

When have you ever been “beguiled by beauty?” Charmed? Enchanted ? Speechless? Deceived?

Today’s theme challenges us to appreciate beauty for its divine goodness, not for its purpose or usefulness (quote Rev. Carla Wilks).

Think about the last time you were awed by something in nature:

I originally wanted to share with you my memory of the first time I saw the Grand Canyon, but Mary Fox covered this awesome creation last week. When I was involved with Yoga classes, the instructor always had us go to our “safe, quiet place” as we went in to our meditation time. I grew up on Lake Huron and loved so many aspects of being on water. My favorite vision is a spot from my childhood friend’s cottage. We walked the beach outside of Alpena for years. I place myself on the cottage deck and look out at the overwhelming beauty of God’s creation. The beauty represented something greater than anything I could explain...I am always encompassed by a power or peacefulness that totally takes control of my mind and body! I have always felt comforted in that vision, by God’s beauty, for simply what it was...His creation. As long as I focus on this peaceful place in my mind, I can put all worldly things away.

The beauty for the sake of beauty that we see in nature is not measured by its usefulness. Its worth comes from its existence alone. Rev. Wilks states that our beauty and our worth in God’s eyes, comes from our existence. In a world where we strive for successes and to reach personal goals and achieve more and more, it is difficult to remember that we are worthy and we are loved and we are beautiful, **SIMPLY BECAUSE WE ARE!**

We often measure our own worth when we accomplish certain things, when we fulfill certain obligations or when we are productive, or whatever our categories for being worthy are, our worthiness comes from something we do to merit worth. It isn't that these things are not important, says Rev. Wilks, but our life with God is "Without a Why."

We are simply worthy in the eyes of God because we have been created.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!

This often heard quote offers us the opportunity to value ourselves and each other person who we encounter in our lives. In today's Scripture, from Song of Songs, we are invited to listen in to a dialogue between two lovers. As we listen, we learn something about love, intimacy, desire, mutuality, longing, vulnerability, and mystery. The lovers praise each other using beautiful imagery. This unique section of the Bible, with its love poems, is thought to portray the intimacy with which God loves us.

If we listen carefully, we recognize the beauty and respect as the descriptions suggest, but at the same time, the metaphors function as much to hide the body as to display it. Recognizing the beauty in others and in their lives remains sometimes a mystery; it becomes sacred and is deserving of protection. How are we adoring the mystery of others? How are we recognizing the sacredness of others? What gets in the way?

First of all, we need to accept the fact that beauty is a gift from our Creator. This does not only include us, but all people are beautiful in God's eyes. We need to see ourselves as God sees us; AND we need to value the same in others; God made ALL PEOPLE BEAUTIFUL! ALL

PEOPLE ARE VALUABLE AND WORTHY in God's eyes. We are adored/beguiled by God!

We allow barriers to separate us! ...white/black; right-handed/left-handed; straight/gay; male/female; Biden/Trump; rich/poor.... Sometimes the barrier that keeps us from recognizing our own beauty, or the beauty of others, is our own selves. When we look in the mirror, we don't recognize our own beauty, often because others have made us doubt our beauty. Abusive words have devalued us; commercials have enticed us to purchase "things" that will make us more acceptable to others; they oftentimes have made us feel unworthy or not acceptable. We have allowed prejudices to impact how we feel about others. We judge ourselves and others based on false premises.

Dr. Wendy Farley, author of "Beguiled by Beauty," states: "Beauty decenters our ego by helping us realize that life is its own justification. As we let go of how everything relates to us, serves us, benefits us, we begin to appreciate all things for their own worth and beauty, and our desire for their flourishing intensifies. When we turn this idea onto our own selves, we can let go of the expectations of others and the societal standards of beauty in regard to our own worth."

Our beauty is oftentimes dictated by our cultural standards. We have been exposed to publications extolling the beauty of thin, scantily dressed models, pictures of bodies made more perfect because of diets and exercise; body building models who have perfected their bodies with diet, medications, weights, gyms; we can't escape the products that promise so much— to help and improve us!

We have been conditioned to look at the surface of things. If we don't think others will approve, we toss things out, change course, trade our personal items, replace our values ...in order to improve our own sense

of worth. We measure the value of who we are and what we have by the opinions of others. What we need to do is value OURSELVES as the way GOD SEES US!

Our beauty is measured by what we contribute to the world and how what we contribute is valuable. It is not, "what can you do for me?" We tend to measure our worth by our accomplishments; how productive are we? God looks at us as we are and questions can we grow and can we become more?

All of this is great until we can't "do" or "volunteer" anymore to make things better. We have health issues, we age, we can no longer do things that make us feel "beautiful" for what we've been able to give to others. We become frustrated, disappointed, or distressed because of what we now consider our limitations.

It is at this point in our lives that we need to listen to the Scripture. "Look at you, you are so beautiful." This means NOW. This means ALWAYS. God has created you in his image and he knows that you are beautiful. Beauty is in the eye of the BEHOLDER/GOD; His love of you is not subject to any standards or expectations of others. He loves you as you are.

The Scripture today discusses beauty in others...the beauty in others exists completely for itself-not for any reason other than that the joy of existence is the purpose of life. When we accept this non-utilitarian goodness, we tune into the raw delight in the world. The fact that we exist is enough in God's eyes.

Perhaps the pandemic has been a gift to us in some ways because it has forced us to slow down. We no longer measure our worth by how many objectives we've met but rather by our relationships with others.

Perhaps we have taken more time to tend to things within our own households, with love, thoughtfulness, and tender care. As Rev. Wilks suggests, we have taken time to NOTICE THE SIMPLE PLEASURES OF LIFE.

Dr. Wendy Farley talks about our passions in life, whether it be our vocation or a cause that we support. She talks about releasing expectations about ourselves or others. She talks about how we don't control the outcome of what we do. We don't control what other people do. We can make an effort in the causes we support, but we don't control what happens or how someone receives it.

My vocation created in me a focus for being a problem solver. When I became trained as a Stephen Minister, I was encouraged NOT to be a problem solver; it is not necessary for me, or you, or anyone to control the outcome of our work or others lives. We can hope for things to turn out a certain way, but we need to include so much more in our decision making so that when we are working with others, we are working side by side with a full heart and passion. "Not my will but thy will" comes into mind when I write this. What is the best outcome for now.....will we accomplish the goal today or in twenty years? Our passion for working with others should be focused on the inherent worth and value in what we are doing with them. If we forget about "our outcome" we can put our heart and passion in to the work for others, without limits.

Our contemplative life is the same, says Dr. Farley. We are invited to work with focus and passion, releasing ourselves from the expectation that we control or even fully understand what happens.

Rev. Wilks concludes that "We are loved and valued and seen as worthy by God because we have been created as part of the wonder of creation, not because of what we have done or have not done, by what



we have accomplished, by how well we pray We can release those expectations of ourselves and others, release ourselves from the “Why” of our existence, and know that God sees us as beautiful children of God, whether or not we think we deserve it.”

In researching this topic for today, I loved the suggestion that we should draw a big heart around our bathroom mirror so that every time we look in the mirror, we are reminded that we are LOVED! God loves us all the time.....

Let me ask you to place your hands, face up, on your lap, and close your eyes. Take 3 deep breaths and release each one slowly. Then list ten things that you like about yourself.

Thanks be to God for calling us “my dearest” and loving us without conditions.

