

The Art of Worship

A Celebration of the Arts

Scripture: Psalm 148; Revelation 4

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Some weeks ago when I knew we were going to have some especially beautiful artistic expressions in this service, I thought it would be appropriate to reflect a bit on an experience such as this where we are blessed, where we are exposed to beautiful artistic expression and to think about the art of worship. As I did that more particularly to the immediate preparation, I recognized that there is an art of worship in terms of the execution of the flow and the movement of it all. There is also the art in the worship, the concrete expressions which are the artistic gifts to the community. And so, for a few moments, think with me about the experience that we are having together about art and worship, and the art of worship.

I have to give you just a brief autobiographical sketch and that is that I was an absolute cultural barbarian in my youth. Out of a very wonderful and devout home that was pious and solid and full of love and grace such that I could not wish anything else, there was a total vacuum in terms of artistic exposure. No sense of the classical in art at all. And my father was a very serious and devout elder in the church in which I grew up, a very solid, stolid, provincial, parochial church with a Dutch ethnic flavor, of good peasant stock, by and large. To my father, being a serious elder, the finest sermon was the longest sermon on the shortest text, and I will reveal to you my own sickness as a child because I used to take a little notebook along so that at Sunday dinner I could render the theme, the text, and the three points of the sermon. There were always, of course, three points. The sermon, point one, point two, point three, and the application. I always embarrassed my older sisters by being able to whip it all off, but it was three hymns, two prayers, and a sermon. I even remember as a child some grumbling when the uppity organist (I've never seen one, but they can be that, I'm told) offered some Bach in place of the old favorite hymns. After all, if the old hymns were good enough for Jesus, they were good enough for us, too. So, that is the environment out of which I came.

Now, let me tell you about three experiences I had. One was about thirty-five years ago in Pittsburgh, an overnight during which I wandered downtown

Pittsburgh into a cathedral. I don't know what it was, Episcopal or Catholic, but it was a magnificent space. The sun was setting and the light was filtering through stained glass and the high vaulted arches, and it was a moment for me, I'm telling you about it thirty-five years later, it was the first time that I ever became aware that beauty could be the vehicle of the experience of the transcendent. It was a marked moment in my life. I didn't understand it then, but I experienced it then. It may have been because the church at which I was a pastor at the time had the ugliest sanctuary in North America. It had a flat ceiling and it was so big and when they needed more seats, they added chunk, and in order to hold up the roof, they put two metal poles in the middle of the aisle. They called them Aaron and Herr, because they upheld the arms of Moses as he was praying. It was an absolutely ugly place that was broader than it was deep, and you really had to be a good preacher to make it in that place, I'll tell you. Out of that experience I go to Pittsburgh and I have this Epiphany moment.

Some years later I was at McCormick Seminary at a seminar on the Apostles Creed and the great Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler said, "You know, you Presbyterian Reformed types always come at it through the head, the intellect, whereas the Catholic tradition comes at it through the senses, so that there is an intuitive grasping of the present reality of God. Smell and sight and touch - all of that which is the other path to God, and perhaps it is really the only path to God because God will not be known or experienced through rational deliberation. The mind simply breaks down at the point of the experience of God, at the holy and the sacred."

Well, light bulbs went on in my head. I who had been bred on the Heidelberg Catechism that says that God will not have God's people taught through stained glass windows with images and dumb idols, but rather by the lively preaching of the word, suddenly saw that there was no need to choose between the lively preaching of the word and all of the magnificence of that Catholic tradition which is so rich in its artistic and aesthetic dimension.

Then, in Leiden, the Netherlands a few years after that, I was wandering alone in the city where I had spent four years, and I wandered into the Hooglandse Kerk, a great old church that had been taken over by the Reformers in the sixteenth century from the Catholic tradition, and they scrubbed it clean of every sign of Catholic idolatry. And they had recently redone the church. There were clear glass windows, whitewashed walls, stone floor, and on a huge pillar hung a pulpit which screamed out of the Reformed tradition that it's the sermon, Baby! Around that pulpit there were folding chairs and it was sterile and the starkness of the sterility struck me, and I walked up the street and went into the one Catholic church in Leiden and felt like I was entering a warm womb. There with muted light and candles flickering and the chancel regaled with brass and gold and flowers, marble and granite - all of that inviting me in, embracing me, as it were, and the contrasting experience two blocks away reminded me of my Pittsburgh experience which I remembered sharply but had not reflected upon. But the

McCormick Seminary experience had been cause to reflect upon. Now with understanding I allowed myself to be invited in to that sacred and holy presence that was replete with such beautiful artistic expression. What I learned and what my experience has suggested to me is that the aesthetic is the vehicle for the experience of the holy. That beauty is the wing upon which the soul soars into the presence of God in such a way that no rational discourse can ever break the soul, because the presence of God is that which hits us at the subconscious level. It hits us in the depths of the soul. It is not a mind thing and it is not a head trip, for it blows the mind, the sacred and the Holy. Beauty and artistic expression is that which invites us into that experience.

As I was thinking about these things, I was reminded of an article somebody gave me some months ago, and I had not thought about it in terms of what I am talking about this morning at all, but it is the story about new vestments being introduced to St. Mary the Virgin's, an Episcopal Church on 46th Street in New York City, a half block from Times Square. They say of this church – known as "Smoky Mary's" for its liberal use of incense, the church officially described as Anglo-Catholic – that it is about as close to Rome as a Protestant church can get. Its service is intoxicatingly ornate and draws a wildly diverse congregation of New Yorkers, black and white and everything else, uptown, downtown, out of town. It goes on to talk about a young man, Patrick Bowlin, who was a dressmaker, and who captured this vocation of making vestments and is totally committed to it and delighting in it. He made these vestments at Smoky Mary's. Frank Griswold, the head Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and two deacons stand regaled in absolutely magnificent vestments, gold and yellow silk, and on and on, but the fascinating thing to me as the story went on talking about vestments in terms of that about which we are talking today, one person is quoted as saying that it represents a real return to what we call the sacramentals, and he says the bare-bones, the Bible kind of thing, is not feeding the senses, so what you see is the church trying to appeal to the senses in the best sense of the word. They realize that liturgy and vestments are a way to inflame the senses, and these make another path to God.

I thought, that is exactly what I am trying to say. A worship filled with artistic expression, with appointments, space, with care given to every detail, and then to inflame the senses in order that, through inflamed senses, we might find a path to God, for I am convinced that it is the aesthetic dimension that can best introduce us to the presence of God.

It is a tricky area. There are diverse people and diverse cultures and diverse religious traditions, and we are talking about style and taste, and there can be a lot of arguments about this, but I want to give a word for the kind of experience that we have cultivated here over the years and continue to cultivate. Not that it is the only way. When I watch late-night TV, I see what Harvey Cox says in his book,

Fire From Heaven, that Pentecostalism is sweeping the globe and when I see hands raised and eyes glazed over, people in another dimension, I have to admit that that is so foreign to me, yet I don't want to denigrate it, although I do feel somewhat like the story of the gentleman who was about three rows from the back who said, "Amen!" as the preacher was speaking. Five minutes later, another "Amen!" a little louder, and the usher came up and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Sir," and the man said, "I've got religion!" The usher said, "You didn't get it here."

Now, not to denigrate it, but to acknowledge a wide spectrum of opinion and taste and style. Nonetheless, I want to say that the aesthetic dimension can be that vehicle, that means by which the soul is lifted into the presence of God, and again, more than the intellectual discourse of the pulpit, it is the being "washed over" by that beauty, that beautiful expression in any one of its forms that allows us almost subconsciously to experience the holy and the sacred and God.

Dorothee Solle, a German theologian, activist, has written a book recently about mysticism and her own quest, and she said, "I have two women friends who recently left for the Catholic Church and I don't approve of that. I don't believe anyway in these divisions among churches and why would they go to the Roman Catholic Church that says no to women, no to humane sexuality and no to intellectual freedom?" Then she says that, in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, they found God, and isn't that what we all are seeking, finally, the kind of experience that would leave us, on occasion, limp, the kind of experience that would enable us to go out, perhaps not making any rational statement about the experience, but just that something had washed over us that had renewed and restored us. I don't know, I don't want to say this in opposition to intelligent and mindful religion.

The best statement of it – I have it in the insert for you; you can read it when you go home – by John Knox, the English theologian in his little *Christology*, where he says that symbols can lose their power sometimes because the symbol no longer grasps us with its truth claim; the truth no longer resonates in us. Then he says *the heart cannot long rest in what the mind finds false*. But, he goes on to say, "I'm not setting the mind and the heart over against each other, *but the mind in its quest comes finally to the experience that blows the mind*." It is not as though it is a bypass of the mind or the understanding. What we do here is not without intelligible design.

It is just that what we are seeking here must move us beyond our mind's limits so that the mind is expanded and stretched, literally, until our minds are blown with the glory and the presence of God, and that kind of worship is more than simply fulfilling the Sunday obligation. That becomes something for which one hungers and thirsts. You can test it by whether or not in the experience of it there is a sense of human wholeness and humane existence that lodges in your soul and whether going out you are marked by the fruit of the Spirit which is love and joy

and peace and longsuffering and gentleness and patience and kindness. As we come together, this assembly demands artful worship full of beautiful art in order that our soul may have wings to soar into the presence where the angels chant, "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty! Heaven and earth are full of your glory."