

The Pursuit of Beauty

Psalm 27:4

Preached January 24, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

Introduction. Patty and I were married while I was a student at Emory and Henry College. During one of my classes, in which there was a small number of students, the name of a person on campus was raised. I acknowledged that I knew that person and described her to the other members of the class. In the description, I said she was an attractive woman. One of the women in the class immediately responded, "I thought you were married." The professor then spoke up and said, "He is but he is not blind."

I am delighted that marriage and the various stages of life have not blinded me to behold beauty. Like most of you, I enjoy experiencing beauty. I believe it is fair to say that most human beings have a longing for beauty and enjoy the experience of beauty.

Created to enjoy beauty.

As human beings we were designed to enjoy beauty. God created us with five senses that enable us to experience the physical world around us through which we experience beauty. Beauty is that which brings pleasure and delight to us through the senses.

We experience beauty from our senses of taste and smell. Many of you have already given thought to where and what you will eat following this service. Most of us want to have a delicious meal that will be pleasing to our taste buds. A few weeks ago, Patty and I had a discount coupon for a restaurant that was new to us. It was extremely busy and we were long in being served. But we were seated strategically. The servers passed us as they served each table. Every time they passed, my nose was filled with such delectable aromas. When we

were finally served, my taste buds told me that my nose had been telling me the truth.

We also experience beauty through our sense of touch. We can distinguish between hot and cold, soft and hard, cuddly and rough. From our touch, we can experience a sense of pleasure or beauty.

Our ears are tuned in to experience beauty as well. Whether it is the beauty of a cooing dove, a pipe organ, a flute, a symphony, a soloist or the voice of one we love, we long to hear that which is beautiful. Probably in the area of music, we become quickly aware that what one finds as beautiful is less than to be desired by another. One might love contemporary music and another find it distasteful. So beauty is in the eye/ear of the beholder. There is an element of personal preference when it comes to beauty or I guess we would all drive the same color vehicles and live in the same style homes.

Perhaps our greatest portal to beauty is through our eyes. We can enjoy the physical beauty of another person, the setting sun, fresh-fallen snow clinging to tree limbs, a graceful buck grazing in a field, a baby sleeping in her crib, a work of art, etc. For those of us who have sight, we can experience beauty many times each day if we will open our eyes to see what is around us.

Last April, a middle-aged and less than attractive woman from a small town appeared on the British television program *Britain Has Talent*. Her plain dress and unattractive exterior caused the judges' panel and the audience to suspect she would be a flop. From the expressions shown on the set, no one believed Susan Broyles had any beauty. But as she began to sing *I Dreamed a Dream*, her beautiful voice filled the auditorium. The facial expressions changed dramatically. When she had finished, the audience gave her a standing ovation and the panel gave her a huge endorsement.

Overnight, the world fell in love with the beauty of her voice and her spunky nature.

What does the Bible say about beauty? Throughout this sacred book, we find a celebration of beauty and the beautiful. The Bible speaks of the beauty of a baby, such as Moses, speaks of the beauty of several women, highlights the handsome nature of some men, lifts up the beauty of voices that sing, and speaks poetically of the beauty of Jerusalem to her people and splendor of creation. The Bible affirms the human longing for and appreciation of beauty.

Of course, the Bible does put some boundaries around the matter of beauty. The Bible speaks of how beauty can be fleeting and fragile, like a flower that can for a few hours bring such joy soon becomes ugly when its petals fade and fall off. The Bible warns that one can allow his/her own personal beauty to become a source of pride. There are warnings about how the beauty of another woman can lure a husband from his wife. In one of the more poignant proverbs, we read: "*Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense (11:22).*" Beauty does not give one good judgment.

Why the longing for beauty?

As interesting as it may be to think about the various dimensions of beauty and our longing for beauty, there is a fundamental question: Why do we have such a longing for beauty? I want to propose three key reasons for this longing.

First of all, beauty can be a window into that which is spiritual. Beholding beauty can take us to deeper levels of experiencing God and the things of God. Through beauty we are linked to the divine and deeper spiritual realities. Often we sense God speaking to us through things of beauty, whether created by God's hand or a human hand. Through the experience of worship we are often

taken to levels of genuine worship of God.

How often have you been seated here in worship and heard the voices of angels as the choir or a soloist sang. The beauty of the voice and message of the song took you to a deeper dimension in worship. Within, your spirit was moved and you sensed a deeper connection with the living God.

Perhaps you have been at a place that overlooks the mountains around you. In the distance you see the mountain peaks and the rich valleys below. You have seen the river meandering through the valley. (Some of our members wake up to these scenes every day.) At those moments, you felt as though you could reach out and touch the living God.

This sanctuary, this nave, is filled with beauty, not for the sake of making it ornate but for the sake of pointing us to and encountering God. This window of gold and glass tells stories that resonate in our souls when we behold its beauty. For more than 40 years, the window has been preaching to generation after generation of worshipers. The carvings of this pulpit and lectern capture the mind and heart and lead us to Jesus.

Beauty can take us to deeper dimensions of spirituality.

Secondly, our longing for beauty calls out in us our creativity to share in making this world a more beautiful place. We are created in the image of God, the *imago Dei*. Our creator is a designer of beauty. In each of us he has instilled gifts and skills to create the beautiful – to cook delicious foods, sing a beautiful song, act out meaningful drama, write a poem that makes our minds dream, paint a beautiful picture, design a home or building that captures the imagination.

Many of you this day have already seen some of the projects of beauty produced by the minds, hearts and hands of some of our members. Our display of art helps us to see deeper beauty. I hope that following this worship you will spend some time enjoying what has been created.

Allow our acts of creation to draw you closer to our Creator.

In 1995, Isaac Perlman, a man who had been left lame by childhood polio, was playing a difficult concerto. During the middle of the performance, one of the strings of his violin snapped with a loud pop. The orchestra stopped at that moment. Everyone thought that Perlman would collect himself, walk off stage and restring his instrument. But in a moment, he motioned the conductor to continue. From that point he continued to play and recreate as he played until the concert was completed. His comment after the performance was, "Sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left" (www.snopes.com/music/artists/perlm an.asp).

The final reason we have a longing for beauty is the most important. Our pursuit of beauty is intended to lead us to Ultimate Beauty. For from this One, all beauty springs forth. Our pursuit of beauty is designed to lead us to God.

This was understood by the Psalmist as he wrote the words in our text:

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple (27:4). He longed to behold and enjoy the beauty of God.

I must confess that I know very little about art. But I do appreciate most art I see. Through the years, I have been given and have purchased pieces that have spoken to me. Nearly all of those pieces though are prints; I do not have any originals. I do enjoy the copies, but how much more valuable would it be to have the autograph. God's beauty in creation and from the creatures is designed to give us a longing for the autograph piece. It is to draw us to God.

Response to the Word.

God has placed in us the ability to experience beauty and has given us the longing for beauty. To nearly all of us, God has given abilities of creating that which brings pleasure and delight. All of this is intended to enable us to

encounter the spiritual and draw closer to God.

Following our final hymn, I will not dismiss you with a formal benediction. But I ask you to venture into the Cloister and onto the bridge and experience the works of beauty. My hope is that you will not only experience each work of art's beauty but also experience the beauty of God.