

Beauty, Contemplation, and Radical Compassion

The beautiful text today invites us to contemplate the grandeur of nature. The tree of Lebanon, like other trees, flourished under the nourishment of streams, growing tall, strong, and deep. In return, it provided sustenance for birds and animals. However, the context of this tree evokes the “boundaries of meaning.” In the scripture, this remarkable Cedar is actually compared to the Pharaoh king of Egypt, and in subsequent verses, the tree will fall due to sin of the empire. The Bible also records the ultimate redemption of Egypt in Isaiah 19 and 25, in an eschatological age. In that time, Egypt will worship God alongside Assyria and Israel on a day of universal peace and worship of Yahweh, on the day of redemption.

Humans also fell from the Garden of Paradise due to sin. However, the ultimate redemption awaits us. There will come a time when peace reigns upon the Earth, where lions and lambs will coexist peacefully, and cobras and children will live in harmony. How long have we endured the world’s violence and sadness?

God’s creation is all beautiful. It is not by a standard of worldly beauty at all. But by an essence of sacred worth that is sensed by the spirit. This is the root and heart of compassion to others and justice of the world. Beauty is the threshold to Divine Goodness and a door into radical compassion.

The worship series title comes from the language of Pseudo Dionysius, who described God as “Beguiled by Beauty.” He was a mystic in the 5th and 6th centuries. He thought that divine goodness fell in love with creation and so was compelled to bring it into being. The beauty of creation reveals the relationship between the divine goodness and the world. Through the doorway of beauty, we walk into the divine realm and begin to perceive creation more in the way God perceives it.

Imagine the smallest patch of land. It is home to countless beings – plants, animals, and those strange creatures that are neither or both. If we pause and calm our minds for a moment, the natural world can appear to us not merely in its aesthetic wonder – though this is important, but it appears to us as if a layer has been removed when we receive their being with inner eye.

The inner light of the trees, moss, ocean tides, stars, flowing water fall shine forth. This light reveals the truth of creation that they are beautiful and for this they were made. We too. We are created to be loved passionately by God. We should unlearn self-hatred, self-loathing rooted deeply in us, which is so prevalent in our world.

What is beautiful and sacred in human beings, the image of God in us, cannot be destroyed even in the world filled with violence and misery. It is still there hidden deep in nature and our soul. They are waiting to be revealed, healed, restored into the image that Jesus provides us. Holy Spirit is sealing our forehead with his Spirit. (according to the expression of revelation). We are on its way.

Slow down your life. Take a moment. Watch the moment. Watch nature. Watch people from an inner eye. Watch how the Holy Spirit nudges you. And enter into the moment with the Spirit. And stay there. This deep connection lets you breathe the fresh, reviving, and life-giving breath of God. This moment of abiding with the Spirit is called contemplation. It is a more receptive spiritual practice. It offers us a profound connection with the divine through silence, stillness, and attentive beholding of God's glory. Monks are familiar with doing this. We are called to live like monks, even though not always we can live like monks. By letting you remind the constant short prayers by the tool of prayer beads. Aimee made prayer bracelets, you can take one it will be in the basket outside.

When we love divine goodness more profoundly, we love the world with greater passion. When we love and care for the world, we are drawn deeper into divine reality—the realization that God is love, not just a magical being we are instructed to believe in. When we love one another more beautifully, we enter the divine realm, drawing closer to God's heart, and love is born. Our eyes are opened to the world around us. When we love God, we love people in the world more.

As Julian of Norwich, also a medieval mystic, states clearly that her religious experiences are only authentic if they “profit her fellow Christians.” So, the core part of contemplative way of life becomes radical compassion. It is saint's life's path, which means it is our life's path. Those who deeply abide in God, give their lives to others. Mother Theresa, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King Junior, etc. This is why the twin love commandments are really the same. The possibility of radical compassion arises as we deepen our relationship with God. Fruit of the Spirit comes to your life. What does your life produce? We can tell whether we are worshiping God or an idol by the fruits of our lives. Love and compassion? Or selfishness or hostility or cruelty?

Recently, I watched a documentary called 'Waste Land.' This remarkable film follows artist Vik Muniz. He was evaluated as second to Picasso. He wanted to change a group of people's lives through his artistic gift. So, he chose people, garbage pickers in Jardim Gramacho, the world's largest landfill located outside Rio de Janeiro. There, he collaborates with catadores—people who pick through garbage to collect recyclable materials. He interviewed some catadores. He invited them to be his models for his modern artwork. And he created breathtaking portraits made from the very materials they collect. Here are a couple of them.



What struck me most profoundly was the transformation that occurred when these garbage pickers saw themselves through the artist's eyes. When they recognized their own image captured in these works of art, something miraculous happened. They began to discover their own dignity and worth. One woman, who had spent decades sorting through others' discarded items, looked at her portrait and said, 'I never imagined I could be so beautiful.' Isn't this a powerful metaphor for our spiritual journey?

Like those catadores, we live in a fallen world. We were expelled from paradise and now live with the burden of survival that constantly demands our attention. The daily grind of life can make us forget the divine beauty with which we were created. We began to see ourselves as the world sees us—through the lens of our productivity, our status, our possessions—rather than as God sees us.

God sees us as beautiful and beloved. God restores us by paying God himself with mercy and compassion. By giving ourselves moments of entering the presence of God, our hearts are filled with more and more with the heart of God who radically loves us.

God protects us, provides us, and helps us to find the original beauty and image of God. God who saved us from the suffering of the world, sends us to the suffering world, where oppressor and oppressed are there together.

Radical compassion never imposes conditions that say some are worthy of compassion and others are not. God desires the oppressed are alleviated and redeemed from their suffering concretely in their life condition and by finding true beauty and meaning of their lives by joining the life of God. God desires the oppressors also to be transformed. And Radical compassion resists harmful acts but it also recognizes to do evil is itself paralyzed suffering that should be transformed.

The world is filled with overwhelming difficulty and crisis. It is almost impossible to bear the burdens of the world without making a deep connection to God. A life of prayer doesn't take us out of life; it deepens our experience of it. Connect to the reservoir of LOVE, God is waiting you there as much beloved children. When we receive God's love, and nourished as we should, we can share the passionate and compassionate love of God with the chaotic world.

We are on our way!