

Homily – The Beauty of Christmas

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It is often said that Christmas Eve is the most beautiful night of the year. The lights, and the Christmas decorations add a visual beauty to the evening. The Christmas carols, and familiar Bible stories add an audible beauty to the evening. And, incense adds a fragrant beauty. The smell of incense reminds some of the years gone by, but it reminds others of coughing fits and tightness in your chest. As you leave today, there is no need for you to let me know your truth about incense. I can assure you that I have heard about the beauty or ugliness of incense.

Incense just goes to show that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. That is beholder with a little “b”. If Beholder was capitalized then that would mean beauty is in the eye of God. And, this is certainly a valid definition of the phrase, but I think the more common definition is that beauty is subjective and up to the opinions of those experiencing the beauty. We all think differently about the beauty of a painting. We all feel differently about a song or piece of music. And again, we have different opinions about incense and perfume.

Now, according to Wikipedia, “beauty is a property or characteristic of an animal, idea, object, person or place that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure or satisfaction. Beauty is studied as part of aesthetics, culture, social psychology, philosophy and sociology. An "ideal beauty" is an entity which is admired, or possesses features widely attributed to beauty in a particular culture, for perfection.

Ugliness is considered to be the opposite of beauty.

The experience of "beauty" often involves an interpretation of some entity as being in balance and harmony with nature, which may lead to feelings of attraction and emotional well-being.

Beauty is subjective, however, we seem to have a deep desire to find the universal truths for objective beauty.

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Richard Rohr, shares the follow story about the universal nature of beauty.

Rohr writes, “When I was a young deacon, I served at Acoma Pueblo, and invariably at sunrise, I would see a mother outside the door of her home, with her children standing beside her. She and the children would be reaching out with both hands uplifted to “scoop” up the new day and then “pour” it over their heads and bodies as if in blessing.” Rohr writes, “I would sit in my truck until they were finished, thinking how silly it was of us Christians to think we brought spirituality to New Mexico 400 years ago!

The Navajo see the world through the lens of hozho: all the goodness to be found through harmony, balance, beauty, and blessing. This well-known Navajo prayer shows the universal nature of beauty.

*In beauty I walk
With beauty before me I walk
With beauty behind me I walk
With beauty above me I walk
With beauty around me I walk
It has become beauty again
It has become beauty again
It has become beauty again
It has become beauty again*

“Looking for beauty all around us is a contemplative practice, an exercise in opening our hearts, minds, and bodies to the divine image. In indigenous traditions, such opening practices often take the form of dance, drumming, song, and trance, as well as other embodied activities.”

In western traditions visual beauty seems to be emphasized. However, music and the written word also have a place of prominence. And, let’s not

forget food. Food has a lot of beauty associated with it. How many of you are now thinking of your favorite food and your stomach is grumbling with hunger.

In general, by arousing the senses, beauty arouses thought and spirit, and lifts us up. Sometimes beauty even leads to change of heart and mind. A person who has appreciated physical grace may have a finer sense of how to move with graciousness through the tribulations of life. A person who has appreciated the Pietà has a greater capacity for empathy, a more refined sense of the different forms of sadness and a wider awareness of the repertoire of emotions.

John O'Donohue writes in his book "Beauty: The Invisible Embrace": "Some of our most wonderful memories are beautiful places where we felt immediately at home. We feel most alive in the presence of the beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul. ... Without beauty the search for truth, the desire for goodness and the love of order and unity would be sterile exploits. Beauty brings warmth, elegance and grandeur."

Whether it is a Baroque Cathedral, the face of a child, or the coast of Sweden seen from an airplane window, we have all had the mysterious experience of finding something beautiful. But what is actually going on when we find these things beautiful?

In 1795, the German dramatist and poet Friedrich Schiller published a book with a fearsome title – "On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters". It has never become well-known, which is a pity, because it contains some of our most useful insights into the nature and value of beauty. Schiller's starting point is an analysis of the human condition. He wants to understand our delight in what we find beautiful. Instead of asking which things are beautiful, Schiller is curious about what is going on in us when we respond with this distinctive, intimate thrill and enthusiasm that leads us to say 'that's beautiful'. Different things might provoke this response in different people. But why do we have a response at all?

In his book from more than two hundred years ago, Schiller goes back to an old religious theme, the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. But there is a crucial difference. Thinkers ranging from St. Paul to Immanuel Kant have all believed that one of these aspects of our nature – which they usually call the spiritual or rational – should triumph. But Schiller does not believe that one side is more important than the other. Rather, the two sides are in need of each other. If the physical or body side dominates, we become brutish and superficial. If the non-physical side is too dominant, we become dry and callous. We need the two to interact harmoniously in order to see the role that beauty can play in our lives.

For Schiller, true beauty is whatever speaks powerfully to both sides of our human nature at the same time. When we find something beautiful, we are called towards a vision of harmonious perfection. This is not only a quality in the object, but a longing in ourselves.

Jeff and I were in Florence, Italy and we saw Michelangelo's statue of David, which I think has harmony between the physical side of us and the non-physical. On the physical-side when we see the statue of David, we feel the sensuous joy of a body at the peak of development and ease. We admire, and maybe desire, his physique. The statue is active, energetic and concentrated, and our physical-side responds powerfully to him.

At the same time, the our non-physical-side is also at work with Michelangelo's statue of David. We respond to the artistic structure to it, its proportion and unity. The hands extend away from the body but not too far. The technical problem of how to imply motion in a still object has been elegantly resolved. Here is a man of self-possession and poise.

And, as we admire the statue of David both sides of our human nature are at full power, but they do not work against one another. Instead, they cooperate, and Schiller's point is that to experience a statue in this dual way is to find it beautiful. More importantly, these experiences of beauty teach us how we should be. Not that we should try to adopt the pose or hairstyle of David. Rather, we should seek to realize in ourselves the fusion and harmony of the two sides of humanity that are embodied by the sculpture.

For me there is some truth in the writings of Schiller, but I would modify it to embrace a harmony of human-sides that is even bigger than a statue. And this gets us to our Christmas story and the birth of Jesus.

At the beginning of time and space the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. Christ, this beautiful, perfect union, is throughout all of time and space and two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready, Jesus was born into this world as a baby boy. Now, all babies are beautiful, but Jesus is the perfect union of human and divine and thus embraces a larger beauty that somehow has changed the universe forever. That one particular, unique baby boy changed the universe for us, and it upgraded beauty to be more than it had ever been.

Now, there may be beauty in a statue. There may be beauty in food. There may be beauty in the behaviors and actions of people. There may be beauty in the gathering of family and friends for Christmas. We may experience beauty in the sights and sounds of Christmas, but these all pale in comparison to the beauty of that one particular baby boy who was the perfect union of God and human.

I wonder sometimes if we have become numb to the beauty of the baby Jesus. Maybe we have become too familiar with the story. Maybe we let the ugliness of the world overshadow the miracle that is Jesus. Maybe we become so focused on what is going on in our own lives that we lose the wonder and awe of the beauty that is Jesus.

But, if common beauty can lift us up and help change minds and hearts, then the uncommon supernatural beauty of Jesus can lift us even higher. This year my prayer for all of us is that we embrace the gift we have been given in the beauty of that baby boy.

O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord! Merry Christmas!

Parts of the homily are based on Wikipedia, and based on Richard Rohr's blog entry titled "Walk in Beauty", and based on David Brook's column "When Beauty Strikes" and based on John Armstrong's article "La Bella Vitta".