

## **Via pulchritudinis**

Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 5:1-9

February 2, 2014

What do these seven things have in common?

- 1) Sue holds up Diane's photograph on the cover of this Sunday's bulletin.
- 2) The chancel choir sings the refrain of "Blest Are They."
- 3) Sophia and Grace come to the front of the sanctuary and hug each other.
- 4) Cliff describes the early morning mists and emerging sunlight over Dog Lake in Missinabie, Ontario.
- 5) Hannah comes to the communion table and breaks the bread.
- 6) Craig describes the feeling of a vespers service at New Melleray Abbey.
- 7) Tim repeats: "What the Lord requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God ..."

What do these seven things have in common?

Beauty! They are all about beauty: the beauty of a photographic image, the beauty of a piece of music, the beauty of human affection, the beauty of the natural world, the beauty of this powerful symbol of God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ, the beauty of worship and of the sensory experience of God's presence, the beauty of a simple human life, a life lived simply to please God.

These seven things are all beautiful, and they all point us to Jesus. In chapter three of his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, "the gospel of joy," Pope Francis writes: "Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus ... " Every expression of true beauty! Beauty is a path that leads to Jesus. The "way of beauty" is a way to Jesus.

The "way of beauty." *Via pulchritudinis*. That's what Francis talks about in the third chapter of his exhortation entitled, "The Proclamation of the Gospel." He talks about the *via pulchritudinis* which means, the "way of beauty."

I decided to use "Via pulchritudinis" as my sermon title instead of "The way of beauty" so I could say it -- *via pulchritudinis* -- and so I could see how Jean Backstrom was going to sign it!

*Via pulchritudinis*, the "way of beauty." This is how we proclaim the gospel!

We proclaim the gospel through the beauty of the word. Francis imagines preaching as “words which set hearts on fire.” It is not merely “moralistic or doctrinaire” or “a lecture on biblical [interpretation].” Preaching is instead a “heart-to-heart communication,” where “truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness.”

Preaching is not just about persuading belief, or motivating behavior, or prodding action. Preaching is about making beauty, or better, it is about discovering beauty, or better yet, it is about uncovering beauty, because the beauty is already there, in the word itself. Why do you suppose so much of the Bible is poetry, or, if not strictly poetry, is still highly poetic in its language and imagery? Because sometimes only poetry can hint at beauties that are beyond description, beyond language.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.*

It is beautiful, isn't it? Beautiful words, but even more beautiful the reality they describe, the blessing that comes to people who are grieving, who acknowledge their need, who are eager for justice, people who show mercy, people who work for peace.

The word, the gospel itself, is full of beauty, which is why it is expressed through poetry, and which is why it is expressed through music. Music, sung and played, is essential to the proclamation of the gospel. Can you imagine a worship service without music? How better can we express our praise of God or express our wonder at what God has done and is doing for us?

I can only speak for myself, but it is music that has taken me to places no spoken word can, where I forget about myself, where I am transported to a wholly different dimension of perceiving and feeling, where I am filled, filled to overflowing, filled almost to tears, with the joy of God's presence.

And not just music, but all the arts serve well to convey the beauties of creation and of grace: music and painting and sculpture and photography and theater and architecture and dance. Christian art and Christian artists are so important, because the life of the gospel is in its beauty. Original Christian art is so important. We need to convey with voices and hands and bodies and imagination what our eyes and hearts allow us to see, what the word of God reveals to us, not just do knock-off imitations of popular culture.

But art does not have to be explicitly Christian to be valued and to serve God's purposes. As Christians, we recognize and celebrate beauty wherever it is found, because "every expression of true beauty [is] a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus."

We proclaim the gospel through the beauty of the word, and we proclaim the gospel through the beauty of culture. Francis writes: "Grace supposes culture, and God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it." God's grace becomes incarnated, takes on substance, in culture, in our lifestyles and social relationships and artistic expressions and unique traditions.

And as Francis says: "Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression." Rather,

*... in the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine [unity] and shows forth the "beauty of her varied face."*

Wow! "The beauty of her varied face ..."

Francis wants to make sure the church understands that "cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity." The gospel itself is unchanging, because the God who delivers it is unchanging in grace and mercy and love, but the gospel becomes new each and every time it is enfleshed in a new culture, and since culture itself is always changing, so our proclamation of the gospel is always changing. There is no one right cultural costume for the gospel. On the contrary, the very diversity of its many expressions enriches and enlarges its beauty. Using another wonderful phrase borrowed from John Paul II, Francis says. "The Church takes up the values of different cultures and becomes 'the bride bedecked with her jewels.'"

Organ music and choral singing and thoughtful preaching and potluck suppers and Christmas Eve candlelighting services and Easter sunrise services are beautiful jewels indeed. But there are so many more jewels to be discovered and appreciated!

We proclaim the gospel through the beauty of the word, and we proclaim the gospel through the beauty of culture, and we proclaim the gospel by recognizing the beauty in the other. Francis writes:

*In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people's lives, shamelessly given over to morbid curiosity, the Church must look more closely and sympathetically at others.*

It's the first part of that quote that got my attention: "a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people's lives." Do you think he's right? A culture suffering from anonymity? People more and more going about their lives as independent operators with less and less sense of attachment and belonging? A culture obsessed with the details of other people's lives? Are we trying to compensate for our lack of real human intimacy and real human community by this fascination with the feats and foibles of people we hardly know?

In this context, Francis says the church must proclaim the gospel by practicing what he calls the "art of accompaniment,"

*... which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.*

"To remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other." I've been thinking about that line all week, struggling with that line all week, looking at each person with whom I have come in contact and thinking about "the sacred ground of the other."

Why sacred? Because of grace. Because the grace of God endows each human life with infinite value, infinite beauty, because God's own breath is in each human life.

Why remove our sandals? Because of grace. So that we may be true to the grace given to us by offering that same grace to each other. So that we may be true to the beauty implanted in us by acknowledging that same beauty in each other. So that in the midst of a culture suffering from anonymity and obsessed with morbid curiosity, we may offer something else, another way, something truly beautiful ... communion.

Communion is a sacrament of the church. A sacrament is a tangible symbol, a concrete expression, an embodiment of grace. A sacrament is a means, a way, of imparting grace. And Francis says we are meant to be a sacrament:

*The Church is sent by Jesus Christ as the sacrament of the salvation offered by God.*

We are meant to be a tangible symbol, a concrete expression, an embodiment of grace. We are meant to be a means, a way, of imparting grace. And we do that by living the *via puchritudinis*, by living the “way of beauty.”