

Sermon , March 6,2023

Matthew 6:25-34

“Consider the Lilies of the Field”

In today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ends this passage saying, “So do not worry about tomorrow , for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Very true words, indeed, yet in times such as these, not always easy to follow.

In recent years the Covid-19 pandemic, the political and economic situations, and today, fears of the expansion of the war in Ukraine certainly are cause for worry, and worry can be closely tied to anxiety and depression - both of which have been sharply on the rise. Worry and anxiety most often have to do with projections into the future. We see things lying in our future that in reality may not happen at all. That is particularly true of depression. If you have ever experienced severe depression, you are prone to think that you are never going to feel any different, that there is no happiness in your future. But having been there myself, I know it’s not true - that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

This brings me to Jesus’ suggestion that we consider the Lillie’s of the field. Although he was talking about worries concerning what we might wear, it goes beyond that. It brings to mind the experience of beauty, and how it may affect us, how it can help relieve anxiety. In a world that can be filled with much ugliness, the presence of beauty can maintain or restore our sense of hope.

The year following 9/11 , over half a million New Yorkers were diagnosed with severe depression. I was one of them, and I sought professional help. For the next two years I saw a therapist once a week, and she was a big help. But there was something else that helped just as much. Her office was just a few blocks from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and frequently I would stop in for an hour or so on my way back home. Being surrounded by so much beauty I found to be very therapeutic, and it helped to focus my mind in a more positive direction.

In a sermon entitled, "Errors about Beauty", Barbara Brown Taylor said, "...art is a friend of faith, not an enemy...". The errors she was referring to had to do with the ways art has often been looked down upon and rejected by the church since the Reformation. But art is, in fact, a friend of faith, and can affect us deeply in spiritual ways.

Back in the early part of the 20th century a woman named Agnes Northrop had been a member of the church I served in New York. She was also one of the top designers for Tiffany Studios, and she designed stained glass windows for that church. They are quite beautiful. When I was serving at that church there were some who were suggesting we sell the windows to the Metropolitan to raise needed funds for the church. Someone even stated that that would be fine because they really had nothing to do with worship. I could not have disagreed more! There is a reason why we place flowers in the church, and surround ourselves with beautifully colored windows, and it goes beyond their aesthetic value. Deep down it speaks to us on a spiritual level, just as the music does. It may even speak to us of the beauty of God!

One of the windows that Agnes Northrop designed for the church was a depiction of the Tree of Life, which is spoken of in the second chapter of Genesis. It says, " Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden...". I think it is important to recognize that God placed Adam and Eve in a garden, i.e., in a place of beauty, but after their act of disobedience they are cast into a world much less so. God's original intention was that we experience that which is beautiful- not that which is ugly. Notice, as well, the relationship between that which is pleasant to the sight and food. One nourishes the body, while the other nourishes the soul.

I am also reminded that to get from my therapist's office to the Met I had to walk along the eastern border of Central Park, something very pleasant to the sight in a place so heavily dressed in concrete. I loved to walk through the park, and just around the corner from the Met there is a pond in The park where people like to come and sail model sailboats. I used to love to take it all in, surrounded by beautiful trees, the shimmering water, and the boats gently gliding , it filled my heart with a sense of peace.

In the early Church, and up to the late Middle Ages, the concept of Beauty played an important part in Christian thought - an important part of the way in which the nature of God was understood. But it appeared to drift away at the time of the Reformation. In the mid-twentieth century theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, wrote, "we no longer dare to believe in beauty, and we make of it a mere appearance in order to more easily dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do Truth and Goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past- whether he admits it or not - can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love."

Happily, in recent decades, beauty has found its way back into the theological mindset.

Art and nature walk hand in hand in the healing of a broken spirit and remind us that there is much beauty in a world that can sometimes look bleak and ugly - and where there is beauty there is hope, and hope can clear away the clouds of worry and despair! Amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, we are made glad by the news of your love for us and for all. We thank you for your action in Christ by which our lives are measured, found wanting, and are renewed. We praise you that the mystery of our life is a mystery of infinite goodness, and we praise you for the order and constancy of nature, and the beauty and bounty of the earth. We thank you, as well, that you endow us with the gift of creativity so that we may also bring beauty into the world, and that all that is beautiful fills our hearts and souls with peace and harmony. Lead us all, Lord, that we might create a better world free of hate, prejudice, and intolerance- and help bring an end to the scourge of war. We pray that your Holy Spirit be our guide. Amen.