [Vedran Smailović](#) was the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera Company at the time and this is all he could think of doing.

To protest the violence, destruction, hatred, and madness of war, he sat in the middle of a crater made by a bomb shell and he played, every day for twenty-two days at 4 pm—a day for each life lost in the deadly explosion, he filled the air with beautiful music. Each day he donned his formal concert attire and walked from his apartment into the battle that raged. In the midst of explosions and sniper fire ricocheting around him, he protested the ugliness and brokenness of his beloved city by holding up beauty. He played to the abandoned streets, the burnt-out trucks, smoldering buildings, and terrified people who hid in their cellars as the bombs dropped and the music played. Vedran Smailović made *hiddur mitzvah* into a song.

Immanuel, let's beautify the gospel with the gifts God has given us. It could be with a cello or a paintbrush or a camera. It could be serving food or donating clothes to a refugee. It could be walking against hunger, loving someone from a different religion, theology, or politics of your own, speaking kindness in a flurry of hurtful words, being a peacemaker, showing mercy rather than judgment to a broken soul. How beautiful are the feet of those that bring good news.

Amen.

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