
Sermon
The Spirit of Beauty

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Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: Robert Fulghum

Maybe we should develop a Crayola bomb as our next secret weapon. A happiness weapon. A beauty bomb. And every time a crisis developed, we would launch one. It would explode high in the air - explode softly - and send thousands, millions, of little parachutes into the air. Floating down to earth - boxes of Crayolas. And we wouldn't go cheap, either - not little boxes of eight. Boxes of sixty-four, with the sharpener built right in. With silver and gold and copper, magenta and peach and lime, amber and umber and all the rest. And people would smile and get a little funny look on their faces and cover the world with imagination.

Second Reading: Matthew 6:25-34 (NRSV)

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Sermon

This is the third in a series of three sermons on the absolutes of religion. The first two were about the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Goodness. This third sermon is about the spirit of Beauty. These three absolutes are suggested by Von Ogden Vogt, one of the leading Unitarian ministers of the first half of the twentieth century, a man who was and is mostly forgotten today, but who remains a recognized contributor to the theory and practice of worship by religious scholars.

I do not think it surprising that the spirit of truth and the spirit of goodness and the spirit of beauty are the three absolutes of religion that Dr. Vogt saw. Almost all religions are forthright in claiming to be guardians of the truth and of what constitutes moral or good behavior. And surely the spirit of beauty is equally obvious. Much of the greatest art throughout human history has been produced in direct response to the religious

impulse. Much of the most memorable music we know is music for religion. Bach, Beethoven and Mozart all wrote music for the church. The theologian Karl Barth made the connection between religion and beauty when he said,

"when the angels go about their task of praising God, they play only Bach." [but] "when they are together *en famille* they play Mozart and that then too the good God listens with special pleasure."

The same is true of the arts from painting to architecture to sculpture. Michelangelo's sculpture of David and his frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, religious architecture that runs the gamut from the pyramids and temples of ancient Egypt to the great stone cathedrals of Medieval Europe, all speak to the demands placed on the arts by religion. Over and over again musicians and artists have spoke of their creations as being dedicated to the glory of God.

While it seems obvious and inescapable that there is a connection between the spirit of beauty and religion it is a fair question to ask why. I think this is particularly true in the context of our own religious tradition. That's because Unitarianism arose out of the Pilgrim and Puritan tradition. Now, in defense of the Pilgrims and the Puritans they did not dress the way they are typically depicted in paintings of the first Thanksgiving. Costumes of that sort are an invention of a latter day. But they did dress plainly. And the churches they built were plain. Most of the time they were lacking in decoration. You can see what a typical eighteen century Unitarian church looks like by driving across town and looking at All Souls Unitarian Church. The original Pilgrim and Puritan churches did not have frescoes or stained glass or other forms of art. They were plain and simple. But even in their simplicity they possessed a special kind of beauty, an elegance of the empty form that was different and creative in its own right. And that last is why I think there is a connection between religion and the spirit of beauty because I believe beauty – both the spirit of beauty and in its particular manifestations is directly related to creativity.

Religion has been described in many ways, but for me the meaning of religion is the search for meaning. It is the act of looking at the world and asking, "Is that all there is? Or is there something more." I believe that is why all religions begin with a creation story.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was

so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas: and God saw that it was good.

The form of the story is not critical. It is the act of connecting the world, the existence of reality, with a volitional act of creation. To say the world was created by such an overt act of will is to say the world has meaning. And by doing so religion becomes necessarily linked and connected to all of the arts and to all forms of beauty because the act of the artist that produces something of beauty – regardless of its form – that act is an act of creation. Beauty – as evidence of creation – suggests there is something worthy of the name God or the Divine and inclines one to believe that there is more to life, that there are layers of meaning to be discovered if one will look.

This connection between creation and beauty and religion does not suggest there is a particular form to God. It may be the anthropomorphic God of classical theism who sits on a throne and who created the world by an act of will. Or it may be the God of process theology, the ground not of being, but the ground of creativity that is the world that creates itself because life has and creates its own meaning, a view of the divine not as something separate from the world, but the belief that the world is itself is divine. In other words, the world is infused with meaning and by the choices we make we add to the meaning of the world.

But not all of our choices are creative. Not all of our choices lead to beauty. That is the challenge of growing up. The adolescent becomes an adult when he or she learns to make choices that have value and meaning. All too often people make the mistake of thinking just being different is creative. It's the "No one can tell me what to do!" syndrome. It's the adolescent who engages in shock behavior. It's confusing the vandalism of graffiti with art. It's thinking just because I can do it I should. We have a world full of such behavior and there's nothing beautiful about it. I see it in people who think openly carrying guns into coffee shops is about the right to carry guns when in fact it is about the right to bear arms when in fact it is about insecurity about their own masculinity. (I can say that as someone who has owned multiple firearms all of my adult life.) And I see it in the alleged creativity of Wall Street that nearly destroyed our economy. But there is neither beauty nor creativity in the complicated and fraudulent schemes they invented to separate people from their money, only greed and contempt for any and all besides themselves. If their behavior was not criminal, it should be. Genuine beauty and genuine creativity have an element of the spirit of goodness and the spirit of truth about them. I think that explains a story I heard years ago. It was a story about a philosopher who was introduced to a geologist some forty or fifty years ago. During the conversation the philosopher asked about the latest developments in geology. The geologist replied with a description of plate tectonics, the theory about the movement of the earth's crust. He explained it was – at the time – a controversial theory not yet fully accepted. It is, of course, now a universally accepted theory. The philosopher listened carefully to the explanation and said, "It's true." The geologist was surprised at that declaration because the philosopher had admitted he knew nothing about geology. He said, "How can you say that?" The philosopher answered, "Because it's beautiful."

As human beings we invent much. We have invented theories to justify one human being owning another. We have invented theories that justify unbridled greed.

We have invented theories that say the color of a person's skin makes one superior or inferior to others. We have invented countless theories to justify every imaginable form of wrong doing. And all of these are lacking in beauty, because there is nothing of the spirit of truth or the spirit of goodness about them. There is only the spirit of ugliness. But we have also invented, we have created much that is good, much that is infused with the spirit of goodness and the spirit of truth. There are the words of that Palestinian peasant that tell us,

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

There are the words of a prophet of our own age who said,

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

And there are the words of Chief Dan George and Dan Hirschall,

The Beauty of the Trees
The Softness of the air
The fragrance of the grass
Speak to me.

The world is a cruel and dangerous place. I know that all too well. There have been and always will be those who will use the human ability to create and to choose the future for countless forms of ugliness. More often than not they will claim the cloak of religion for their choices. But such claims are false. True religion, genuine religion will have about it the spirit of truth, the spirit of goodness and the spirit of beauty. The spirit of beauty is one that will always prefer crayola bombs that

explode high in the air - explode softly - and send thousands, millions, of little parachutes into the air. Floating down to earth [N]ot little boxes of eight. [But] Boxes of sixty-four, with the sharpener built right in. With silver and gold and copper, magenta and peach and lime, amber and umber and all the rest.

But this spirit of beauty should not suggest naiveté. Because it will also embrace the spirit of truth it will not turn away from the reality of the world and the presence of ugliness. But it will, as a volitional act of creation choose to be different. It will look at the ugliness of the world and say no, there is a better way. There is a way of beauty. There is a way of grace and graciousness. We can choose mercy. We can choose love. In doing so the story of creation that begins every form of religion becomes not something that happened once upon a time, but a story that continues, a never ending story of creation, of choosing form over chaos. It is why the founders of this church are not just the people who signed the original charter in 1968. Every member of this

church, from the first to join some forty-two years ago to our newest members, are to be counted as amongst its founders and creators. And because creation is ongoing beauty is not something fixed and permanent. This church will be different from the church it was yesterday because the absolute that guides us is not that of beauty, but the spirit of beauty.

May the spirit of truth, the spirit of goodness and the spirit of beauty be with us always that we might have a church that stands for genuine religion – religion that is a joy not a burden, religion that is more concerned with human beings than creeds and that seeks the holy instead of dwelling on the depraved.

Amen.