

**Homily and Reflection—(Un)Limited Beauty**  
**UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi**  
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**Homily: Limiting Beauty**

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of May is “Nurturing Beauty.” And so, we continue our discovery today, gaining wisdom for our journey from the words of writerly prophets and religious practitioners, from the expansive vistas of the natural world, and from our own experience. And let us explore with joy and open hearts.

At one time or another, all of us have felt the lure of beauty, that inexplicable desire to be near what is beautiful, to gaze upon it, to revel in it. We feel sharply the loss of it, perhaps without knowing why, why we feel needful of the beautiful. There is something of the Divine, of the Holy, there. But there is something worrisome within the lure of beauty, too. In the lure of a certain kind of beauty. There is beauty, and then there is false beauty, a restricted beauty, and we have all fallen prey to that at one time or another. We have all been seduced by a beauty that is not only skin deep but also of only one kind.

The writer Ursula K. LeGuin frames the problem this way: “Beauty always has rules. It’s a game. I resent the beauty game when I see it controlled by people who grab fortunes from it and don’t care who they hurt. I hate it when I see it making people so self-dissatisfied that they starve and deform and poison themselves.” The problem is not beauty itself but rather the limitations on beauty that have too many of us hating ourselves and each other.

When my son was a small boy, nearly thirty years ago, he experienced his first crush, and he crushed on the actor Michelle Pfeiffer. He was sitting on my lap as I flipped through a Newsweek magazine. When I landed on a review of the movie *Frankie and Johnny*, he ran his chubby little hand over the photo of Pfeiffer. “Pretty,” he said, “Pretty.” “That’s Michelle Pfeiffer,” I said, and he continued to stroke the page. “Pretty Shell. Pretty Shell.” Clearly, a small boy felt strongly the lure of a beautiful face. I find it interesting that his first girlfriend was a tall, slender blonde.

What is it that makes Pfeiffer “beautiful”? What makes anything beautiful, really? The ancient Greeks felt that they knew—symmetry was beautiful, and Michelle has a beautifully symmetrical face, perfectly aligned. There was a lot of popular talk at one time, about symmetrical beauty as the basis for biological efficacy: it was said that the survival of the human species depended upon this form of beauty. Symmetry as normative and thus valuable—a formula for beauty. And how convenient, for the symmetrical. Not so much for the vast rest of us.

It’s more than symmetry, of course. It is size, both height and girth. It is hair color, skin color, eye color. But it is also more than my dear little boy could see, though. More was embedded in that photo—cisgender rather than trans or non-binary. Hetero rather than queer. Able-bodied rather than disabled. Healthy rather than ill. Not Michelle Pfeiffer herself, mind you. But the image of Michelle Pfeiffer as a

standard of beauty—the standard that is supremacist and racist and phobic of so much of the actual diversity of human beings with our bodies. And that game keeps too many of us hating ourselves.

We know the relentless push we all receive from advertising to change ourselves—what to buy, how to look and smell, what is cool and what is out-of-date and out of touch. Body activist Sonya Renee Brown describes such limited view of beauty and its advocates in this way: “the bounty hunters of the Body-Shame Profit Complex and the institutional structures of body terrorism,” to be trapped in this “grueling labor under a system of capitalism” (2). Even if we don’t buy all that we are supposed to in order to re-make ourselves, we are still subjected to the messages, we still witness the debilitating effects it has on people we love—especially upon children and those of us vulnerable with injury and those of us growing old and so growing disabled in one way or another.

The Rev. KC Slack, in her sermon “Abundant Love,” personalizes our problematic reality in this way: “I’ve spent years unlearning internalized fatphobia, biphobia, femme phobia, and stigmatization of mental health issues, and still...some days I wake up and I wish I could just be normal. Some days this body and this life feel like too much. Some days I want a break from being me. I bet we’ve all had those days.” There is the heartbreak for all of us, that the one narrow, limited standard of beauty is seen as the norm, with almost all of us outside of it. Everybody hurts sometimes. Everybody.

And just to be clear—the standard of beauty is not only a problem for women. All people are subject to the limitation of the normal—that cis, straight, and able-bodied is the best and only way to be. White supremacy is certainly in effect here, but so is a certain version of masculine supremacy, where to be tough, even violent, is the only way for a man to be a real man. And if you do not fall neatly into binary categories, all the more pain for you in the dominant world we live in.

Again, the Rev. KC Slack has some thoughts for us: “We all have these things. The stuff we hide as best we can and hope nobody notices. The stuff we were taught was ‘wrong’ about us, that would make people not like us, not love us. We are fat and queer and trans and Black and brown. We’re people who are chronically ill, and who experience mental health problems, and who interact with the world in a way different from the ‘norm.’ We are people with bodies and lives that we are supposed to believe are wrong. We’re told to hide, to disappear, to blend the best we can. To kill pieces of ourselves so that someone else may think we’re ok.” Everybody cries. Everybody hurts sometimes. May more than hurt hold us together.

Symmetrical, supremacist beauty is a recognizable formula, a *sameness* that we can see and easily understand, a beauty game played for profit to the destruction of our human variety. And we understand the lure of it, how we might want to embrace it, even when we know it hurts us and it hurts humanity. But this limited notion of beauty is not the only one. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has a much more interesting definition of beauty, one that can include Michelle Pfeiffer and includes all of us variably-bodies folk. Rather than a formula or a game, beauty is an action, specifically the action of multiplying diverse forms of being. *Beauty* is a multiplying of diverse forms. And I think this is a better definition of beauty, a better understanding of beauty as the way the world and the universe works.

We all intuit this definition, though we might resist calling it beauty. We can think about it this way by asking ourselves some questions: Would we want to eliminate a tulip in favor of a daffodil? An elm in favor of a walnut tree? Would we want to eliminate Rumi in favor of Herman Melville? Anne Lamott in favor of Louise Erdrich? Would we want to eliminate Gandhi in favor of Mother Theresa? Kandinsky in favor of Monet? Reingold in favor of Rothko? Don't we want them all? Would we want to eliminate a jelly fish in favor of a sea star? A dog in favor of a cat? Don't we want two kinds of elephants, as well as three species of vampire bats and 239 species of woodpeckers? Yes, I do. I hope you do, too.

The examples are endless, because the diversity of forms is both multitudinous and ever-growing. We don't know all that lies within our galaxy, let alone beyond it, or even every living thing in the plot of land around this building. Slimy slugs and annoying mosquitoes, too, are part of the beauty, and not simply because they have roles in the vast play of nature. Their very existence *as part of the multitude itself* is what makes them beautiful. All of them. And the all is what constitutes beauty itself.

Thus, we too, all of us *are* ok as a part of the multitude itself. As Rev. Slack enjoins us, "We're better than ok. We're beautiful. Fearfully and beautifully made, children of the Divine, stardust that has figured out how to experience itself, walk in your light. Be you, you're the only one who can. Find something that reminds you of you, a way to remember on the days that are hard. Listen to your favorite music, put on your favorite outfit, get up, dance. Love yourself like you love the world. Love yourself like you love [what you call the Holy]. Be brave when you can, be you loudly and fiercely, make space in the world for someone like you, and know that your community has got your back. How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful? Your beauty is abundant. Your worth is abundant. You matter so much."

We are, each of us, entirely worthy of calling ourselves beautiful. It is a given. It is already a truth that all of us are included in the beauty that is the diversity of forms made by the universe. But also, the beauty of the universe can lure us toward justice, since attention to the diversity of forms means including *more*. It means including plenitude within our vision of justice, as the best justice conceivable. Our beautiful universe, full of forms and ever-creative of more, requires of us devoted, even devotional attention to our human differentiation, and to see that we are needful of each other. The beautiful universe calls us to inclusion, *each tenderly holding each diverse form* in caring curiosity and true companionship. White, Black, Latinx, Native, Asian, Trans, Disabled, and more: our universe conspired to create us all. Our human work of justice is to hold all of us valuable and lovable, all of us relevant and desirable. All of us vital and indispensable.

Multiple forms encouraged, cultivated, drawn close, truly seen as valuable rather than as divisive: this is justice. Choosing among the many, finding that which draws us into relationship rather dividing us from and ranking us against each other because we don't fit some limited notion of symmetrical sameness: this is justice.

When you're sure you've had enough of this life, well, hang on. Everybody cries. Everybody hurts sometimes. Sometimes everything is wrong. Take comfort in your friends. No, you are not alone. Feel that? Each breath, every inhale, exhale. We are living, breathing, connected. We are the whole, complete, beautiful selves that we were born to be. The struggle, the worry, the pain, the loss, the grief, it is still you. You are still whole, complete, beautiful, extraordinary. We *are* ok. We're better than ok. We're beautiful. Feel that.

**Reflection: Unlimited Beauty**

“Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul? Then when your mother wanted to brag about you she could show people the picture and say, ‘That's my[child], [don't they] have a beautiful soul, all sparkly and many-colored and flowing [. . .]?’ Wouldn't it be great if we walked around surrounded by our souls, so that they were the first things people saw instead of the last things?” That sounds nice indeed, to be fully seen. But I want to live in a world where all the bodies are seen, all the bodies are cool, the diverse variety of bodies, the magical everchanging bodies, where they are all seen as beautiful.

I want to inhabit a world where everyone feels like the Rev. Slack does: “I have almost endless space in my heart for other people's flaws – perceived or otherwise. I love being with people who have different experiences than I do, I love what I see in others the same way I love flowers – the things other people might find imperfect I find beautiful. I am grateful for their variety. I'm the first to push back when a friend or acquaintance is being hard on themselves. I think it's my job to show up for my people in their struggles.” I want to live in the world caring for myself in this way, caring for all of you in this way. For in living in this way, we do the work of justice, by seeking and embracing the blessings of plenitude and difference, the natural and ordinary beauty that is adaptive and resilient and available to us all.

How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful? How could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole? May you believe with all your being that you are beautiful, that you are whole. May you know how deeply you're connected to loving souls holding you with compassion and tenderness, as you remember also 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.”

“Pretty” by Katie Makkai <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7TS2Z6IAI4>

*The Body Is Not An Apology Workbook: Tools for Living Radical Self-Love* by Sonya Renee Brown.

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