

June 26, 2016

Dent Davis
Tryon Presbyterian Church

The Grace of the Beautiful

Text: "God has made everything beautiful in its time." (Ecclesiastes 3:11"

Colossians 3:12-14

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

I was eight years old, attending Vacation Bible School at the Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church in Knoxville Tennessee. There were 14 third graders in our class, 5 girls and 8 boys. It was early August and Bible School had been going on for several days. It was hot, that dull overbearing heaviness and humidity that August in Tennessee is known for. We were bored, tired of the Bible stories, even tired of the playground, and just plain crabby. The teacher must have known that things weren't going too well.

On Thursday morning she announced that we weren't going to have a lesson that day. Instead we were going on a field trip - to the air-conditioned sanctuary to see the pipe organ. So we all lined up and headed up the stairs to the sanctuary grateful to escape the heat. The room was huge. The lights were turned off, and it was mostly dark, except for a single light shining over in the right corner at the front of the sanctuary. We walked over to the light and there we met Mr. Peterson. Mr. Peterson had been the organist and minister of music at the church for many years. He was a kindly older man dressed in a dark suit and tie sitting on the bench of the organ.

I had never seen the organ before. In fact I had never really seen Mr. Peterson before. He never came in with the choir or appeared during the service. I was short for my age, and sitting in the pew during the service I had to really strain just to see the top of his bald head peeking out over the wooden rail that hid the organ.

Mr. Peterson invited us into the small enclosure that contained the organ console. The organ was all lit up. It was amazing. It had three keyboards and a bunch of pedals. Then he demonstrated the notes. It was like a hundred instruments all playing at the same time. And amazingly I watched him actually make music with his feet while he was playing with his hands. Using one of the pieces he was going to play that Sunday, he showed us how all the notes blended together, some so soft you could barely hear them, and others so loud they felt like they rattled the room. I was spellbound. The sound was extraordinary, and beautiful, even to the untrained ear of a third grader. I've never forgotten the experience.

Beauty is theme of our worship today. We live in a beautiful part of the country. We worship in a beautiful sanctuary. We regularly experience moments of beauty. Beauty is something many of us appreciate, but rarely stop to think about. Beauty touches our lives in many forms: the joy of a relationship, the incredible vision of an artist, the satisfaction of an extraordinary golf shot, the smell of exquisite food, words that are striking and memorable, architecture that raises our spirits, music that touches our soul. Beauty is a physical and spiritual quality that brings pleasure, awakens the senses, kindles joy, increases energy, and enlarges one's vision for life.

A couple of weeks ago we talked about the beauty of this sanctuary and especially the stained glass windows. But we didn't quite cover everything. Today I've asked Lesley Bush, our minister of music and organist, to talk with us a bit about this beautiful pipe organ we have here in our sanctuary. [At this point in the sermon I stepped out of the pulpit and over toward the organ where I "interviewed" Lesley and he pointed out features of the organ].

- Lesley, how long have you been playing an organ? Lesley totaled up the years - forty. Amazing. He also studied with Betty Brewer, former Organist and Director of Music at Tryon Presbyterian Church, and he mentioned that he also witnessed the inaugural concert of the Farwell Memorial Organ June 13, 1982 in our sanctuary.
- Lesley, you play both the organ and the piano, and sometimes both at the same time. Musically, what's the difference? Lesley explained how pianos work in contrast with pipe organs pointing out some of the benefits of a pipe organ.
- Where are the pipes? Lesley described how the pipes are arranged, pointing out those "hidden" behind the cloth and the cross, those that are visible and those behind the stone walls in the chancel area. He also pointed out how the pipes make their sounds.
- After I mentioned that it would be nice if he could demonstrate the various sounds of the pipes, Lesley mentioned that the offertory he was going to play later in today's worship service (an arrangement of "How Great Thou Art") would be a great example of the many musical

- capabilities of the organ. [And it was an extraordinary experience to hear it].
- I asked Lesley to describe some of the benefits that our building project for the quality of music in our church? He mentioned the additional seating for the choir pointing out that we now have 35 choir members singing in a space originally designed for less than twenty. Moving the chancel area forward will allow the congregation to hear the choir better. He also mentioned the flexibility in the chancel area design allowing for different size choirs and various combinations of instruments.
 - I asked Lesley why the quality of music is important in worship. He responded that music has been an important element of worship since Old Testament times and that beautiful music is spiritually moving both for those listening and those singing. [We concluded the “interview” and I returned to the pulpit and continued the sermon].

If you look at the brochure for our building project you will see that one of the four criteria the Building Committee used in making decisions was “beauty.”

Why is beauty important?

When you and I experience beauty, when we are moved by something beautiful, I believe we are in fact experiencing some reflection, however pale or powerful, of God’s Spirit, because ultimately beauty has its origin in God. Five times in the first chapter of Genesis alone, for example, God describes the creation as “good.” In Genesis 1:31 for example, the text says: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). The word translated there as “good” can also be translated as “pleasant,” “desirable,” “joyous,” “useful,” and “beautiful.” In a sense anything created by God reflects some of God’s goodness and beauty, and things that we find beautiful often remind us of God’s goodness and inspire us. That’s one reason why many people report that they experience God’s Spirit through the arts.

But not everyone experiences beauty through the arts, and certainly not in the same ways. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as the old saying goes. Some people are moved by music. Some are moved by the sound of a pipe organ. Others by a magnificent choir. And others by stained glass windows. And still others by sacrifice and service. Some are moved by the beauty of nature. Others by the beauty of the words of the Bible. Each of these different perceptions, different glimpses of beauty have a way of drawing us out of ourselves, toward a new vision. They renew our spirits and enlarge our souls.

Beauty is everywhere, if we are looking to see it. And beauty can take many forms. And beauty is always more than outward appearance. The Apostle Paul could even describe Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection as “beautiful,” not because it was enjoyable or pleasant to witness, but because it dramatically revealed the truth of the incredible love, grace and mercy of God – for Paul and many others, the most beautiful thing in all creation.

Just as the experience of beauty is a part of God's witness to us, our expressions of beauty, however great or small, are a part of our witness of faith. And that witness can happen as we engage in our work, or relationships, or hobbies, or service, or projects like our building renovation.

Ultimately all beauty is a gift from God. So when you do experience something in life that is beautiful – whatever it is – give thanks to God, because God's Spirit is not far away from your experience. And when you have the opportunity to help create even a little bit of beauty in the world, grab it. The world, especially our world, needs more beauty. Mother Teresa was a longtime missionary to the poorest of the poor in the worst situations of human misery. Her words continue to move me and humble me: "Now let us do something beautiful for God." "Now let us do something beautiful for God." We have the opportunity to do that each day of our lives in many different ways. As a congregation we also have been given a unique opportunity to do that this year through our project to renovate this building.