

Article of Faith: Beauty
By Anna Pinckney Straight
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Luke 7: 36 – 50

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." 48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

John 12: 1- 8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Our texts today are two different stories of a similar event. Two different stories. One, in which a sinful woman, though her sin is never named, anoints Jesus' feet.

Another, in which Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, takes that pure nard and anoints Jesus' feet.

All four gospels contain a variation of this story, (Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50). All four.

Which is not typical.

Which is Biblical Code for, "Listen up! This is important!"

After all, what stories do we repeat?

Those we want to remember.

Those that are important.

What is it that makes this story one that is so central to the gospel?

Well, let's look at what they have in common. At least three things.

- 1) The anointing, the cleaning of Jesus' feet. With something that is precious and costly. It is an act of kindness, care. It is an act of beauty.
- 2) The opposition. Someone opposes the woman who does this to Jesus. In Luke it is his host, who doesn't think Jesus should be associating with a sinful woman. In John it is Judas, who is pretending to care about the poor. Pretending.
- 3) And Jesus defends the women. Stands up for them. He receives the gift of their actions and tells those in opposition that they are plainly in the wrong. Jesus does not hesitate, for it is not a kindness to let these men continue under the assumption that they are somehow justified in demeaning these women or their acts of kindness and beauty.

I chose these texts to talk about beauty, because they exemplify the word- beauty can be a view that fills us with awe, and action that causes us to pause, a community where the bonds that tie us together create a family. Beauty- in many forms, in many ways, it is an article of faith. A gift from God to be savored, appreciated, shared.

For a long, long, long time, one of my favorite quotes has been a passage from a book entitled "Life's Extras," written by the former poet laureate of South Carolina, Archibald Rutledge.

"Creation supplies us with only two kinds of things: necessities and extras. Sunlight, air, water, food, shelter --- these are among the bare necessities. With them we can exist. But moonlight and starlight are distinctly extras; so are music, the perfumes, flowers. The wind is perhaps a necessity; but the song that it croons through the morning pines is a different thing..... Neither a day dawning nor a sunset (with all abundant beauty) is really a

necessity. It is one of life's extras. It is a visit to an incomparable art gallery; and no one has to pay an admission fee. The human mind, being somewhat proud and perverse may be inclined to reject this kind of proof of God's love. But the human heart can hardly do so."¹

They are words that I have called upon time and time again for most of my life. But in recent years I've begun to realize something. Archibald Rutledge was wrong. There are more than two categories of things in life. And beauty isn't an extra.

What are two texts set before us today is an example of beautiful selfless acts. Acts of profound caring and love.

And the way Jesus receives them. The way in which he rebukes those who would deny him these gifts, tells us they are far from extras. This beauty we heard about today is a part of the tapestry of life, of faith, of discipleship in which the threads need each other to survive and thrive.

It's the point Jesus makes, and it is a point that has been carried through the years in theology.

This understanding of beauty found in the created world as well as in acts of love, beauty as connected to faithfulness has, in fact, been a part of our theology across the ages. Not as an end unto itself, but as something that leads us on the path of discipleship.

In his study of this belief, Theologian Belden Lane writes, "God's beauty remains restless (and in some sense incomplete) until it communicates itself to all that God loves. The goal of the divine beauty is to join itself in the most intimate way with the whole of creation, starting with the church as a promise of God's larger vision of restored glory..... The saints were expected to manifest this beauty in their lives... God's beauty is complete, then, only as the beauty is shared with others. Indeed, the entire creation awaits the return of its original resplendent glory."²

And it's not just about refilling the well. About retreating to a place of beauty to renew and nourish our spirits like we would fill the gas tank of a car. Beauty in this world, whether tangible, visible, or communal, is not a good for us to consume, it is something that leads us closer to God. Makes us bolder in welcoming God's kingdom. Beauty, understood faithfully, has a direct connection to justice.

¹ Archibald Rutledge. *Life's Extras*, Westwood: Fleming H. Revell, 1961. 12-13, 24.

² Belden Lane, "Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality." New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pages 193-194.

In the conclusion to his book, Lane writes, “Any Calvinist spirituality worth its salt will make its way from aesthetics to ethics, from the celebration of God’s beauty to the communication of that beauty to others. Making the world beautiful—and just—is part of the proper work of giving glory to God.... The reformed tradition insists that beauty and justice are inseparable dimensions of a single truth. Beauty adds grace and largesse to the exercise of justice. It illuminates and restores the original goodness of God’s creative work.... Beauty gives justice a face of compassion, an endearing touch of bountiful excess that enlarges life rather than merely preserving it.”³

Now I’ll be honest. I picked this topic and these scriptures in July. Truthfully, I thought I’d be able to offer some reflections on my trip to Wyoming—time in a beautiful place with a sacred community. But that was before the recent events in Charlottesville, Birmingham, Lewisburg, Boston, and Durham.

These events haven’t, of course, erupted from nowhere, from some spontaneous combustion. They are past-due bills come due here in America. Bills from our earliest days as a nation. Bills from slavery and racism and wrongly interpreted Bible and privilege. Not knowing our history as well as we should, not knowing how to listen as we should, and not being willing to take the corrective actions we should.

And I’ve seen and heard lots of different suggestions about how we should be proceeding. I’ll confess what you already know—I do not have all of the answers.

But what we do know is that our God does not stay on the sidelines. Our texts today are just one reminder among many that Jesus does not hesitate to speak up and speak for beauty and justice, and neither can we.

“Silence is the welcome mat of hate,” My friend Kathryn Johnston preached last week. You have to denounce this level of hate and the propaganda that goes with it. You can’t ignore it, or else the hate becomes emboldened. You must stand against it. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote, “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”⁴

And this is true no matter which character we most identify with in our Bible texts for today. I can confess that more than once I have wondered if Judas had a point. More than once I’ve given in to, and more than once I’ve applied,
 the pressure to behave like Simon wants Jesus to behave.

³ Lane 239-240.

⁴ This paragraph was written by Kathryn Z. Johnston of Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church. <http://mechpresby.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/By-Gracious-Powers.pdf>

No matter where I find myself. No matter where you find yourself. The role models are clear. We are supposed to be more like the sinful woman. We are supposed to be more like Mary. We are supposed to be more like Jesus.

And that means putting ourselves out there. Pouring ourselves out like so much perfume.

Sometimes that means putting ourselves on the line, like so many people did last weekend, refusing to give way to hate. Singing “This Little Light of Mine.” They sang as a way to try and not to be afraid, while some among them were shoved and punched and spit upon and maced by those who had gathered to spread, not light, but hate.⁵

As those did last week, once again in Charlottesville, with candles instead of torches, once again singing the familiar refrain of little lights, gathered together in candles to great a field of light in defiant hope, refusing to allow the weekends images to be the images of their city in their hearts and minds. “We replaced you,” the caption said. And so they did. Beauty wrote over the hate.⁶

And then again, yesterday. As dozens turned out for their message of hate, they were overwhelmed and overshadowed by thousands and thousands who were there to speak

⁵ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/august/dispatches-from-charlottesville-what-happens-when-neo-nazis.html>

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/torch-wielding-white-supremacists-march-university-virginia-n792021>



⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/university-of-virginia-candlelight-vigil-charlottesville-protest_us_59950acde4b0d0d2cc8431fb



their message of love. With music. And dance. And joy. In Boston and Portland. In Houston and Memphis and even Hot Springs Arkansas.⁷

Many of those events yesterday reminded me of an event years ago in Knoxville, Tennessee where counter protestors threw White Flour and White Flowers into the air each time the KKK shouted “White Power,” so flummoxing the marchers that they eventually gave up and went home, leaving the streets open for a dance party and celebration of joy.⁸

These responses are just a piece of the puzzle, a slice of the pie of what needs to happen to address issues of race and inequality, history and future here in the United States, but the response is a part.

As I’ve read the coverage and the commentary from a wide range of viewpoints, the questions that are raised in our texts today seem remarkable relevant.

Where did we ever get the idea that our God hasn’t given us enough to feed the poor **and** engage in beautiful acts of kindness and justice. Why do we insist on living with a mindset of scarcity when our God, our God who created both mountains and morel mushrooms, has promised abundance?

What does it mean to say that some aren’t worthy of being in Jesus’ presence? Why do we doubt the love and power of God to do more than our minds can imagine?

When did we start thinking that Jesus can’t be anointed **and** be THE anointed, pointing us to God?

That we can’t both denounce and resist the evil actions of our enemies and love those enemies, too?

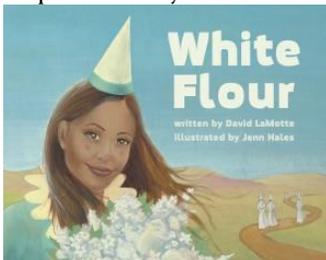
⁷ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/bigpicture/2017/08/19/free-speech-rally-and-counter-protest/o0YfQ3S21r7SZuR1FqLjpl/story.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/us/demonstration-race-free-speech-boston-charlottesville.html?mcubz=0>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGOdH1js1co>

David Lamotte has written a book about this event. It is also a video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05etFVZasyg>



<https://www.davidlamotte.com/white-flour/>

That we can't be mature adults and color?⁹

Beauty, whether it is the hike to a mountaintop, your child's greeting in the morning, or spending time with a friend who knows you. Whether its something you feel or something you see or something you experience. If we're going to move forward in a faithful way, we're going to need beauty. Just as we are going to need worship and communion and community and Jesus. Lots and lots of Jesus.

The good news is that we are so blessed in this place. So very, very blessed. We are surrounded by beauty. Not just in the mountains. Not just in these stones. But in the relationships, we have, one with another. The love that I see. That God keeps calling people to join in this fellowship.

What beauty do you call to mind? Is at the forefront of your mind?
How does it inspire you? Encourage you? Give you hope?

Beauty is profound. And it is nothing less than faithful sustenance. And Jesus is here. Right here. Waiting to lead us. Walking with us. With his clean, anointed, beautiful feet.

"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10)

Where have our feet taken us?

Where have your feet taken you?

Where will our feet take us?

Where will your feet take you?

And what beauty will you carry along with you, to share?

God knows. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ The bulletin cover this morning is a coloring page and there are colored pencils and crayons for everyone.