

Sermon, October 22, 2023

Psalm 96

“Worship the Lord in Holy Splendor”

As I mentioned last week, The Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, the newly elected General Minister and President of the UCC, was the Keynote Speaker at the Florida Conference’s Annual Gathering. It turns out that she is also a poet, and she read three of her poems in her Address.

She also spoke of how poetry can be an excellent vehicle for expressing and experiencing the Word of God. Well, of course. The scriptures are filled with poetry - the Psalms being the most obvious example. But it also got me thinking about how the visual arts can also be capable of the same. This has not always been accepted as true. In the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation many beautiful works of art such as paintings, mosaics, sculpture, and architecture were destroyed. Many of the Reformers saw artwork within the church as a distraction from the Word. Around that same period there were also conflicting views about the types of music that was acceptable. Some believed that only hymns sung without instrumental accompaniment could be tolerated, that instruments such as the organ were too sensual, again distracting from the centrality of the Word. But the fact is that the arts have always played an important role in the life of the church. For instance, in the Middle Ages, in Europe, most people were illiterate, and very few understood Latin, which was the language of the Mass. Therefore, the artistic imagery in the church became an important means by which they could come to know the stories of the Bible. It is my contention that the arts, visual, music, prose, and poetry not only maintain an important role in the life of the church but could also be an effective part of the church’s renewal.

Also, dating back at least as far as St. Augustine the concept of Beauty has been an important part of Christian thought, again, losing its importance following the Reformation, but has been revived in recent decades. Back earlier in the twentieth century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar addressed the fact that Beauty had slipped away in Christian thought, and wrote, “We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it...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”. He is not saying that appearance is not an important part of our experience of beauty, but that it goes much deeper than that - that it is a vital part of our understanding and experience of God. In other words, beauty is an essential part of our spiritual life.

On a few occasions when visitors have come here on a weekday when I was here, I would take them over to see the inside of our sanctuary, and, inevitably, the first thing they would remark upon was how beautiful it is. I'm sure that is the experience of many people upon entering many churches throughout the world. This tells me that aesthetic experience, the encounter with beauty, is a gateway to an enriched spiritual life.

In the 96th Psalm, today's reading, we find expressions of 'the glory of God', which appears innumerable times throughout the Bible. And the word 'glory' is an aesthetic term, which speaks to the beauty of God. In verse 6 we hear, "Honor and majesty are before him, strength and beauty are in his sanctuary". Then in verse 9, "Worship the Lord in holy splendor". Both not only refers to the beauty of God, but also of the appropriateness of worshipping the Lord in attractive surroundings.

However, when we speak of the beauty of God we are not really speaking about God's physical appearance. God is Spirit, not a physical entity in the same way that we are. A number of Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages spoke of the beauty of God revealed to us through his Creation. Francis of Assisi was of the mind that 'the beauty of creation can guide each person toward the Creator'. But how often are we aware of this. We walk through the world distracted by so many things, including the ugliness we see in current world affairs, that we fail to observe the beauty that surrounds us, let alone that God is self-revealing through it.

Another Franciscan thinker, St. Bonaventure, wrote about the Beauty of God as it is revealed to us through the Virtues of Truth and Goodness, insisting that, "Beauty integrates both mind and heart, both intellect and emotion. As the union of the true and good, Beauty lies beyond the distinction of cognitive and affective domains. The experience of beauty makes us whole".

Jesus, of course, expands our awareness of what is beautiful. He saw beauty in that which we may be tempted to look away, such as, the poor, the disabled and sick, the marginalized and victims of discrimination. Once more, divine beauty is revealed through compassion and love.

And may I conclude with one more aesthetic term, that being the word 'harmony'. We find pleasure in the sounds of harmony in music, or the harmony of colors in a painting. But in a world like ours today filled with so much violence, bitterness, and hate, what could be more beautiful and more desired than harmony within the human family, as well as us in harmony with the whole of Creation! Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, we are grateful for this day that you have given us, and for the beauty that surrounds us, both within this sanctuary and the Nature that surrounds it. Help us to be more aware of the splendors of Nature, and to learn how to recognize your shining in it and through it. In a world that is so filled with ugliness do not let us lose sight of the glories of Truth and Goodness, believing that in them we can transform both ourselves and the world. Help us to open our eyes so that we may recognize the beautiful face of Jesus in all those we encounter, especially in those who suffer. Help us to create true harmony on this earth.

This morning we raise up especially the situation in Israel and Gaza. We desire Justice where it is due, but also a swift end to the hostilities and violence. We commend to you the many who have died, and pray for the wounded in body, mind, and spirit. We pray for a safe and quick release of the hostages, as well as humanitarian aid for those displaced from their homes as they seek shelter and safety...Amen.