

Revelation 5:11-14 (NRSV)

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” ¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” ¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

The Cathedral of the Food Court

A thousand years ago Prince Vladimir the Great, the pagan King of Kiev, was looking for a new religion to unify the Russian people. Toward this end Prince Vladimir sent out envoys to investigate the great faiths from the neighboring realms. When the delegations returned, they gave the prince their reports. Some had discovered religions that were dour and austere. Others encountered faiths that were abstract and theoretical. But the envoys who investigated Christianity in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople reported finding a faith characterized by such transcendent beauty that they did not know if they were in heaven or on earth. Their report shared:

Then we went to Constantinople, and they led us to the place where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or earth, for on earth there is no such vision nor beauty, and we do not know how to describe it; we only know that God dwells among men. We cannot forget that beauty.

Upon receiving the report from the Constantinople delegation of the unearthly beauty they had witnessed in Christian worship, Prince Vladimir adopted Christianity as the new faith for the Russian people. What impressed the envoys and persuaded Prince Vladimir to embrace the Christian faith was not its logic or its reasoning or its ethics, but rather its aesthetics—its beauty. Nine hundred

years later, the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky coined the enigmatic expression, “beauty will save the world.” What he meant by this has been a matter of much conjecture, but I think it must have been drawn from the deep well of his Christian faith.

The first sermon at any church is always rife with anticipation and expectation. Who is this unfamiliar person standing in our familiar pulpit? First sermons are almost always to some extent, autobiographical. What is my story and where do our stories find commonality as we begin to serve in ministry with one another? So let me begin by saying that the Church has always been a huge part of my life. I grew up in the church, a highly liturgical Lutheran church at that. My dad was a volunteer organist, playing at church since he was sixteen—offering his gifts and his time for sixty-six years, until his hearing and eventually his Alzheimer’s wouldn’t allow him to continue.

Along the way, he took several classes on theology, the Old and New Testaments, and pastoral care, he was commissioned as a deacon and would often lead worship for a small congregation about 45 minutes away in Elizabethton where he would not only preach but also play the hymns. My mom was always involved with children’s and hospitality ministries making sure that Sunday school and nursery were covered and would provide leadership for after-funeral meals and receptions. Needless to say, it seemed that my childhood was based on the three corners of home, school, and church—and, if we weren’t at one of them, it seemed that we were at least enroute.

I distinctly remember helping dad change the vacuum tubes on the first church organ before going solid state—the tubes offering an eerie orange glow that I found a bit intimidating at that young age. I also remember how dad despised wearing a tie and, when he ascended the organ bench, he would clip his tie on his dress shirt pocket and then take off his shoes where he would play the organ pedals sock-footed. It probably was a good thing that the organ was in the balcony behind the congregation where no one could see him wince when he hit a wrong chord. It was quite comical when I look back on it—dad was the original “phantom of the choir loft.”

I was never much of an athlete, but I did like to sing. I think music was what drew me to the worship experience. Standing in the pews and singing between my parents on Sundays that dad wasn't playing—mom's soft soprano and dad's more boisterous tenor, are some of the earliest memories that I have. I was especially fond of what I called "alleluia hymns" that we would sing on Easter Sunday and throughout the following season. For me, what brought me to church—beside mom and dad's insistence that my brother and I would go with them—wasn't so much the preaching I encountered or the creeds we recited each Sunday, but rather it was the joy I felt when we sang the great hymns of faith, the repetition of the chanting of the morning Psalm—often in minor keys, the smell of the candles, the colors of the paraments on the altar, the themes of the banners adorning the worship space, all leading to the sense that there indeed is something beyond the physical that was inexplicable and mysterious but also present and compelling. Something that must be taken on faith...

Today there are many in the Western world who are searching for some sort of spirituality to give them what materialism, the de facto religion of our age, promises but is unable to deliver. The gods of the Enlightenment have proved wanting, and like Prince Vladimir, many are in search of a new understanding of faith. The Western church is the direct heir to the Scientific Revolution. Thus, we have been tempted to respond to this renewed spiritual interest by supplying logical arguments for the truth of Christianity—which is what we mean by the term "apologetics." We have also made the case for our faith through "ethics"—highlighting the moral goodness of the Gospel. Now certainly, these are fine ways of presenting ourselves to the world, but it seems that something is missing. What about beauty? What about aesthetics? Is it possible that what Prince Vladimir found most persuasive about Christianity in the tenth century and what the character Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, is the very thing that could draw a new generation of spiritual seekers to faith in Jesus Christ and maybe to our church family here at Main Street United Methodist Church?

To a skeptical world we are generally more accustomed to defending the Christian faith in terms of truth and goodness. But beauty also belongs to Christianity as well. Beauty has a way of sneaking past our defenses and speaking to us in

unique ways. To a generation of people suspicious of truth claims and the institutions that purvey them, and who are often unconvinced by moral assertions, beauty has a surprising allure. When we think about the Gospel story, everything about Jesus Christ is beautiful. His life, his miracles, his teaching—even his ignominious death on the cross and most certainly his resurrection—evoke feelings of awe and wonder. A Christian faith that is deeply enchanted by Christ’s beauty and thus formed and fashioned by this beauty may present an aspect of the Gospel that we don’t always give its due. Where truth and goodness fail to win an audience, beauty may once again captivate and draw those whom it enchants into the kingdom of saving grace. The Gospel is breathtakingly beautiful when we allow it to shine through our words, actions, and witness to the world.

On November 13, 2010, the eighty-voice Chorus of Niagara from Niagara Falls, Ontario, gave a performance of the famous “Hallelujah Chorus” from Georg Frederick Handel’s sacred choral work, *The Messiah*. Now this wouldn’t be particularly noteworthy except that it was given as a surprise performance in the food court of the local Seaway Mall. The unsuspecting shoppers didn’t see it coming. It was just another busy lunch hour in the food court at the mall. A young woman with a cell phone pressed to her ear stood up and began to sing. While folks were trying to figure out what was going on, she was joined by a man, who moments earlier, was enjoying a roast beef sandwich from Arby’s. Then what appeared to be a mall custodian added his voice to the chorus. Eventually all eighty voices of the choir performed a stunning rendition of Handel’s masterpiece. The shoppers in the food court are stunned. They realized something special was happening. Some captured the performance on their cell phones. Others rose to join in the time-honored tradition of standing for the “Hallelujah Chorus.” Others simply sat with faces full of wonder, while others wiped away tears. All were witness to this miracle in the mall, the banality of a shopping mall food court transformed into a cathedral of astonishing beauty.

A local photographer recorded the surprise performance and posted it online. Within weeks it had been viewed tens of millions of times! So why all the interest in this spontaneous “stunt?” Maybe that which makes the video so amusing is

also what makes it so compelling. The juxtaposition of high art in a shopping mall, the surprise of sacred music in a food court is an incongruence that has a strange effect on us. Maybe it's because, given all the technology, security, prosperity, and convenience we have at our fingertips, we have a deep-seated fear within us that we are losing everything that inspires beauty. With this latent fear lurking in our subconscious, a choir appearing out of nowhere and performing sacred Baroque music in a public place is a beautiful thing, not unlike the surprise performance of the angels to the shepherds that Luke records in his account of Jesus' birth as captured so regally in the King James version:

And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Maybe this is a posture that we as the Church can take. Instead of angry protesters shaking our fists at the secular culture around us, might we become joyful singers transforming the secular with the sacred. Instead of alienated separatists sequestered in close Christian enclaves, might we transform shopping malls and food courts into cathedrals by our beautiful song. If we can lay down our frustration and our anxiety long enough and joyfully sing the melody of Christ in the malls of meaningless that we find all around us, we can perhaps astonish our weary world with the beauty of the Gospel. You see, our task isn't to protest the world into a certain moral conformity, but to attract the world to the saving beauty of Jesus who leads us into new life, one that he calls, abundant.

The Western church has had a four-century experiment with viewing salvation in a scientific, rational, mechanistic manner, presenting it as a plan, a system, a formula. Follow the Roman Road. Adopt these principles. Assent to this blueprint for a better life. But might we consider the alternative: viewing salvation not as a logical system to be acquired but rather seeing faith as a piece of art or as a song to be sung. As we heard in our Scripture reading this morning, the Book of Revelation from which Handel found the lyrics for his "Hallelujah Chorus" doesn't have any plans or systems or formulas but does have lots of songs. There is worship throughout this final book of the Bible. The heavenly

host sings, the elders sing, the innumerable members of the worshipping throng offer their praises to God through song. The task of the Church is to sing the songs of the Lamb creatively and faithfully in a world that was originally founded on beauty, as the Creation stories in the first book of the Bible share—a world that has been distorted by human greed, arrogance, and violence. Instead of being purveyors of pragmatic plans, maybe we are called to be vocalists or instrumentalists in a vast, transcendent symphony, one to which Creation itself lends its voice and its beauty. Maybe it's partly because of how we view God as a manager or a clerk maintaining the ledgers of life, that we've been unable to see God as a composer, deftly blending melody and harmony, with wind and stringed instruments, drums and percussion, and a multitude of voices from across time—much like the worship found in our text this morning.

Indeed, sin and distortion have stolen from us the song we were meant to sing with the Creator and all of creation itself. When we are bereft of beauty and missing the melody, we are left with little more than the inane Muzak of the mall of meaninglessness. Frederick Nietzsche was on to something when he said, “Without music, life would be a mistake.” And so, it is into the cacophony and chaos of our sinful world that the Son of God comes singing his song of God's saving grace—a song that first announces itself as beautiful. Says God at the beginning of the Son's ministry— “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The Singer starts small, inviting a couple of working-class folks, some fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, and a few others. After his death, resurrection, and ascension, that song continues through the breath of the Spirit at Pentecost where three thousand people were immediately caught up in the chorus. And from generation to generation, that same Singer invites us to join him in his song. It is an invitation to find forgiveness and freedom from sin. To join the Son of God in singing his beautiful song is to find the melody of grace that can save our soul. Perhaps this is what Dostoevsky meant when he prophetically said, “beauty will save the world.” Ultimately, it will be Christ's beauty that will save the world. American poet Walt Whitman offers these words that seem to have been written just for this moment:

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd),

After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,

*After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemists, the
geologist, ethnologist—*

Finally, shall come the poet worthy of that name,

The true Son of God shall come singing his songs.

As we embark on this great adventure together here at Main Street, may our voices be clear, our hearts ring true, and our story stream with the light, the love, and the beauty of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.