

**Noticing the Beauty Around Us (and Why That Matters)**  
**UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi**  
**May 8, 2022**

**Homily**

There is a lot of bad in the news lately, my friends. I don't have to tell you that. You know. It's a long litany of more civil rights under attack; more evidence that, indeed, oppression by police of Black and Brown people is demonstrable through police records; more data to show that COVID is still actively infecting people and the infections have serious long-term health effects; more proof that the brutality and bigotry, even insanity, of one powerful person, if conditions are enabling, can devastate millions, even billions of people. And today, we begin our exploration of the theme of Nurturing Beauty. Wow, do we need that more than ever in days such as these!

I know there is so much beauty in the world, in the midst of all this misery. I see it clearly when I look outside. I see it clearly when I look here, and here. But what I know and see does not always help me to feel and to act. How are we to live with the contradiction? I feel one thing for certain, and that is that anxiety is not the way to live within our terrible and beautiful reality. Twisted up in knots and in despair about all the bad news is not, in my estimation, a good way to honor the gift of life. "Beauty is mysterious, a slow presence who waits for the ready, expectant heart." So, how do we rid ourselves of the anxiety that blocks beauty in our lives? How can we notice and nurture the beauty that is ever-present even in days such as these?

Now in the search for beauty, there is no use in denying the bad news. It is especially important to notice who is most directly impacted by it. The world does act against some of us more strenuously than others. With the current open assault on Roe v. Wade, as a woman and as the mother of a woman, I feel particularly assailed. And the social assault has a different and devastating resonance for transman or non-binary person who have a uterus. The social assault has a different resonance for Black Women, whose incidence of maternal death is three times that of White women. Increasing flooding and wildfires are destroying more frequently plant and animal, as well as human, habitat. Black people are daily terrorized by institutionalized practices and assumptions documented by the Department of Justice. People who identify as LGBTQ have been threatened, attacked, beaten, and killed, within our living memories. Indigenous women are abducted and murdered so regularly that we set aside a day to remember this fact, a hideous extension of the governmental extermination policies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Those with mental difference are regularly stigmatized in our popular culture and in terms of everyday existence. In times not so bygone it was a regular practice to force the left-handed to write with their right hands. So very many ways to discipline our bodies and control our lives.

And into the search for beauty we carry so many of our own personal sorrows, too—death separates us from people we love, conflict separates us from people we love, differences of opinion become reasons to sever relationship, poor health keeps us from living the lives we wish for, lack of opportunities keeps us from living the lives we wish for, the caretaking of others keeps us from living the lives we wish for

ourselves. We can't necessarily change these things, and we might fear these restrictions will mold us into bitterness and hopelessness and defeat.

So, both social and personal forces work to limit our ability to acknowledge the beauty of the world. We get broken down, we get overwhelmed, but that is not the same thing as doing ourselves in with anxiety. Anxiety looks like ruminating—going over and over the misery relentlessly, trapped by it. Doomscrolling, too much news, echo chambers, passively watching the world go by as if we have no role to play except on the sidelines. Anxiety can also look like overly-controlling—a rigidness of belief about what is happening, of how to solve the problem and make it go away, a limiting of imagination and possibility. Anxiety looks like hopelessness, like giving up, as if change for the good is futile. Yet, “Beauty is mysterious, a slow presence who waits for the ready, expectant heart.” We can choose to live in the open awe, in an awe-filled reality. Even as I was typing these very words, hearing the distinctive clacking of the keyboard, the sound of a bird calling penetrated my concentration, a bird whose name I don't know, calling on life and calling life into being while I was busy with my own.

One thing we can do in our effort to search for beauty is to look for an exemplar, someone who has done well finding beauty in the midst of misery. I was encouraged this week to remember the example of those who endured the Holocaust. And I returned to a couple of quotations from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Here is one of them: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” This, written by a Jewish Dutch teenager hidden with her family in a secret room so as to evade capture by Nazis. Here is another quotation: “I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.” When I first read Anne Frank's words 40 years ago, I just didn't understand them. How could anyone in such a circumstance be so apparently cheerful and so optimistic? Such a mindset in the face of the Holocaust, and the Holocaust itself the devastating culmination of a millennia and more of racist hatred and persecution of Jewish people. She imagines her role in the world to make it better, to make it more beautiful, I would say. And even though she is not in a position to make her attitude active in the world—she cannot venture into the world for fear of exactly the fate she ultimately met, death in a concentration camp—she finds it important to cultivate her ideals, to foster her sense of right and good in and for the world.

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” Anne Frank never knew that I would read her words 40 years after her death, that her words would be read by millions even today. She focused on making her immediate devastating world as beautiful as it could be, without any possible knowledge of any ultimate good it might do. Her words are good and beautiful in the moment, in her present, when she needed them most.

“I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.” After his own release from the death camp, the diary is said to have saved Anne's father's life, he the only member of the family who did not die in the camps. He returned to his former home and hiding place to find only loss, all of his family destroyed, but also his daughter's words—what could not save her did, in fact, save him and could inspire, maybe even save, innumerable people in despair of the world as it is. We can choose beauty, “[. . .] mysterious, a slow presence who waits for the ready, expectant heart.”

Today, we have to imagine the sun, so warming, so present yesterday. But the sun is there, always there, always, every evening, relaxed and easy, floating toward the horizon and is gone. Yet how it slides again out of the blackness every morning like a red flower in its perfect imperial distance. Such wild love. Such pleasure as it reaches out and warms us as we stand empty-handed. Such is the beauty of the world, as long as we have not forgotten our place in this real world, as long as we have not gone crazy for power, for things. All of our human created catastrophes are real and painful and frightening. But the real world of which we are a part is also always there, dissolved in the edges of light which surround us and fill us. Always there, and not only in the sun. In the rain too, in the thunder and wind. In the so tiny buds, so late in returning to our sight and our awareness. In the fragile birds, singing their own songs of return. In the dissolving edges of suffering and strife when realized as temporary, when removed from the hulls of ourselves and of our sense of time, removed from our grasping. Beauty is there when we open to the creation of art that commemorates and transmutes our human suffering—The Wedgewood medallion created in 1787, “Am I not a man and a brother,” to counter the slave trade, the AIDs quilt begun in the 1980s, the image of Brionna Taylor, murdered by police in St. Louis, projected onto the statute of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, VA. Dancing of all kinds springing forth at protests, a show that there is joy in life and beauty in the body regardless of the catastrophes and injustices being protested. The real world of beauty is there. And it is here. Let’s just think on that for a time, whatever image is the one that fills you with that piercing sense of living beauty, that fills your empty hand in a time of anxiety and pain and suffering.

For all of us, grieving and celebrating and getting by, all of us tired and frazzled and energized and confused. For all of us, may we seek the beauty that is always present in its mystery, may we make beauty as a gift returned to that mystery. For we come from it and so we are made of it and so we can make more of it. And we should—as a bolster, as a cushion and a hope and a promise and a possibility of enduring the harshness of reality that is also true though not so much of a mystery. We know how we make misery. Let us seek another way. We can dance and we can sing, figuratively or actually. We can throw our hands up and holler to the skies and to each other. There is so much beauty in the world. For the joy and wonder that beauty fosters and makes possible, to this may we raise a hymn of grateful praise. For I believe that nothing will save us from the current devastations except that we embrace and unfold beauty—especially, most certainly the beauty of communities working to make the world better in the here and now. May we be one, pledging ourselves anew to the high cause of greater understanding of who we are, and what in us is true, regardless of the clear devastation of ordinary life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Reflection**

I don’t know if democracy inclusive of diverse voices will prevail. I don’t know if we will stop the climate crisis and the suffering that is already happening from it and the more that is promised. I don’t know if we will stop killing each other and brutalizing each other because of our differences. I don’t know. Nobody does know. All I know is how I want to live in the time that I have, and I want to walk lightly and do good and care about people and learn and remember my place in the web and be a better part of the web and make the web anew.

And that requires that I see the devastation clearly and quell the anxiety and despair. That I seek beauty, to amplify it and honor it and honor it in others. In the words of Adrienne Rich, "My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power reconstitute the world." So, may we cling to the activists and the protesters. May we support the dancers and the singers and the writers and the artists. May we write our checks to the causes that animate us, may we write our letters to the editor about the concerns that enrage us, may we write to our politicians that they may hear what motivates us. And may we vote. For we are that lot seeking and making beauty and seeking the salvation of the world in this immediate time, for what happens ultimately is not in our hands.

Each of us, miracles in long lines of miracles, where our hearts are connected by biology and stories, may we nurture beauty. May we be one in living for each other to show to all a new community. May we be each other's best present, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together "Amen."

<https://www.epa.gov/climatechange-science/impacts-climate-change>

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