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Editor's Note

On the cover is a picture of a mended teacup, the fissures filled with gold. This is the ancient Japanese art form of *Kintsugi*. Broken tea ware, unusable as fragments, is carefully repaired with Japanese lacquer and gold to make the pottery not only useable again, but now, even more beautiful and valuable than before. For the Christian imagination, *Kintsugi* can evoke central themes of our redemption—brokenness and restoration, creation and new creation. Artist Makoto Fujimura has explored these connections, even speaking of a kind of *Kintsugi* theology:

The Christian Gospel, or the Good News, begins with the awareness of our brokenness. The Fall created a schism between humanity and God caused by our desire to become like gods. Christ came not to “fix” us, not just to restore, but to make us a new creation. . . . The biblical vision of the new world accompanies the reminders of the wounds of Christ. The resurrected Christ still bears the wounds of the crucifixion. Through these sacred wounds a new world is born; through the revealing of the wounds still imbedded in the new body of Christ, our faith is given. (*Art and Faith*, 45)

Likewise, St. Paul will talk about himself and indeed all Christians as plain earthen vessels which nevertheless carry within a bright and inexpressible treasure—the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Broken and weakened through suffering, our bodies show the death of Jesus . . . but they also show his life! Precisely through our fissures the light of this life shines, our weakness now his strength, our failings now filled with his precious forgiveness and grace.

When it comes to beauty and art, the Christian embraces this duality of the broken and the mended, of the new creation breaking into the old fallen world. Art and beauty are testimonies to this duality—they involve fallen creatures and fallen creation and yet they shine with an eternal glint, the golden traces of hope. Mary wasted a costly perfume on a dead man, but Jesus’s resurrection transformed her act—already then, at his word, it was deemed beautiful.

Last fall we held our 31st Theological Symposium and devoted it to the theme of beauty. The essays in this issue come from that symposium. David Schmitt opened the symposium with a plenary that gave us a creedal framework for considering the relationship between beauty and faith. As we have come to expect from our colleague,

it was an immensely helpful and insightful presentation and so we offer it here to our readers for further reflection. Similarly for one of our sectionals, Rev. James Wetzstein, university pastor at Valparaiso University, considered some categories to experience and use beauty as a work of love for the neighbor, revisiting especially the work of Rudolf Otto and his classic, *The Idea of the Holy*. In a final essay, I bring together a few observations about C. S. Lewis and the role that beauty played in his life and thought.

We hope that the warmth of the summer gives you some rest, some restoration, and perhaps a few glimmers of gold.

Erik H. Herrmann
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Concordia Seminary PhD Dissertation Synopsis, 2022

Curran Bishop (Adviser: Rev. Dr. David Schmitt)

Rev. Curran's dissertation is entitled, *The Personalization of American Christianity: Subjective Assurance and the Puritan Conversion Narrative*. This dissertation offers a multi-generational study of the New England way. It argues that the need to give an account of one's conversion in order to be received into communing membership in the New England churches contributed to contested debates and controverted practices spanning generations of ministry. Ultimately, the New England Way fostered a robust development of the doctrine of assurance in the Reformed tradition that continues to inform the personalization of American Christianity today.

James Fickenscher (Adviser: Rev. Dr. James Voelz)

Rev. Fickenscher's dissertation is entitled, *A Rank-based Analysis of Word Order and Codification in the Greek of the Pastoral Epistles*. In his comprehensive study of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus (the Pastoral Epistles), James Fickenscher establishes a profile of Paul's Greek, that is, a complete description of Paul's language in the original. To do this, he looked, not at select words and linguistic structures, but at every word and structure. This dissertation will be the foundation for all future studies in these three Pauline letters.

Noppawat "Elvis" Kumpeeroskul (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Thomas Egger)

Mr. Kumpeeroskul's dissertation is entitled, *Exodus 18: Its Literary Unity and its Key Transitional Role in the Exodus Narrative*. Exodus Chapter 18 recounts the meeting of Moses with his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, at Mount Sinai, after God has delivered Israel from Egypt and brought them through the wilderness. This dissertation makes a compelling case that this chapter functions as the key transitional midpoint of the Exodus narrative, highlighting the two different ways in which God reveals himself in the book, and highlighting especially the Exodus theme that God desires to be known and worshipped by people of all nations.

Editor's note

These scholars received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Concordia Seminary's Commencement exercises on May 20, 2022. Fuller descriptions of their dissertations are available at concordiatheology.org.

Ernest Mahoro (Adviser: Rev. Dr. William Schumacher)

Rev. Mahoro's dissertation is entitled, *Socio-Political and Economic Paradigm Shift in Rwanda: Did Colonial-era Missionary Schools Fuel Ethnic Hatred?* Church leaders, politicians, and scholars continue to debate the causes of the devastating 1994 Rwanda Genocide. European colonial powers and Christian missionaries exploited, but did not originate, pre-existing tension between Rwanda's people groups: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. This study focuses on the priorities and goals of missionary schools, which played a crucial role in 20th century Rwanda. The results of the research suggest new paths for Christian education that can help build a more peaceful Rwandan society.

Brian Mosemann (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Charles Arand)

Rev. Mosemann's dissertation is entitled, *Theology of the Laity: The Lutheran Way*. Is it possible to speak about clergy and laity without one being elevated over the other or emphasized at the expense of the other? Brian Mosemann proposes that instead of defining laity over and against the definition of clergy, we define the laity by what they are in Christ, namely, Christians through Baptism. Beginning here gives positive content to our understanding of people in the pews by emphasizing Christ's gifts to them. Some of these Christians are then called to exercise Christ's priestly office for the sake of the church.

Tibebu Teklu Senbetu (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Joel Elowsky)

Rev. Senbetu's dissertation is entitled, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's Interpretation of ἌΝΑΞΙΩΣ in 1 Cor. 11:27–29 in Relation to Worthy Admission to the Eucharist in Light of Ritual Jewish Purity Laws Embedded in its Qeddassé and Tradition*. This dissertation explores the influence of ritual purity laws on the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's understanding of worthy participation in the Sacrament reflected in the history of exegesis of Ethiopian texts commenting on 1 Cor. 11:27. The *Qeddassé*, *Fetha Negaste*, *Ademta Commentary* and other Ethiopian historical and liturgical texts evidence a profound influence from early church fathers who often based their exegesis on these Old Testament prescriptions, attempting to incorporate them into the New Testament church practices with the perhaps unintended consequence of restricting participation in the Eucharist.

Christoph Weber (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Timothy Dost)

Rev. Weber's dissertation is entitled, *Reading the Signs of the Time: Three Voices in the Confessional Lutheran Church as They Relate to Segregation, Racism, and Apartheid in South Africa from 1900-1978*. This dissertation details the role of three prominent Lutheran theologians, Karl Meister, Herrmann Sasse and Friedrich Hopf and their relationship to the struggle with apartheid among South African Lutherans from

the early twentieth century to the 1960s. This represents a significant contribution to understanding and appreciating the issues of race, nationality, colonial pressures and human dignity during a sensitive period in the history of the church and also highlights the roles of the church and her theologians in advancing fairness and fundamental human rights in social and political spheres.

Charles Westby (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Joel Okamoto)

Rev. Westby's dissertation is entitled, *How Speech Act Theory Can Help Address Problems in Theology and Church Posed by Modern Philosophy*. Conservative Christian theology is usually thought to be defending Christian witness and teaching against undue influences. In this dissertation, Charles Westby shows how modern philosophical idealism has subtly shaped the methods and aims of conservative theology, focusing on the well-known American evangelical theologian Carl Henry. Westby uses the theory of speech acts to trace out idealism's influence in Henry's theology. Westby also uses speech-act theory to make clear how Christian theology can help contemporary Christians more faithfully to proclaim and live according to the gospel.

Theological Observer

A Proposal to Replace the Term “Monotheism” with “Miatheism”

I attended a Society for Biblical Literature section a few years ago (maybe it was as many as ten years ago, now that I think about it) where there was a session entitled: “Do Jews, Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God? The three great monotheistic religions were represented by three important theologians: Islam was represented by Vincent Cornell, Judaism by Baruch Levine, and Christianity by Martin Marty.

I was not surprised to find out from the three panel participants that their answer to the question was: Yes. In the spirit of the age in which we find ourselves, one could hardly expect any other answer. Over the years this has caused me to ponder one of the theological terms we take for granted as appropriate—the term “monotheism.” We often refer to Christianity as monotheistic because it connotes the idea of the worship of one God in accord with Deuteronomy 6:4, the great Shema: “Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is ONE.”

The fourth-century Cappadocians were often accused of worshipping *three* Gods because of the treatises defending the Trinity. Gregory of Nyssa even wrote a treatise entitled “On Not Three Gods” to try to make it as clear as possible that Trinitarian Christians do not worship three Gods, but one God. Pagans and Jews, and later on Muslims, have all leveled the charge against Trinitarian Christians, that we are tri-theists or polytheists, for that matter.

Franz Pieper addresses this in the first volume of his dogmatics (p. 388), explaining that Judaism is monotheistic, but since they do not believe that Christ is God they do not have the true God. Athanasius made the same argument about the Arians in the fourth century, referring to them as a Jewish heresy because of their rejection of Christ as God. The Muslims, too, are monotheistic, but they too reject the “only-begotten One,” having inscribed that very rejection on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

So what’s the problem? I won’t get into all the details of the argument of the panel I mentioned at the beginning. They all point to the common source of the Old Testament, which Jews, Christians, and Muslims all share to varying degrees as the reason we all worship the same God. You can read more about their solution, if you like, in the book *Do Jews, Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?* (by Jacob Neusner, Baruch Levine, Bruce Chilton, Vincent Cornell, with an epilogue by Martin Marty, published by Abingdon Press, 2012).

The Trinity remains one of those perennial doctrines that people, including Christians, get wrong, even renowned theologians. Perhaps part of the problem lies in our terminology. I have a modest proposal. Instead of Christians referring to themselves as “monotheists,” we refer to ourselves as “miatheists.” You can probably do a Google search and find someone who has thought of this before me. It came to me after cogitating on a conference I helped organize on Early African Christianity back in 2007 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In attendance was Metropolitan Bishoy who represented one of the most ancient churches of Africa, the Coptic Church of Egypt.

I had met him in Cairo and we became friends (I have the cross that he blessed people with in my office). He was Metropolitan of Damietta, Kafr El-Sheikh and the Monastery of Saint Demiana (for nuns), Barrari, Belkas, Egypt. Before we were able to proceed, his Eminence asked to make an apology for the Coptic Church which he felt had been misrepresented in the Christian world for centuries. Metropolitan Bishoy insisted that the Coptic Church had been slandered in being called a Monophysite church. He agreed that monophysitism was a heresy justly condemned in the church. But the Coptic Church, he insisted, was not monophysite, but miaphysite. You say *tomayto*, I say *tomahto*, you might think. Not so, said Metropolitan Bishoy (Ok, he didn't say *tomayto/tomahto* but his point was similar). He explained that the fifth-century Coptic Bishop Cyril of Alexandria's use of the term “mia” (which he thought was from Athanasius but perhaps had unwittingly been borrowed from Apollinaris who was later condemned) allowed for a composite single nature that was made up of humanity and divinity, whereas “mono” only allowed for a singular, simple nature, un-composite. Therefore, Coptic Miaphysites are not heretics, because they allow for a composite single nature of Christ that is fully human, fully divine. After twenty minutes of explanation, he convinced us we were all using the wrong term for the Coptic Church, and I have striven to refer to the Egyptian church as Miaphysites ever since.

Perhaps a similar corrective is needed in how we talk about Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Islam and Judaism are, indeed, monotheistic religions. The God of the Jews and of Muslims is a singular God, allowing for no composite nature. The God of the Christians, on the other hand, has always been a triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet we do not worship three gods, but one God. We baptize in the Name (singular) of the three persons (plural): Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are one God. We hold to both Deuteronomy 6:4 and Matthew 28:19. In this sense, we are miatheists, not monotheists. Such terminology would help to differentiate us from Jews and Muslims and the God they worship. We worship one God in three persons. They do not. This is why the answer to the question “Do, Muslims, Jews, and Christians Worship the Same God?” must be No. Neither Muslims, nor Jews worship Jesus or the Holy Spirit, although they no doubt respect them, in one way or another.

Having been surfing the waters of the early church for the last thirty years or so,

I am loathe to use neologisms. But I'm wondering if the time might be right, in an era when important differences are being glossed over concerning the Trinity, to make an exception and start using the term "miateists" and "miateism." So then, there would be two great monotheistic religions, and one miateistic religion. I most likely have not anticipated all the misuses the term might bring. We might have to dust off Gregory of Nyssa's treatise against those who would say we worship three gods. But in this day and age, "monotheism" isn't working either because we do not worship the same God as Muslims and Jews. If nothing else, perhaps we can start a conversation.

Joel Elowsky

Articles

Holy Wonder

The Experience of Beauty and Credal Contemplation

David R. Schmitt



David R. Schmitt is the Gregg H. Benidt Memorial Professor of Homiletics and Literature at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He is professor of practical theology and chair of the practical department. His interests and

areas of expertise include preaching, the intersections of faith and culture, particularly literary culture, spiritual autobiography, and the devotional life. He is the editor of the new Conversations in Preaching Series.

Beauty has a way of catching our attention. It surprises us. It opens for us a world where aesthetic experience is central to the formation of meaning. In this article, I would like to consider a way to contemplate the experience of beauty. By joining the dynamics of beauty and the commonplaces of the creed, I hope to explore one way of integrating theology and the arts.

My focus is not on theological aesthetics or tracing the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime. Rather, I have more pedestrian interests. I am interested in how we might cultivate a way of being that includes the experience of beauty in the life of faith. When a reader of Scripture encounters a turn of phrase that is beautiful, when a participant in worship is struck by a moment of splendor, when a servant in the world is overcome by an element of wonder, how can we respond? What are the forms of a faithful subjectivity that includes the aesthetic? My words here are not definitive but exploratory and my ends are not prescriptions of what must be done but descriptions of what can be done with the hope that we will not miss the moments of beauty in our world but be led by them into holy wonder.

Editor's note

A version of this article was presented in 2021 at the 31st Annual Theological Symposium, Whatever is Lovely: The Role of Beauty in Theology and Ministry.

I'd like to start in an odd place. The battlefield . . . where, in the midst of the blood and the mutilated bodies, there are moments of rare beauty . . . at least, that is, according to Homer. When Homer composed *The Iliad*, he had moments when the forward progression of the battle would slow down and suddenly you would be taken into the wonder of the warrior.

Literary scholars have long known about these moments. They have even given them a name. *Aristeia*. The moment when a warrior appears in rare form. These moments pay attention to details. You see the silver clasp that the warrior uses to fasten the armor on his legs. As he lifts the breastplate, you see swirls of color. The cobalt blue and the brilliant gold. Only after he straps the breastplate on do you see the snakes. Three snakes on either side. Intertwining in iridescent rainbows toward his face.¹ The *aristeia* is the moment that the warrior arises. He dresses for battle, he fights, he falls, he rises, and he fights again, to kill or be killed . . . but always to be remembered. To be remembered for this one brief shining moment. His *aristeia*, his excellence, praiseworthiness. For this rare moment of beauty on a battlefield.

What Homer does to the battlefield is what the apostle Paul does to our world. Consider Paul's letter to the Philippians. "Whatever is lovely . . . think about these things" (Phil 4:8). In writing to the Philippians, Paul has asked them to keep their eyes open. *Σκοπέω*. He has asked them to pay careful attention to the people who follow his example (Phil 3:17). Now, however, at the end of his letter, Paul asks them to open their eyes even wider. He expands their vision to encompass the world. "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely . . . think about these things" (Phil 4:8). Paul breaks open our world for moments of splendor, excellence, beauty. Notice that Paul does not walk his readers through an art museum. He does not seat them in the silence of a concert hall. He doesn't even have them kneel in the splendor of a gothic cathedral. No. He leaves them in the world that God has created, where they are immersed in the daily affairs of life, but he encourages them to see that life is filled with moments of excellence, of beauty, of that which is praiseworthy, and encourages them to think about such things.

Paul knows that, in this world, we are surrounded by moments of *aristeia*. The *aristeia* of God. God breaks through our daily experience, and we discover something beautiful and see that it is good. Paul calls us to attend to such moments and I would like to consider how we do that. In this article, I'd like to answer two questions: (1) what is an experience of beauty? and (2) how do we think about such things?

Notice the order. I'd like to begin with the experience ("whatever is lovely") and then move to reflection ("think about such things"). I point this out because we tend to do it the other way around. That is, we tend to think first, and then, after we have thought about it, turn our attention to beauty. This would be approaching beauty as ornamentation.² First, we use reason and God's word to arrive at the truth we need to teach, defend, and confess. Then, we consider the beautiful. First, we build the house

and then we choose the paint colors. First, we write the book and then we consider the cover. We first do the hard work of establishing what something means and then we consider how to make that meaning beautiful.

When we approach beauty as ornamentation, beauty is considered last. That is, we add beauty on at the end. We do this because what is important is not so much the experience of beauty but rather the teaching or truth or activity that beauty adorns. In this case, beauty is not essential. It is frivolous. Beauty is something added on at the end. Even though beauty is considered frivolous, it is also something that we carefully evaluate. After all, beauty has the power to distract people from the point we are trying to make. Poetry can be too artfully ambiguous, and people can lose sight of what you are teaching. Music can be too passionately powerful and distract people from the words that they are singing. So, beauty is something we approach with caution. In this approach, beauty is frivolous. It is expendable. It is not necessary. And it should only be considered after you have figured everything else out.

But that is not the only way to approach beauty. Instead of being a frivolous end, beauty can be a fruitful beginning. Beauty can be something more than ornamentation. It can be an invitation to exploration. At least, that is how God uses the experience of beauty in Scripture.

In the gospel of Mark, it is two days before the Passover and Jesus is eating at the house of Simon the leper. A woman comes with an alabaster flask of ointment, pure nard, very costly. She breaks the flask and pours the ointment over his head. The moment is extraordinary. Jesus calls it noble, beautiful (Mk 14:6). Notice the dynamics of beauty in this account. Mark does not tell us what the woman was thinking. He doesn't tell us the teaching that we are to understand first and then give us this experience of beauty. No. Mark wants us to be surprised. Mark wants us to experience this moment of beauty as an invitation to exploration. The disciples see what this woman has done, consider it economically, and declare it a waste. They consider this moment of beauty through the lens of piety and declare it unholy: "this money could have been given to the poor." But Jesus looks at this moment of beauty prophetically and says, "she has anointed me for my burial." This is her *aristeia*, her moment of beauty, always to be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed. A beautiful moment when an unholy waste was turned into holy wonder and the one who would die like a criminal smelled like a king.

So, what is the experience of beauty and how can we think about such things?

The Experience of Beauty

Recently, in literary studies, there has been interest in neuroaesthetics. Neuroaesthetics is the use of neuroscience to study aesthetic experiences.³ It makes sense that literary scholars would be interested in beauty. In literature, reading and the imagination are woven together in moments of experience that defy explanation. Whether it be in the

lines of poetry or in the pages of a novel, readers discover a beauty beyond explanation. What happens when you read a poem and think that it is beautiful? Emily Dickinson once wrote to Thomas Higginson, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry.”⁴ Now, instead of just taking off the top of your head, scholars are using the tools of neuroscience to look inside.

While there are several scholars writing in this field, I would like to share with you the research of Gabrielle Starr and Edward Vessel. Gabrielle Starr was a professor of English at New York University when she paired up with Edward Vessel who was a research scientist at the New York University’s Center for Brain Imaging. They set out to study the differences of people’s responses to art and Starr published the results of their work in *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience*. Their study walks that perennial fault line in discussions of beauty: the division between objective and subjective analyses of beauty. Are there objective standards that can be discerned that reveal what is beautiful to all people in all places for all time or is beauty only in the eye of the beholder, so that different people from different cultures and different times approach different things as beautiful? What Starr and Vessel sought to do was analyze the different kinds of experiences of beauty that can happen within a medium, such as art. So, they gathered artwork for people to see. They did not choose well-known pieces. They gathered art from a broad spectrum of time, from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, from a broad spectrum of cultures, both Western and Eastern, and from a broad spectrum of styles, both representational and abstract. And they showed this art through a series of images to people who were in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner that measured blood flow in the brain. The people then would respond and mark whether they found the image to be beautiful or not on a four-point scale.⁵

What they found was very interesting. As they expected there was no universal experience of beauty among the external objects they chose. In fact, every piece of art that was shown was rated beautiful by some and not beautiful by others.⁶ So, they were able to differentiate between different kinds of experiences of external beauty. Interestingly, while they did not find unity among the external objects that people saw as beautiful, they did find internal unity in the experience of beauty. When they looked at what was happening in the brain, they discovered there was an internal unity to what was happening to the people. Regardless of the differences between the objects that evoked experiences of beauty, the internal mapping of the experience in the brain was similar. While there was diversity in the external objects of beauty, there was similarity in the internal experiences of beauty.⁷

Starr and Vessel discovered that experiences of beauty tended to activate the default mode network in the brain. The default mode network is “a network of brain regions typically found to be suppressed when observers engage in externally oriented tasks.”⁸ That is, when you are engaged in an external activity, such as mowing the

lawn or cooking or research, the default mode network is suppressed. You focus on the external activity. When the default mode network is activated, however, you are involved in internal activity. So, for example, you are cutting the grass and, while you are mowing the lawn, you start thinking about your relationship with your son. For a moment you are daydreaming. You think about that relationship, and it is as if you are “in another world.” When you come to, you realize you have cut half of the front lawn, but you don’t remember doing it. You were in another world. Individuals who experienced moments of beauty in the fMRI noted the lack of awareness of the pounding of the fMRI.⁹ The art transported them to another place.

Not only does the default mode network help us feel transported, but it also leads us into a deeply personal experience. According to Vessel, the default mode network is related to the neurological basis of the self. It is the place of self-referential processing.¹⁰ We remember events of the past, weaving them together in memoir and autobiography. We process emotions, reflect on character traits, imagine our relationships with others, and envision the future. Such experiences can be intensely personal.¹¹

Finally, they can be transforming. As Gabrielle Starr argues, this evocation of deeply personal experience can lead to a restructuring of value and new configurations of knowledge.¹² Beauty is a mystery that can lead to new discoveries. Hence, the almost cavalier attitude of the apostle Paul. He doesn’t spend time defining beauty. He simply says, “whatever is lovely . . . think about such things.” Why? Because whatever is lovely has the power to change your world.

That is what the experience of beauty looks like theoretically: it transports us in a deeply personal way that can be transforming. Have you ever experienced beauty in your life? Perhaps that moment you watched you baby daughter fall asleep, holding your finger?

Years ago, I was walking down Delmar Boulevard in University City. I was in graduate school at Washington University, and I was meeting some other graduate students at Blueberry Hill. As I was walking down the sidewalk, I passed by a storefront and almost ran into a customer. He was coming out of the door just as I was walking past. He was an older man, bent forward, wearing a tattered tweed overcoat. I thought he was drunk. I almost hit him. But when I made it past him, something hit me. I was slapped in the face with a smell. I was expecting a combination of whiskey and moth balls but, instead, what hit me was Old Spice. I know, you’d rather have the whiskey and moth balls. But for me, in that moment, the experience was beautiful.

Here, you see how different external materials can evoke an internal experience of beauty. I would not normally think of Old Spice as beautiful. In fact, I remember when I was in high school how I tried to rid my dad of Old Spice cologne. I’d buy him the latest men’s fragrances—Polo or Halston—but he’d leave them on the

windowsill in the sun and then tell me they didn't smell good. "Of course not, you destroyed the aromatics by the heat," I'd think. But then he'd pick up that bottle of Old Spice and say, "You see, this stuff lasts." "Of course, it lasts," I'd think. "You could put that aftershave with the three men in the fiery furnace, take it out, and slap it on a cow and it would always smell the same." Old Spice was not a wonderful smell for me in my past . . . but on that day, it was beautiful.

You see, my father had died. He had died about five years prior to this moment. I had reached that point of grief where he was no longer always on my mind. Life was returning to some sense of normalcy. But that whiff of Old Spice hit me, and I was transported from a sidewalk in University City to a small home in Normandy. There, in the back bathroom, I stood by the sink as my dad finished shaving. I had come in at the end. He would take that Old Spice, splash it on his hands, and then smack his face. Then, he would look at me and ask me if I wanted some. He'd put some in his hands and smack my face as well. The sting of his slap and the sting of the alcohol from that Old Spice helped me know that I was seen, and I was loved.

On that day, this smell transported me into a memory of my father. It was beautiful and deeply personal. When I finally came out of that memory, I needed to retrace my steps. I had walked past Blueberry Hill. As I retraced my steps, I walked with a much deeper appreciation for the gift of my father, knowing that as a child I was loved. Beauty has the power to transport us into an experience that is deeply personal and transforming.

We have considered the experience of beauty, now what does it look like to "think about these things"?

Credal Contemplation

In Ecclesiastes, we hear that "God has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11). In these words of wisdom, we see the tensive nature of beauty. Time and eternity, certainty and mystery, the external world we live in and the internal world that lives in us, are woven together by God in beauty.

Externally, moments of beauty are created by God ("God has made") and encompass all kinds of experiences ("everything"). Times of weeping and laughter, mourning and dance, silence and speech, war and peace (3:2–8) can all be occasions when we are struck by the beauty of God's work. And, yet such beauty is temporary ("in its time"). It has a momentous momentariness that leaves us longing for more.

Internally, this longing is a way of God working. God has placed a glimpse of eternity in our hearts. As moments of beauty pass, we long for what has been lost: created goodness that never ends. Is it possible that this created goodness could be restored? If so, how? Such longing leads to a certain mystery: trust in the larger story of God's work ("what God has done from beginning to end") that has been hidden from our eyes ("he cannot find out").

Through beauty, God offers us a glimpse of something more, something that can never be contained in our experience (since beauty fades away) but something that can contain our experience, bringing us into that which is greater and more wondrous than we ever imagined. There is a hearkening back to that original goodness, a beauty that lasts, and a hearkening forward to that promised goodness, a beauty that lasts, but this hearkening occurs in a moment when beauty is experienced as that which fades away. Experiencing beauty, we know that we never have it all—God’s ways are always beyond our knowledge, experience, and imagination—and yet we also know that what we have is a gift to be held in holy wonder.

What does it mean, then, to experience holy wonder? What does it mean to “think about these things”?

To answer that question, I would like to reflect on the tensive experience of beauty through the commonplaces of the creed. For each article of the creed, I have identified four experiential tensions that give shape to holy wonder. First article beauty (created beauty) may be experienced as aching awe that leads to loving care; second article beauty (broken beauty) may be experienced as trust in suffering love that leads to faithful humility; and third article beauty (promised beauty) may be experienced as courageous hope that leads to gestures of God’s kingdom in a fallen world. When beauty catches us off guard, these tensions are fertile soil for the imagination and the re-imagination and can lead to a life of holy wonder.

In what follows, my goal is not to define what beauty means but to explore what beauty could mean when joined to the overarching narrative of God’s word and work. I am not arguing what must happen when one contemplates beauty, or even what should happen when one contemplates beauty, but rather what could happen by the grace of God. Credal contemplation is not a way to explain beauty but a way to explore it for the faithful.

Created Beauty

The first type of beauty for us to consider is created beauty. Created beauty is the beauty that God gives us to see. This is first article beauty, woven throughout creation. It is beauty to be seen and to be enjoyed.¹³

In the creation account in Genesis, God basically does two things. He speaks and he sees. By speaking, he brings things into being and, by seeing, he enjoys what he has made. As Lutherans, we have done a good job of emphasizing God speaking. As we attend to the creation account, we focus on the fact that God says, “let there be . . .” and there is. He speaks and his word is effective. It does things. His word is his deed. We focus on the power of God’s word in our theology, in our preaching, and in our hymnody (e.g., “Thy Strong Word Did Cleave the Darkness”). This is good. After all, by his word, God declares us righteous, God forgives our sins, God calls us his own, and we are his children. We are loved.

Created Beauty



I wonder, however, what it would be like if Lutherans were to develop the theology of God seeing. God looks at his creation and sees that it is good. As you read the creation account, woven throughout are moments when God sees and enjoys what he has made. Seven times we are told that God sees things and enjoys them. The seventh time, there is one small difference. The seventh time God invites us to look too. We are told, “And God saw everything that he had made and, *behold*, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Not only does God see all that he has made, but, with the word “*behold*,” God invites us as readers to see this as well.

Remember, this account is being written for those creatures who have sinned. We have rebelled against God and now live in a cursed creation. To those creatures who have fallen, who live in a cursed creation, God offers an invitation for us to look with him and see that it is good. So, in experiences of created beauty, there is always a tension. The tension between the goodness of creation and the curse of decay. As the writer of Ecclesiastes has said, “God made everything beautiful in its time.” “Everything is beautiful” *but* “everything is beautiful *in its time*.” Beauty does not last. All has been cursed with decay. In the experience that reminded me of my father, I was in awe of my father and the love that God expressed through him, but I was also aching because such love was temporary, a moment in my life in this world. On the one hand, sometimes, we can focus too much on the awe-inspiring moments of God’s goodness and not acknowledge the reality of the fallen world. When we do that, we enter the realm of Christian sentimentalism. Beauty becomes the Hallmark Channel for Christians. It doesn’t reflect real life. On the other hand, sometimes, we can be tempted to focus too much on the terror of decay. We see the dark moments of destruction in creation and do not acknowledge the goodness of God. Created beauty holds these experiences in tension and invites us into an experience of aching awe: aware of the curse, we ache; aware of the goodness, we are in awe.

This aching awe awakens us to life as a gift. Consider the tension of receiving life as a gift. It hovers between the mundane and the refined. On the one hand, we can reduce life to an experience that is mundane, or, on the other hand, we can work to

refine life in order that it might fulfill our standards of perfection and be meaningful. In either case, we lose sight of the one who offers us life as a gift.

Consider how life can be reduced to the mundane. When babies are born, we have a moment of divine *aristeia*. They take their first breath. Bloody and exposed, vulnerable and weak, they breathe. Such breath is a moment of holy wonder: the splendor of God's gift of life. But then they keep breathing and we begin to forget that every breath is a gift from God. This wonder of life in which we all participate suddenly becomes mundane. Years later, COVID comes along, and your sister is hospitalized. Suddenly, every breath she takes is no longer mundane. It is once again beautiful, a blessing, a gift from God. Immersed in the lure of the mundane, God graciously awakens us to the beauty of life as a gift.

Now consider the challenge of approaching life as something that needs to be refined. Often, precisely because we have normalized the experience of life and made it mundane, we work to cultivate the mundane and make it beautiful. Living in a consumer-oriented culture, we approach life as mundane material that we need to refine in order to give it meaning. There is always a better wine we could drink, a better coffee we could brew, a better car we could drive, a better phone we could use, and we lose sight of life as a gift, freely given and beautiful. When we approach life as either mundane or needing to be refined, we lose sight of the fact that we are creatures, creatures who experience life as a gift in a world created by God. Although this world has been cursed, it is the world in which we live and for which we have been called to care. Through created beauty, God awakens us to the holy wonder of such care.

During the pandemic, I began watching documentaries. I remember watching one about the fire in Ojai, California.¹⁴ I know, this was not exactly uplifting viewing for a pandemic. What was I thinking? On December 4, 2017, the Thomas Fire devastated 282,000 acres of land and destroyed the city of Ojai, California. There was a scene at the end of the film that struck me as beautiful. In the background is the charred landscape. In the foreground is a road of human construction. Out of the charred landscape comes a California black bear. It is a cub. Walking slowly. Awkwardly. Not because it is a cub but because it has been severely burned. But the bear painfully makes its way forward because a human is offering it water to survive. This moment filled me with awe at this little black bear, it filled me with ache at its suffering, and it filled me with awe at the human who was trying to help it survive. On that evening, in the midst of the pandemic, I woke to the calling to be a creature who cares for a cursed creation.

Have you ever noticed how when you go to an art museum, they have security personnel stationed throughout the rooms? When I was a kid, I thought they were there to keep people from stealing the paintings. In my child's imagination, it was as if someone were going to walk out with a statue from Rodin over their shoulder.

When I grew up, I noticed what these guards spend most of their time doing: they prevent people from unconsciously touching the art. The museum has signage on the walls to not touch the art, the museum has ropes cordoning off the artwork and black lines on the floor indicating the safe distance to keep . . . and yet, when people experience the beauty of the art, they have a natural response. They want to engage with it. They want to touch it, to experience it, to handle it. They lean in and begin to point out something amazing that they see to others. This is the power of created beauty, it awakens us to the gift of God's good creation, and it inspires us to be involved, to attend to, and to care for the things of this world. We do so with awe in the goodness of God and ache at the horror of decay. Created beauty causes us to attend to life as a gift and, behold, it is beautiful.

Broken Beauty

Created beauty is the beauty that God gives us to see. This is first article beauty, woven throughout creation. Broken beauty is the beauty that God knows we cannot see. This is second article beauty, woven throughout the experience of salvation. Broken beauty is centered in the cross, where love and evil meet to change the world. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has changed things, renaming and reclaiming all evil in this fallen world. So, by God's grace, there is beauty in brokenness.

Such beauty breaks out in the pages of Scripture. We hear it first and foremost in the mystery of the cross. There the death of the Son of God is confessed to be a fragrant offering pleasing to God (Eph 5:2). It is there in the noise as crowds gather around Jesus and he names that which is poor, mourning, hungering, and thirsting, persecuted for righteousness' sake, and then claims it to be blessed (Mt 5:1–12). It is there in the rhetorical brilliance of Paul's catalog of sufferings that reveals God's treasure hidden in jars of clay. Our dying that reveals Christ's life (2 Cor 4:7–12). And so, we have glorious paintings of ghastly crucifixions, beautiful pictures of beastly beheadings, and we sing about the slaughter of the innocents and marvel at the sacred head now wounded. In dying is the life of Christ.

This is the heart of Lutheran theology and that's good because it forms us to handle the struggles that happen on the torn edges of our lives.

In the spring of 1960, Flannery O'Connor received a photograph from an order of nuns. It was of a little girl. Her name was Mary Ann. Mary Ann Long. O'Connor looked at the photo and then put it away. But it wasn't the kind of photo you could put away. It was a picture of broken beauty.¹⁵ Mary Ann had been born with a tumor on the side of her face. At the age of three, she was given to the nuns, and they took care of her until she died at the age of twelve. The photograph was of her first communion. There she was with a white dress on her body and a white bandage on her face. One side of her face showed the beauty of a child, and the other side showed the bandage of brokenness. The nuns had wanted O'Connor to honor the girl by

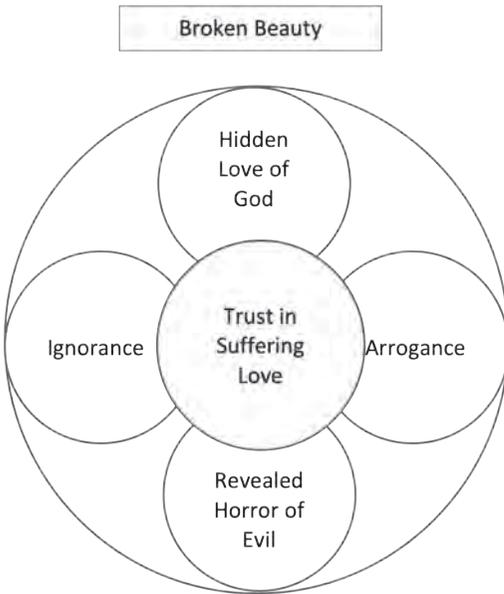
writing her story. Ultimately, O'Connor chose not to do this, but in explaining why she didn't do this, she maps out for us the tensions of broken beauty and the concerns that arise as you seek to speak about what she calls "the mystery of Mary Ann."¹⁶

O'Connor's reflections recognize the spectrum in which broken beauty is found. On the one hand, there is the tension between the love of God that remains hidden and the reality of evil that is revealed in our world. Broken beauty is honest when it comes to the suffering of evil—it sees and acknowledges and speaks of it—and trusting when it comes to the love of God—believing, though not seeing, as it confesses it. On the other hand, there is the tension between ignorance and arrogance. Ignorance claims that nothing can be known for sure, and arrogance claims a full revelation. Broken beauty lies at the intersection of these four things.

In particular, O'Connor was frustrated by the spectrum of ignorance and arrogance by which people approach broken beauty. As O'Connor thought about the mystery of Mary Ann, she noted the problem of ignorance. There are those who overemphasize the evil, to the exclusion of the love of God. As she writes, "One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him."¹⁷ This approach names evil for what it is but then claims ignorance when it comes to speaking about the reign of God. By focusing only on the reality of evil, our dying, one is silent about the working of God, Christ living. On the other hand, Christians have not done much better. For many Christians, the answer has been to avoid speaking of evil at all. They speak strongly and passionately about the love of God and

enter into arrogance when they turn toward evil. They romanticize it, sentimentalize it, or explain it away. They speak so loudly about Christ living that they silence any mention of our dying. As O'Connor notes, such Christian tenderness is "cut off from the person of Christ."¹⁸

For O'Connor, one is to look at broken beauty through the person of Christ. At the center of broken beauty is the broken body of Christ. When the crucified Christ is at the heart of broken beauty, one is freed to see with what O'Connor calls a "blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye."¹⁹



A blind eye, because the love of God is hidden and can only be confessed by faith. An unsentimental eye, because the reality of evil needs to be acknowledged in all of its horror. And a prophetic eye, because in our dying is Christ's life. As O'Connor once said, "evil is not simply a problem to be solved but a mystery to be endured."²⁰

For those who are enduring evil, whose bodies are breaking, broken beauty is a gift. It forms us to be faithful. It acknowledges in stark terms the reality of evil, our dying, and yet holds on to the mystery of God's grace, Christ's life, revealed in these dying places. Neither ignorant nor arrogant, we are faithful, trusting in the suffering love of God that redeems the world.

Promised Beauty

Created beauty is the beauty that God gives us to see. This is first article beauty, woven throughout creation. Broken beauty is the beauty that God knows we cannot see. This is second article beauty, woven throughout salvation. Promised beauty is the beauty that God promises we will see. This is third article beauty, woven throughout the Christian imagination, as God speaks promises of the new creation.

One Saturday, I was sitting in our parking lot at church, waiting for parishioners to arrive. We were gathering to go to a social ministry event. I was paging through calendars that I was going to give to my members. We had had a funeral planning workshop that morning. Hornburg-Klein, one of our local funeral homes, had offered to come and lead a workshop. They provided us free calendars with the liturgical seasons marked out on them, and so I was going to share the calendars with those members who did not come. After all, who could refuse a calendar of the church year with the advertisement for Hornburg-Klein funeral home at the top? Every morning when you wake up and look at the calendar, you can be reminded of dying.

When the first parishioner arrived, I handed her a calendar and said, "we missed you this morning." I meant it as a joke. I knew she hated the idea of planning your funeral. She didn't see that I was joking and said, "yes, Pastor. I just couldn't do two different events this Saturday." I then let her know I was joking. I humorously said, "What? You don't like planning your funeral?" And she said, "No pastor." Then she paused and looked at me with a smile. "To be honest, pastor, I'd rather spend time planning my resurrection. When you have a workshop on that, let me know." "Planning my resurrection." I loved that idea. I thought, that's what we do every Sunday. We call it worship, but in a way, it is a workshop on planning your resurrection. God speaks and we come to life, eternal life, and we start living in the certainty that we will be raised.

Have you ever noticed in Scripture, how God enters into scenes of present human diminishment and speaks words of future flourishing and fulfillment? That is the tension that is built into promised beauty. The tension of the now and not yet. God enters scenes of human diminishment and speaks words of future fulfillment.

To Israel in exile, God gives the words of Isaiah, a vision of promised beauty: a feast for all nations, well-aged wine, the finest of meats, the swallowing of death, and the wiping of tears from all faces (Is 25:6–8). To John, exiled on Patmos, God offers a vision of promised beauty: all nations gathering before the throne, singing praises to the Lamb (Rv 7:9–12). Though our bodies may be exiled and imprisoned, our imagination is free, and God speaks his promises to it.

Such visions of beauty are not merely to be enjoyed but lead into action. This action is not some grand program of earthly reform, conquering others and establishing

God’s kingdom. No, it is something much smaller, a gesture really. Promised beauty leads God’s people to offer gestures of courageous hope. God’s people do not respond to the present diminishment with fear: the fear that things will always be like this. When Christians respond in fear, they either hide or they hoard. They do not give freely of what they have received. Also, God’s people do not respond in folly: the folly that they will be able to build God’s kingdom on earth. No, promised beauty leads God’s people to respond in faith, with gestures of courageous hope in the promises of God.

The biblical writers often associate such gestures with God’s beautiful promises of restoration. As the prophets call for Israel to engage in acts of justice, God clothes their language with the beauty of the new creation. “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5:24). The desolate landscape of the present becomes the fertile soil of a beautiful future. When Stephen is surrounded by a mob and being stoned to death, God offers him a vision of promised beauty: Jesus standing in glory at the right hand of God. Seeing this vision, Stephen prays that God would forgive his persecutors, a gesture of courageous hope (Acts 7:54–60). Whether it be a community or an individual, God’s vision of promised beauty inspires his people to respond to experiences of human diminishment with gestures of courageous hope.

Such gestures break out both in public and in private. During the pandemic and the riots and the political fights over policing that filled our cities, we felt the

Promised Beauty



diminishment of life. But there were moments of public action of promised beauty. In neighborhoods where there are burned out buildings and boarded up stores, where there are streets that people would rather drive around than through, graffiti art makes a courageous gesture. African American faces appear in glorious colors, larger than life. These works of beauty cause people to see, to finally see the people who live here. People whose lives matter . . . not just to activists creating anarchy . . . or to politicians pulling votes . . . but to God and his people.

Ask Jeff Huntington and Julia Gibb. They are local artists with a world vision. In 2016, they founded the non-profit Future History Now. Since then, they have created over forty-five murals in seventeen communities in five countries. Their murals hover around issues of injustice.²¹ In July 2020, a set of basketball courts in Chambers Park, Annapolis, Maryland was transformed into a 7,000-square-foot mural of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman fatally shot by police in Louisville, Kentucky. Teaching-artists and volunteers painted the courts in blocks of paint. African Americans, living with a sense of diminishment fostered by social forces that shape their lives in a downward spiral, expressed a larger vision. The mural cannot truly be seen from the ground. You need to take a different perspective, an aerial view, to capture the beauty of Breonna's face staring into the heavens from a historically African American neighborhood named after the only African American mayor of Annapolis. The irony that you need to take a larger view to see her humanity is part of the beauty of this piece of art. Neighborhoods can be hidden away in urban landscapes, their inhabitants not seen as neighbors much less as fellow citizens or humans. These are the streets and public spaces that are passed over. Yet, they are not unseen by God. His calls for justice, for love of the neighbor, interwoven as they are with a promised beauty of his full and future community awaken his people to see, to say, and to act in gestures of courageous hope.

Gestures of courageous hope boldly shape our public spaces and quietly enrich our private lives. Promised beauty could be found in something as simple as a bouquet of flowers at the bedside of someone who is dying. Ruth was a member of my congregation. She had very little. Back then, people would have called her a bag lady. She lived off of what the city provided in social services. There was a small janitorial closet with a sink and a work area in a large apartment complex where a maintenance person let her live. Ruth had very little and, when we found out that she had cancer, our congregation found a Medicaid bed for her in a hospital in Oak Forest. That is where she would die.

I remember a visit I made to Ruth. One of our fellowship groups had had a luncheon and I was in the kitchen cleaning up before I made my way down to Oak Forest to visit Ruth. As I put something in the refrigerator, I noticed the flowers that had been on the altar last Sunday. No one had claimed them and so somebody put them in the fridge. Because it had been almost a week, many of the flowers had

already wilted, but I realized that if I took a few of the better-looking ones out of the arrangements, I could combine them and bring a bouquet of (dying) flowers to Ruth. It wasn't much but it was something. As I reflect on it now, I am ashamed. I can't believe that I took our church's left-over flowers to a homeless woman who was dying. She had nothing and here I was giving her what we would have otherwise thrown in the trash. Rather than buy her a fresh bouquet of flowers, I took her trash from our church. But God was able to work with a gift as impoverished as that as he gave Ruth a vision of promised beauty.

When I entered her room, Ruth immediately saw the flowers. Ruth had always loved flowers. When I set it beside her bed, she was struck by beauty. She sat there and just stared for a moment at the flowers. It was as if she was transported by a moment of beauty into something deeply personal and transforming. She kept mumbling to herself, "So beautiful. So beautiful." When she finally came to, she looked at me and said, "Pastor, will there be flowers in heaven?" In seminary, I remembered a professor in my pastoral theology class telling a story about a little boy who had lost his pet. I think it was a dog. He wanted to know if his dog would be there in heaven. I remember the professor saying that "when you are raised from the dead, you will see Jesus face to face and there will be perfect joy. If it takes having your dog with you in the presence of Jesus to have perfect joy, then your dog will be in heaven." I thought I would try that same pastoral logic with Ruth. I told her that, when she was raised, she would see Jesus face to face, and there would be perfect joy. If it took having flowers there with Jesus to bring her perfect joy, then there would be flowers there. Ruth looked at me, as if I had sinned against her. She said, "Ohhhhh, Pastor! I don't want the flowers for myself. I was just thinking that it might be nice to pick a bouquet and give it to God." I've never forgotten that moment. Her simple statement was filled with such unselfish love. She wanted to pick a bouquet and give it to God. In a hospital room filled with all the human machinery that planned on her dying, with a pastor who brought her trash from the church, Ruth saw God's promised beauty and was planning on her resurrection. In her Christian imagination, she offered us all a gesture of courageous hope.

Conclusion

Beauty is an experience that we try so hard to explain. In fact, in recent years, there has been a rebirth in the field of aesthetics and in calls for a fuller theology of beauty. I greatly appreciate that work. In this article, however, my goal has been much smaller. I am not seeking to explain beauty. Rather, I am inviting you to use credal contemplation to explore it. My belief is that, if you use credal contemplation to explore beauty, you will find that beauty has the power to explain you and your place in God's world. Created beauty inspires within us aching awe to tend to God's gift of creation with loving care; broken beauty awakens us with faithful humility to trust in

God's suffering love; and promised beauty evokes from us gestures of courageous hope in God's promises in times of human diminishment. Through experiences of beauty, we find ourselves living in the mystery of God's working, from creation through redemption to his final restoration of all things.

So, "whatever is beautiful . . . think about these things."

Endnotes

- 1 See the description of Agamemnon's day of glory in Homer, *The Iliad*, 11.17–30.
- 2 For a description of how the church can approach art as merely ornamentation, see Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 79–85.
- 3 For literary studies of neuroaesthetics, see Anthony J. Sanford and Catherine Emmott, *Mind, Brain and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Will Storr, *The Science of Storytelling* (New York: Abrams Press, 2020); David Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013); Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006); and Lisa Zunshine, ed., *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
- 4 Lewis Turco, *Emily Dickinson Woman of Letters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 72.
- 5 For a description of the research, see G. Gabrielle Starr, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 44–45 and Edward A. Vessel, G. Gabrielle Starr and Nava Rubin, "Art Reaches Within: Aesthetic Experience, the Self, and the Default Mode Network," *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 7 (Dec. 2013): 1–9.
- 6 Vessel, Starr, and Rubin, "Art Reaches Within," 2.
- 7 Vessel, Starr, and Rubin, "Art Reaches Within," 7.
- 8 Vessel, Starr, and Rubin, "Art Reaches Within," 5.
- 9 Starr, *Feeling Beauty*, 63.
- 10 Vessel, Starr, and Rubin, "Art Reaches Within," 6.
- 11 Starr, *Feeling Beauty*, 57–67.
- 12 Starr, *Feeling Beauty*, 14–15.
- 13 For an insightful and wide-ranging discussion of beauty in creation, see Charles P. Arand and Erik Herrmann, "Attending to the Beauty of the Creation and the New Creation," *Concordia Journal* 38 no.4 (Fall 2012): 313–331.
- 14 *Burning Ojai: Our Fire Story*, directed by Michael Milano (HBO Documentary Films, 2020).
- 15 For a scholarly account of this interaction, see Kathleen Lipovski-Helal, "Flannery O'Connor's Encounter with Mary Ann Long," *Flannery O'Connor Review* 11 (2013): 38–49; for O'Connor's reflection on this experience, see Flannery O'Connor, "Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*," in *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957): 213–234.
- 16 O'Connor, "Introduction," 223.
- 17 O'Connor, "Introduction," 226–227.
- 18 O'Connor, "Introduction," 227.
- 19 O'Connor, "Introduction," 227. This vision is the hallmark of O'Connor's short stories.
- 20 Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," in *Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South*, in *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957): 209.
- 21 For a description of their work, see "Projects," Future History Now, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.futurehistorynow.org/projects>.

Beauty as a Service to the Neighbor

James Wetzstein



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research focuses on the formative power of liturgical art and design. He is writing his dissertation on the work and theory of meaning of the American Lutheran sculptor, Ernst Schwidder.

This paper argues that providing the opportunity for an excellent aesthetic experience in the context of the liturgy is a service to one's neighbor. It will do so by starting from Luther's sermon for the occasion of the dedication of a liturgical space and then it will build upon Rudolf Otto's work *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*.

In October of 1544, Martin Luther preached at the service of the dedication of the new Schlosskapelle (castle chapel) at the Hartenfels castle in Torgau. The chapel was an addition to the oldest wing of the castle which was built over 180 years earlier and housed the personal rooms of the Elector and his family.

Nicholaus Gromann was the project architect and Luther's friend Lucas Cranach, artist to the Court, provided the color scheme for the interior and all of the interior artwork. This included the bas relief sculptures on the barrel of the elevated pulpit. Cranach divided the side of the pulpit in three and presented three scenes from the Gospels—Jesus forgiving the sins of the adulterous woman (Jn 7:53–8:11); the

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A version of this article was presented in 2021 at the 31st Annual Theological Symposium, Whatever is Lovely: The Role of Beauty in Theology and Ministry.



*Interior, Schosskirche (castle church) Hartenfels Castle, Torgau, Saxony, Germany
(Photo: Andreas Praefcke)¹*

twelve-year-old Jesus teaching in the temple (Lk 2:41–52); and Jesus driving out the money changers from the temple (Mt 21:12–17; Mk 11:15–19; Lk 19:45–48; Jn 2:13–16)—to illustrate the three “solas” of the reformation movement: grace, scripture, and faith alone. The rest of the chapel was well appointed, with a pipe organ as well as the freestanding altar that Luther had proposed in his reform of the mass in the German language, 1526². Luther was the liturgical consultant on the project. We can reasonably conclude that the room was ordered according to his prescription.

While not ostentatious, the chapel is clearly intended as a treasured space and is of a quality consistent with the rest of the castle which was something of a showpiece. It might come as a surprise then to read that as he preached at the first service Luther stated, “Not that we are making a special church of it, as if it were better than other houses where the Word of God is preached. If the occasion should arise that people did not want to or could not assemble, one could just as well preach outside by the fountain or somewhere else.”³

There he was in the pulpit designed by his friend Lucas Cranach. Cranach was

among those who twenty-two years earlier had pleaded that Luther might risk coming out of the protection of the Wartburg to save the churches of Wittenberg from the iconoclastic excesses of Andreas von Karlstadt. Karlstadt, in his reforming zeal had become convinced that all art in the church, including the image of the crucifixion that was typically stamped on each eucharistic host, was idolatrous.

So two decades later, Luther is in that fabulous, mounted pulpit which he had specified and Cranach had designed, saying that it did not really matter, that standing outside and preaching by the fountain was just as good.

If it is just as good, why bother at all? Why not, in the interest of efficiency and economy, make use of some other space in the castle? Surely in a compound of this size there would be other larger rooms where a congregation might be gathered. Mission churches in our experience do this all the time. A funeral home, or restaurant, or school auditorium, they're all adequate to the task.

An answer to this question is made evident from a statement Luther makes earlier in the same sermon. There Luther argues for a designated and specifically appointed space.

Likewise, the one who is called to the office and commissioned to preach should not preach to himself alone, but to the whole congregation. Therefore it should also be arranged in such a way that they may all assemble at a definite and convenient time, when the ordinary man can be away from his trade or work, and at a definite place where they may know and hear their preacher.⁴

Luther is arguing that the “ordinary [woman or] man” needed to know that when they came through the chapel doorway, they would be entering to join an assembly that had gathered to hear the gospel and receive the sacraments. The vocation of the architect and artist was, in the mind of Luther, like any other vocation, pursued for the sake of service to the neighbor. The room was designed, built, and appointed in order to provide members of the community with a specific place to gather and receive God’s means of grace.

For Gromann and Cranach, and also, I believe, for Luther, such a room needed to be beautiful in its design and execution. While the room and its appointments were a statement of the patron’s wealth, status, and taste, I will argue that providing for an aesthetic experience was also an act of service that is consistent with the gospel.

Among us—and our time is not alone in this—concerns about aesthetic experience are frequently viewed with suspicion. We might not share Karlstadt’s impassioned iconoclasm. Our aniconism is frequently that of indifference, driven by economic pragmatism. Typically, our concern is that of expense and of the expensive. Artists and art are perceived as expensive and probably unnecessary. After all, it’s the word that matters.

This is a false choice and a lost opportunity. I believe that the creation of a space

that provides an excellent aesthetic experience for those who gather is as necessary a service to the neighbor as is a well-delivered sermon.

I will argue that this is because there is an implicit connection that can be intuitively apprehended between the aesthetic experience and the experience of being in the presence of that which is holy. We are indebted to Rudolf Otto and his identification of the experience of the numinous for this insight.

Rudolf Otto was a Lutheran scholar who lived in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. He earned a PhD at the University of Göttingen, writing on Luther's understanding of the Holy Spirit after which he served on the faculties of the Universities of Breslaw and Marburg. Following an extended trip through North Africa, Palestine, British India, China, Japan, and the United States in 1911 and 1912, Otto became increasingly interested in the phenomena of a human encounter with "The Holy," what others might term "the religious experience."

Otto argued that human beings become aware of the presence of God and recognize both their own creatureliness and divine otherness in a way that is non-rational or intellectual. It is a feeling, a function of one's emotions. It is intuitive rather than deduced through analytic thought. It is suprarational, that is, the phenomena exceed beyond rational categories of thought. Further, he observed that western theology is inclined to regard divine holiness as a moral category—God is morally perfect, that is, without sin, and humans are not. This rational view flattens the human experience. God is not merely morally superior; God is completely other and human beings are incapable of circumscribing God in any rational way. Otto recognized in this experience of such an encounter, the human emotions of fear and dread centered in the awareness that one's whole ground of being was dependent upon the Holy One who is radically independent of creation and before whom humans are powerless.

But the experience of dread is only one aspect of the experience of the encounter with the Holy. As Otto reflected on descriptions of encounters with God, he saw that in addition to dread, there is also a sense of fascination. The human being is simultaneously repelled by and attracted to the experience. Otto coined a word to describe this experience of the Holy. It was to experience the numinous, from "numen" the Latin term for "divinity."

Otto identified accounts of the numinous all through Scripture. Isaiah's encounter with the Lord is a prime example.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Is 6:1–5)

Isaiah recognizes the presence of the Lord. This presence is localized, but the location of the presence cannot contain the presence. It is not just that the Lord is “bigger” than the temple, rather, the Lord is a category of being that cannot be circumscribed by time and space. Words fail in such a circumstance.

Isaiah’s record tells us that he felt completely undone by the experience. This is dread. Yet, we can also recognize fascination in Isaiah’s detailed description. He looks all around. He takes it all in. There are detailed descriptions of the seraphim and their wings and their song. The seraphim themselves are described as experiencing a sense of dread, they cover their faces, and fascination, they sing of the Lord’s glory! It is an expression of wonder and praise. It is doxology.

In a recent sermon delivered at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Valparaiso, Indiana, the moral theologian Gilbert Meilander described the work of the doxology of the church as analogous to going to a baseball game with a friend. “You’re both there in the stands, Meilander told us, and you watch as the shortstop moves with efficiency and grace to field the ball and initiate a stunning triple play. Your companion is watching the same game and their vision is just fine, and yet, in the wake of the play, you turn to them and say, ‘Did you see that?’”⁵

The song of the seraphim is doxology, not a series of descriptive statements intended as a systematic theology of the nature of God. We have a song of praise and Isaiah’s full attention to all that is happening—a sign of his fascination. Yet along with it is a sense of dread. Isaiah gives voice to this as he cries out “Woe is me! For I am lost!”

Isaiah describes himself as “a man of unclean lips,” whose “eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” This cry is not one of moral categories, Otto argues, it does not spring from the consciousness of a transgressor reflecting on specific moral failures. It is a response before the numinous. It is not the product of thoughtful reflection or rational thought, rather it is instinctive and spontaneous.⁶ For Isaiah, this experience is so defining that the primary name of God in all of the rest of Isaiah is “the Holy One of Israel.”⁷ The title appears twenty-five times.

This experience is not limited to Isaiah. It is transmissible through time for the reader of the text. Otto writes “if a man does not feel what the numinous is when he reads the sixth chapter of Isaiah then no ‘preaching, singing, or telling’ in Luther’s phrase can avail him.” The feeling of dread and fascination is the work of the Holy Spirit.⁸

Now, one might assume that the numinous experience of the Holy One of Israel, the God who is wholly other—the Numen—would diminish with the incarnation, that Jesus’s ministry would rationalize, moralize, and humanize the idea of God.⁹ We might here bring Luther in with his argument that the only knowable God is the incarnate God.⁹ But Otto observes that even when Jesus teaches of God as Father, a way of expression which becomes so prevalent in the Gospels, it cannot be regarded without consideration of the rule and reign of God. Otto writes,

As against all rationalizing attempts to tone it down into something less startling, the most recent research shows quite decisively that the “kingdom” is just greatness and marvel absolute, the “wholly other” “heavenly” thing, set in contrast to the world of here and now, “the mysterious” itself in its dual character as awe-compelling yet all-attracting, glimmering in an atmosphere of genuine “religious awe.”¹⁰

Such a sensitivity to the thickness of meaning when we consider the reign of God certainly saves the *Magnificat* from being merely a song about social justice. Rather it is a celebration or perhaps better, a worshipful wondering at the absolute otherness of God whose very being subverts all human powers when he appears in the womb of an unwed mother.

The Heavenly Father is the Holy One. He is the being that inspired both fascination and dread in Israel. He is the gracious will come to us. The mystery does not diminish in the face of the familiarity of Jesus, rather it deepens. When Peter cries out, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8), he is echoing Isaiah’s cry of dread (Is 6:5). When the Emmaus Road disciples express wonder, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” (Lk 24:32) they are joining the seraphim’s song of fascination (Is 6:3). Jesus teaches us to pray, “Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name” and teaches us that God is an all-consuming fire.¹¹

For Otto, it is in light of this tremendous mystery, that Christ’s agony in the garden on the night of his betrayal is best viewed and understood. He writes,

What is the cause of this “sore amazement” and “heaviness,” this soul shaken to its depths, “exceeding sorrowful even unto death” and this sweat that falls to the ground like great drops of blood? Can it be ordinary fear of death in the case of one who had had death before his eyes for weeks past and who had just celebrated with clear intent his “death-feast with his disciples”? No, there is more here than the fear of death; there is the awe of the creature before the “mysterium tremendum” before the shuddering secret of the numen. And the old tales come back into our mind as strangely parallel and, as it were, prophetically significant, the tales of Yahweh who waylaid Moses by

night, and of Jacob who wrestles with God “until the breaking of the day.” He had power with God . . . and prevailed with the God of “Wrath” and “Fury,” with the numen, which yet is itself “My Father.” In truth even those who cannot recognize “the Holy One of Israel” elsewhere in the God of the Gospel must at least discover Him here if they have eyes to see at all.¹²

Paul also knows the experience of being in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. We might cite his experience on the road to Damascus and speculate about his wayfaring in Arabia. It is Paul who writes “[God is] he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tm 6:15b–16a).

But for Otto, it is Paul’s doctrine of predestination that clearly signals that “we are standing on a downright non-rational ground.”¹³ Not only is the idea of election one of unmediated pure experience of divine grace in which the elect is passive: grace is received, and experienced, not achieved, accomplished, or chosen. But election by God does not also bring with it the phenomenon of the damning of others by the same God as a logical necessity.¹⁴ The doctrine of election for Paul is not a rational description of divine causation, it is rather a reflection on the encounter with the phenomenon of divine grace and mercy. Otto writes:

The numen, overpoweringly experienced, becomes the all in all. The creature, with his hoping and doing, his coming and going, his schemes and resolves, becomes nothing. The conceptual expression to indicate such a felt abasement and annihilation over against the numen then—here impotence and there omnipotence; here the futility of one’s own choice, there the will that ordains all and determines all.¹⁵

Next, Rudolf Otto turns his attention to Luther and his experience of the numinous. We will follow him in order to return to that preacher in Torgau preaching at the dedication of the Castle Chapel.

Contemporary Lutherans, some of whom are nearly allergic to any talk of religious experience, might imagine that Otto, having been engaged by the experience of the numinous in Christianity and other religions, must now in Luther seek to tease out scant evidence of an awareness of the numinous as Otto has come to describe it in order to argue for his orthodoxy. The opposite is true. Otto writes,

I recalled Luther’s own expressions and borrowed them from his *divina maiestas* (divine majesty) and *metuenda voluntas* (fearful will), which have rung in my ears from the time of my earliest

study of Luther. Indeed I grew to understand the numinous and its difference from the rational in Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* ("The Bondage of the Will") long before I identified it in the *qadosh* (holiness) of the Old Testament and in the elements of "religious awe" in the history of religion in general.¹⁶

The problem, Otto argues, is that Luther is read in his own day as ours, through the lens of later systematicians whose rationalizing impulse marginalized Luther's description of the numinous. Otto writes, that "this aspect of Luther's religion . . . is today readily dismissed as 'not the authentic Luther,' or as 'a residuum of the scholastic speculations of the nominalists.'"¹⁷

Rather than an inauthentic or a hapless residue carried over from cruder days, Luther's awareness of the numinous is grounded, Otto believes, in the formative influence of earlier German mystics. In an appendix that addresses Luther's definition of faith, Otto writes,

But a complete judgment upon Luther's connection with Mysticism will only be possible when all the manuscript remains of the popular mystical preaching of his time become known, which as yet lie undisturbed in our libraries. They will show the background and setting of Luther's thought and phraseology, the soil out of which they grew, and how many similarities and analogues there are to the feelings to which Luther gives expression. Were we unaware that the pamphlet *Of the Liberty of a Christian* was by Luther, we should probably count it among these writings.¹⁸

Under Otto's guidance, a rediscovery of Luther's sensitivity to the numinous shows itself in four ways. First, Otto observes that Luther's description of divine omnipotence in *The Bondage of the Will* is best understood as a union of absolute supremacy with a divine "energy in the sense of a force that knows not stint nor stay, which is urgent, active, compelling, and alive."¹⁹ This is God as the absolute "other" over which human beings, or any other aspect of creation have no control or claim. Yet, Otto notices Luther declaring, "To have a God is nothing else than to trust Him from the heart" and that God "overbrims with pure goodness." Luther knows the abyss of despair before God and yet writes that he flees for refuge to God's own word like, "a hare to his cleft in the rocks flees."²⁰

Second, the awareness of divine wrath as described above leads Luther, with Job, to consider the absolute strangeness of God. Luther recognizes that God is beyond our understanding, and God's judgements are incomprehensible to us. It is in this context that Luther lashes out as "the whore reason" a position, Otto argues, that would be ludicrous for anyone who has not grasped "the non-rational element in the idea of God."²¹

Third, Otto points to Luther's understanding of the doctrine of predestination which, as with Paul, places the human being, whose own will is completely captive, solely in the hands of God.²²

Fourth, Otto finds the necessary element of fascination so interwoven with the rational attributes of trustworthiness and love, which is "faith," that it might be overlooked all together except for what Otto describes as Luther's "boisterous, almost Dionysiac, blissfulness of his experience of God."²³ He quotes Luther,

Christians are a blissful people, who can rejoice at heart and sing praises, stamp and dance and leap for joy. That is well pleasing to God and doth our heart good, when we trust in God and find in Him our pride and our joyfulness. Such a gift should only kindle a fire and a light in our heart, so that we should never cease dancing and leaping for joy. Who will extol this enough or utter it forth? It is neither to be expressed nor conceived. If thou feelest it truly in the heart, it will be such a great thing to thee that thou wilt rather be silent than speak aught of it."²⁴

While one, seeking to emphasize reasoned categories for understanding God, might be able to negotiate Luther's call to songs of praise that come from the heart, his observation that one's heartfelt feelings of joy before God are so essential that they are better to be guarded in silence rather than denied, ought to give anyone who conceives of Lutheran theology in exclusively propositional terms, pause.

At the center of this, is Luther's understanding and experience of faith which, in contrast to later Lutheran theologians who speak of faith exclusively in terms of the act of belief (*fides qua*) and the content of that belief (*fides quae*) Otto finds Luther's description of faith development of the "love" of earlier mystics.

It remains obvious that there are definite features in "Faith," as the term is used by Luther, which justify us in classing it with the mystical ways of response to which it is in apparent contrast, and clearly distinguish it from the "*fides*" taught by the Lutheran school with its determinate, well-ordered, unmystical temper. "Faith" for Luther plays the same essential part, *mutatis mutandis* [changing, but unchanged] as "knowledge" and "love" for the earlier mystics: it is the unique power of the soul, the *adhaesio Dei* [adherence to God] which unites man with God: and "unity" is the very signature of the mystical. So that when Luther says that Faith makes man "one cake" (*ein Kuche*) with God or holds him "as a ring holds a jewel" (*sicut annulus gemmam*), he is not speaking any more figuratively than when Tauler says the same of Love.²⁵

Moving through Luther's writings, Otto sees Luther's faith in ways that might surprise and even alarm contemporary Lutherans, even as they substantiated the experience of later pietists. He writes,

It [faith] even takes over all the functions which all "enthusiasts" from Paul onwards have ascribed to "the Spirit"; for it is "faith" that "transforms us inwardly and brings us forth anew." . . . All subsequent mystics from Johann Arndt to [Philipp] Spener and [Gottfried] Arnold have always felt these aspects of Luther's inner life to be congenial and akin to their own and have carefully collected the relevant passages from his writings as a defense against the attacks of the rationalized doctrine of the Lutheran school.²⁶

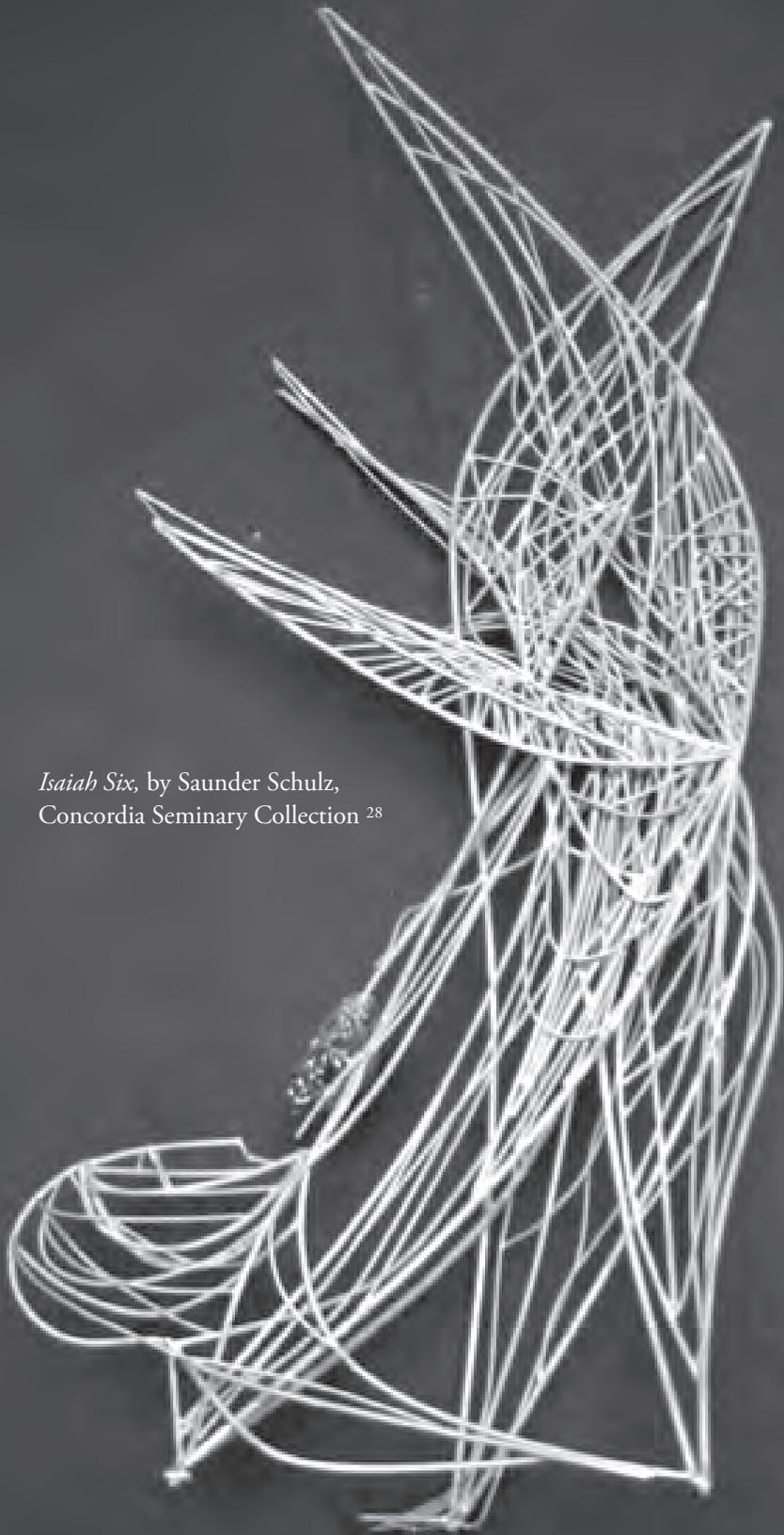
Far from a contrived connection, a close reading of Luther shows his thought to be both well aware and supportive of the experience that Otto is has identified as the numinous.

This groundwork with Otto, Luther, Paul, Jesus, and Isaiah, is important because this non-rational (or suprarational) nature of human existence before God is of the essence of the Christian faith. Doing so has the potential to open us up to a deeper appreciation of the importance of the aesthetic experience in the context of the liturgy.

The problem is that we are not used to thinking in this way. So much of our theological imagination is colored by rational categories that the elements of the numinous experience—dread and fascination—are typically collapsed into ethical categories. Thus, Isaiah's dread is read exclusively in terms of awareness of moral failing. God's wrath, a mark of divine inscrutability, is merely indignation. Fascination and praise become primarily the sinner's thanksgiving for an alien righteousness that can be appropriated as their own and a resolve to believe and live in an orthodox manner. Is there a way for us to consider the dynamics of the numinous without collapsing the whole experience into these well-worn rational forms? The consideration of the suprarational numinous experience risks being closed off to us.

Otto asserts that just as one idea attracts another or one thought gives way to another, feelings and sensations can arouse other sensations into our awareness.²⁷ So, if we can identify an experience that is analogous to the numinous experience, we might be able to expand our appreciation of the numinous without being drawn into a rationalizing frame of mind which is so often our default when doing theology. This is because analogous experiences point to one another. The experience of the one may awaken awareness of the experience of the other.

The experience of the sublime—a profound aesthetic experience that inspires wonder, frequently calling us to an awareness of our own limits, and attraction—Otto argues, is such an analogous experience. The experience of the sublime can awaken in us a sensation that is non-rational or rather suprarational and yet real, even objective.



Isaiah Six, by Saunder Schulz,
Concordia Seminary Collection ²⁸

Otto's insight, made by him as a way of allowing for meaningful meditation on and analysis of the numinous, provides a compelling argument for taking beauty in service of liturgical theology seriously. If Otto is correct and experiences of the sublime open us up to an awareness of the numinous, then offering experiences of the sublime in the service of the sacramental encounter with Christ may help form Christians in a more profound awareness of God and God's grace. They may awaken in us an awareness of the phenomena that Isaiah, Paul, and Luther all knew.

A personal story may help explain what I'm getting at. In my first years as a pastor, there was a district convention. I attended out of a sense of duty. I don't believe that many go to district conventions intent on having a religious experience. I certainly did not. But there I was at the opening service in the nineteenth-century Gothic Revival brick-and-timber church. As the organist played the opening measures of the Sanctus, the congregation of (mostly) men joined in with gusto. Maybe you've been in those sorts of assemblies where it seems like every man is bent on out-singing his neighbor and the organist is right in there egging them on.

Now the biblical account that underlies the first part of the Sanctus, that of Isaiah six, had a special place in my imagination ever since I'd encountered the sculpture *Isaiah 6* in the Concordia Seminary Library and had an opportunity to meet with the artist, the late Saunders Schultz. So maybe I was emotionally predisposed to the experience I'm about to describe.

Vaults of the southern side aisles of Ulm Minster, Ulm, Baden-Württemberg, Germany ³⁴



As the intensity of the vibrations making the music increased with the notes on the low end setting up harmonic vibrations in the floor under our feet, a question entered my mind: Was this a little like what it was to experience the shaking of the foundations and thresholds of the Temple? I recall approaching the Lord's Supper with a sense of dread and attraction which likely would not have surprised Otto. He had his own list of experiences of the sublime from which to draw.

Otto regarded the massive rings of standing stones at Stonehenge as an example of the sublime. He considered the Sphinx at Giza to be another.²⁹ Both of these ancient installations stretch us to the edge of our understanding and invoke a sense of wonder based on their monumentality and the mystery that remains regarding the means of their construction and their purpose. Stonehenge, because it seems to be intended to interact with the movement of the sun, calls us to consider our small place in creation, a realization that may call us to both shudder and praise.

And consider the landscapes of Imperial China.³⁰ *Fisherman's Evening Song* is a work in ink on silk by the eleventh-century artist, Xu Daoning.³¹ While just over nineteen-inches tall, the handscroll is over seven feet long. Unlike western works of art which are put up for permanent display, Chinese handscrolls were stored out of sight and taken out for only occasional viewing, the scroll being unrolled section by section and likely never seen in one glance.³² The fishermen are but a small detail. The work's title serves to draw attention to their small place in the larger work. They are small and the day is over. Like Stonehenge, this work calls attention to the small place of humanity in a grand cosmos. What struck Otto about these works in particular was their awareness of a void in the distance which called attention to that which is transcendent.³³

In the west it was architecture, Gothic architecture in particular, that held the greatest promise for evoking the numinous by presenting the sublime in Otto's mind. With soaring vaults of lacelike stone and walls of translucent glass that present as enormous jewels the gothic church building is awe inspiring—numinous.³⁵

As Otto considered aesthetic experiences of the sublime, he was especially attentive to the power of negation to evoke the numinous. This is especially evident in Otto's examples from western music. Among his examples of this are the *Incarnatus* from Bach's Mass in B-Minor.³⁶ Bach has the ensemble, singers and instrumentalists, working their way through the Nicene Creed. Much of it is very grand in tone, but as they come to the Second Article and approach the line that in the Latin text reads, "*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sanctu ex Maria virgine et homo factus est,*" parts in the ensemble drop away until all that is left are the lowest voices, nearly silent, singing "*est.*" And then comes a profound pause.

Silence.

It's a silence that calls us out of ourselves to consider the mystery.

Otto describes it this way, "The held breath and hushed sound of the passage, its

weird cadences, sinking away in lessened thirds, its pauses and syncopations, and its rise and fall in astonishing semi tones, which render so well the sense of awe-struck wonder—all this serves to express the mysterium by way of intimation, rather than in forthright utterance.³⁷

Otto considers Felix Mendelssohn's setting of Psalm 2 to be another example of how a move toward silence can evoke the numinous.³⁸ He writes, "Here too the matter is expressed less in the music itself than in the way the music is restrained and repressed."³⁹ Psalm 2:11 reads "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling." Mendelssohn has the choir render "*furcht/fear*" in a terrified silence.

But the sublime need not be limited to ancient expressions, nor as we have seen is it the exclusive purview of the church. And while the sublime is linked with the beautiful and may even be synonymous, "beauty" should not be confused with "pleasant" or "comfortable."

In 2002, Johnny Cash recorded a cover of the 1994 Nine Inch Nails song, *Hurt*.⁴⁰ The lyrics include references to both self-harm and heroin addiction. The repeating line, "And you can have it all, my empire of dirt," might be interpreted as the dying will of the protagonist. His life is coming to an end, whether by his own hand or not, and he has nothing of his own to show for it. It's not a joyful lyric.

The cinematography bolsters the message of empty accomplishment. In one section of the song, Cash sings from behind a dining table, laden with food. The table is, in every detail, a reconstruction of *Still Life with Lobster*, a seventeenth-century still-life painting by the Dutch artist, Abraham van Beijeren. As Dutch colonialism spread, and the trading cities of the Netherlands grew increasingly prosperous, once simple paintings of fruit and the spoils of the local hunt became increasingly grand and exotic—and increasingly morose. It is as though these painters who, though they were no longer patronized by the church, were continuing to preach a prophetic word to a world of nascent capitalism—itsself an empire of dirt. The production—lyrics, arrangement, and performance, along with the video—is not pleasant to watch. It is, however, sublime, beautiful and numinous. We watch and listen with both dread and fascination.

Otto regarded Gothic architecture as emblematic of the sublime, but modern architecture has the same potential, even on a limited budget. The Lutheran Church of Christ the King in Seattle⁴² was built in the late 1950s with a budget of \$650,000 in today's dollars. The stark interior, the distorted image of an ascending Christ, the asymmetric plan, and the fact that the natural light comes through an unseen skylight all combine to apply the lessons of Otto's Chinese landscapes.

Evidence that the sublime might make us uncomfortable can be seen in later photos of the same church where much of the negative space around the cross has been filled by colorful and homey banners, likely in an effort to lower the intensity of the stark and arresting space.



Still Life with Lobster, Abraham van Beijeren ⁴¹

We've established that Otto had very specific ideas about the Holy and that he believed that other feelings, specifically feelings generated through aesthetic experience, were capable of evoking within us a sensitivity to being in the presence of the Holy or at least to the possibility of being in the presence of the Holy. So what?

For those of us who practice liturgical theology—pastors and musicians, but also everyone else in the room for the liturgy, even the children—we all are doing liturgical theology together as a community. What are the implications of this awareness and what do they have to do with Luther's ideas about the purpose of church buildings?

Let us begin to answer this question in the negative. I am not advocating for the design and construction of holy places, that is places that are ontologically or in their essence somehow separate and distinct from the rest of the material of creation. I am not proposing the design and construction of places that will, as an essential component of their materiality, necessarily deliver an encounter with God or divine grace. Luther was right when, in the same sermon I quoted earlier, he emphatically rejected the Roman consecration rights that were imagined to transform a newly constructed room into a more sacred space than the rest of creation. I think the Smalcald articles are right when they make the same determination.⁴³ I think that the church orders of Nuremberg were on the right track when they, in 1527, abolished the use of rites of blessing for all sorts of things including water, salt, wax, palms, and Easter cakes with the argument that such things “have all been consecrated before through the Word of God as his creations which were made for the good of mankind.”⁴⁴ They are correct when they assert that all parts of the material creation are inherently sacred by virtue of being created by the Divine Word. This has significant implications both for environmental stewardship and for our attitude when we are in a seemingly mundane environment such as the self-checkout line at Walmart. And if you find that funny to think of divine agency at Walmart, then you are ready for the point.

We forget. We forget the wonder of divine action. We forget the reality of divine grace. It's why so much of the work of the liturgy is the work of remembering. We recall our baptismal identity. We preach the same life, death, and resurrection of Jesus over and over and over again. We “do this in remembrance of me.”

If Otto is right, then it is possible to design and create spaces for such gatherings of remembering and receiving that support that remembering work through the possibility of aesthetic experience that may bring an awareness of the numinous to mind through the experience of the sublime. It is possible to create spaces that actually help members of the community, especially those yet being formed in the faith, to a fuller awareness in their thinking and their feeling that they live their lives in the presence of a Holy One of Israel who has come among us in Jesus Christ and inspires us to trust through the work of the Holy Spirit which makes of us members of the body of Christ.

Is it possible to have this intellectual awareness in an ugly place? Of course it is. The gospel has been preached and the sacraments celebrated in all sorts of settings and conditions. Luther said we could gather out by the fountain. We could gather in an open field. But the moment some member of the congregation looks around and says, “This would work better if we mowed a part of the field where the people are gathering.” At that moment, we’ve begun to design. And if our design doesn’t strive to deliver an aesthetic experience that has the potential for awakening the numinous among us, then we have not lived up to our vocation to serve our neighbor through all of the gifts that have been given to us.

Endnotes

- 1 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Torgau_Schlosskirche_03.jpg
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- 25 Otto, 104.
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- 28 *Isaiah Six*, by Saunder Schulz, Concordia Seminary Collection.
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- 33 Otto, 69.
- 34 By Uoaei1 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=72223041>
- 35 Otto, 70.
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Breathed Through Silver

C. S. Lewis and the Truth of Beauty

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“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

John Keats

“Late have I loved thee, beauty so old and so new.”

St. Augustine

C. S. Lewis and beauty seem like an obvious pairing. At least I thought it would be obvious. After all, his *writing* is beautiful, and his stories and essays describe many *beautiful things*. Yet he has given us no treatise “On Beauty,” no essay on aesthetics, no fulsome treatment of transcendent sublimity as one finds in Plato or Kant or Burke.¹ Perhaps one reason why we don’t often find Lewis writing about beauty directly is his conviction that it is better to produce that which summons the feelings that one gets when encountering something beautiful rather than merely talk abstractly *about* “beauty.” He makes this point, for example, when giving advice on writing in a letter to Joan Lancaster in 1956:

Don’t use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to *feel* about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was “terrible,” describe it so that we’ll be terrified. Don’t say it was “delightful”; make *us* say “delightful” when we’ve read

the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers “Please will you do my job for me.”

We certainly see this in his fiction. Lewis, who originally wanted to be a poet, shied away from abstractions and instead believed that the most important ideas are best expressed through art—through poetry, and story, and myth—because of its power to transform a person’s experience and being, rather than merely the intellect: “What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that *about which* truth is).”² There’s much we could glean from the Narnia books or the Space Trilogies in this regard, but for this essay I would like to give attention, first, to beauty in Lewis’s biography, especially its role in his own conversion to Christianity. Before beauty is a concept to be contemplated, it is an experience that drives Lewis into the most important crisis of his life. Lewis’s encounter with the beautiful tears at him and pulls him in two directions, (much like Augustine’s early experience of reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* in 373). Part of him is pulled downward to the pragmatics of secular life, but beauty draws him upward, towards something he wishes were true. The resolution of this crisis brings Lewis, finally, to faith.

Second, I’d like to look at how he begins to deal with the meaning of beauty in some of his less familiar works, especially his literary essay *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961). There are some larger academic works that are also worth exploring, for example his preface to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1942), or his work on medieval literature, *The Discarded Image* (1964), but it would require a more extensive treatment than I can give here. Instead, I will try to offer some preliminary indications of Lewis’s thoughts about the nature of aesthetic judgments and then conclude with a certain embodiment of these thoughts in his final (and greatest) novel, *Till We Have Faces*.

Lies Breathed Through Silver

The course of Lewis’s conversion is well known, especially because of his own autobiographical reflections in *Surprised by Joy* (1955). An atheist from a young age, Lewis considered himself a materialist and rationalist intellectually, but aesthetically he was continually drawn to the world of the romantic. The mythological, especially from Nordic and Germanic folk tales and sagas, captivated him along with the wild Celtic countryside of his native Ireland (the English landscape was a little too tame). *Joy* was the word that Lewis ultimately used to describe this latter love and longing. Here “joy” was not happiness or pleasure but an *aesthetic ache*, what the Germans would call *Sehnsucht*. Joy was Lewis’s stirring encounter with beauty—beauty that both terrified and thrilled. Joy’s introduction, memory, and return was, as Lewis would come to realize, the dogged pursuit of the divine. He describes this longing and the crisis that it brought in the following poignant passage:

I didn't get the old thrill. I was in the Wordsworthian predicament, lamenting that "a glory" had passed away.

Thence arose the fatal determination to recover the old thrill, and at last the moment when I was compelled to realise that all such efforts were failures. . . . At that very moment there arose the memory of a place and time at which I had tasted the lost Joy with unusual fullness. It had been a particular hill-walk on a morning of white mist. . . . That walk I now remembered. It seemed to me that I had tasted heaven then. If only such a moment could return!

In my scheme of thought it is not blasphemous to compare the error which I was making with that error which the angel at the Sepulchre rebuked when he said to the women, "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, He is risen."

The first [error] was made at the very moment when I formulated the complaint that the "old thrill" was becoming rarer and rarer. For by that complaint I smuggled in the assumption that what I wanted was a "thrill," a state of my own mind. And there lies the deadly error. Only when your whole attention and desire are fixed on something else—whether a distant mountain, or the past, or the gods of Asgard—does the "thrill" arise. It is a by-product. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer. . . . And the second error is, having thus falsely made a state of mind your aim, to attempt to produce it. . . . To "get it again" became my constant endeavour; while reading every poem, hearing every piece of music, going for every walk, I stood anxious sentinel at my own mind to watch whether the blessed moment was beginning and to endeavour to retain it if it did. Because I was still young and the whole world of beauty was opening before me, my own officious obstructions were often swept aside and, startled into self-forgetfulness, I again tasted Joy. But far more often I frightened it away by my greedy impatience to snare it, and, even when it came, instantly destroyed it by introspection, and at all times vulgarised it by my false assumption about its nature.

Such, then, was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow "rationalism." Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless. . . . I chewed endlessly on the problem: "How can it be so beautiful and also so cruel, wasteful and futile?"

Such, then, was my position: to care for almost nothing but the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hesperides, Launcelot and the Grail, and to believe in nothing but atoms and evolution and military service.³

At the crisis and crossroads of Lewis's life stands *beauty*, pulling, tugging, drawing Lewis into the possibility of a different world than the disenchanting one that he believed in and over which he secretly grieved. Various talks and moments with colleagues and friends helped him to embrace this beauty as a witness to what is most true. Certainly, J. R. R. Tolkien's influence here is quite important, especially with the idea that the myths and fairy stories that stirred Lewis's soul were not the vain pleasures of a hopeless romantic, but a pattern of fundamental longing—a longing that can only be satisfied by the gospel. After one of the most significant of these conversations, on the evening of September 19, 1931, Tolkien wrote a poem for Lewis, *Mythopoeia*, with the telling dedicatory line: "To one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver.'" Lewis seemed to think that beauty was just an embellishment for the human experience, but Tolkien argued that it was a ground for its meaning and purpose. Tolkien's argument rested on the idea that the myths that Lewis loved and the longings that they inspired were rooted in the very nature and truth of human existence and that this truth finds its definitive form through the "myth" of Christ, the archetypal "myth" which was simultaneously historically and metaphysically true.⁴

The ideas that Tolkien expressed were dealt with at length in his later essay, *On Fairy Stories* (first given as a lecture in 1939). A few excerpts from this piece will suffice to make the point.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive." In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. . . . it denies universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

This "joy" which I have selected as the mark of the true fairy-story (or romance), or as the seal upon it, merits more consideration.

The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. . . . But in the "eucatastrophe" we see in a brief vision that the answer

may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world.

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving . . . and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; . . . The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. . . . There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.

But in God's kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending." The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. . . . All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.⁵

This notion that there is a deep, almost Augustinian signification to the "happy-ending" helped transform Lewis's view of the world, moving from atheism, to theism, and finally to Christianity as the central story upon which all others rested. Later he would write that the relationship of Christianity to the rest of human experience was like the central chapter of a novel or the crucial movement in a symphony from which all of its themes and motifs found their true significance, realization, and *telos*.

So beauty and its place in Lewis's biography. This is ground that has been well ploughed by others, but it gives our overall topic its necessary context. I will now turn to some of Lewis's writings that intersect with the subject, hopefully giving a clearer picture of how Lewis approaches the question of aesthetic judgments and the tension between the objective and subjective elements of beauty.

Receptive to the Truth of Beauty

At the opening of *The Abolition of Man* (1947), Lewis begins with a story involving Samuel Coleridge. While the main thrust of this essay on education will focus on *morality* and the need to instill and cultivate virtue (without which we only produce

“men without chests”) Lewis’s opening story is about *beauty*. The story has Coleridge visiting a waterfall in Scotland (the Corra Linn) and happening upon a group of tourists who were likewise admiring the scene. It is “*sublime*” said one of the men. “Yes,” agreed the woman, “it is *pretty*.” Coleridge found the man’s word choice fitting, but “pretty” entirely missed the mark.

Coleridge’s reaction, according to Lewis, reflects the assumption that there is an inherent quality in the sight of the waterfall that requires one response rather than another: “certain responses could be more ‘just’ or ‘ordinate’ or ‘appropriate’ to it than others . . . The man who called the cataract sublime was not intending simply to describe his own emotions about it: he was also claiming that the object was one that *merited* those emotions.”⁷ Those who would disagree with Coleridge, that is, those who argued that differing emotional responses to beauty were entirely subjective, were making a dangerous assertion, argued Lewis, one that undermined traditional goals of education. From this consideration of beauty, Lewis then went on to develop the idea of a universal and objective morality.

There are a few problems with the way Lewis makes his argument here. First, the idea of universality and objectivity in ethics cannot really be so easily elided with aesthetics. In the philosophical tradition, the idea of beauty, even if it is regarded as a transcendent platonic idea, is inevitably handled quite differently than goodness or truth. It is with beauty that the maxim *de gustibus non est disputandum*, (“in matters of taste, there can be no dispute”) is most often applied. By the end of his book, Lewis is able to muster evidence for a basic, normative universality to a moral law (which he tentatively calls the *Tao*), but he would be hard-pressed to offer similar examples of an aesthetic norm across all cultures and ages. As just one example, Coleridge and Lewis are moved by the kind of landscape that is indicative of tastes developed during the Romantic period. In earlier times, it was the pastoral scenes of gentle hills and fields, not the majestic mountains and craggy vistas that were idealized and preferred.⁸

Secondly, Lewis seems to know that this is the case. In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, for example, Lewis acknowledges that chronology and context affect an aesthetic reaction to nature: “Everyone [in biblical Israel] was close to the land, everyone vividly aware of our dependence on soils and weather. So, till a late age, was every Greek and Roman. Thus, part of what we should now perhaps call ‘appreciation of Nature’ could not then exist—all that part which is really a delight ‘in the country’ as a contrast to the town. Where towns are few and very small and where nearly everyone is on the land, one is not aware of any special thing called ‘the country.’ . . . At other periods what we call ‘the country’ is simply the world, what water is to a fish.”⁹ Unlike ethics, for which Lewis relies on a universal natural law, *beauty*, which inspires an aesthetic response, that is, an emotional and affective response, is far more contextual and varied. Lewis doesn’t believe beauty to be relativistic or entirely subjective, but it is inherently ambiguous.

That said, Lewis will repeatedly make value judgments about the *posture* of one who is confronted with beauty. For Lewis, a proper encounter with beauty should awaken both gratitude and adoration. Here the Christian has the advantage in knowing whom to thank and *whom* to adore, especially regarding natural beauty. In *Letters to Malcom*, Lewis explains further: “Gratitude exclaims, very properly: ‘How good of God to give me this,’ Adoration says: ‘What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!’ One’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun.”¹⁰ But one’s posture and response becomes an even more dominant theme when Lewis considers an encounter with *literary* beauty.¹¹

In his essay *An Experiment in Criticism* (1965), he initially alludes to characteristics of “good” literature and “bad,” but fairly early on shifts to consider what makes a good or bad *reader* (or as he says, “literary” and “unliterary”). He gives various attributes of the *few* (literary readers) and the *many* (unliterary readers), but the most important is the *effect*, the momentous, transformative experience that reading a good book gives to a good reader. It is, in fact, what Lewis refers to earlier as *Joy*: “an experience with a razor’s edge which re-makes the whole mind, which produces the ‘holy spectral shiver,’ which can make a man feel ‘really sick . . . just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife.’”¹² Good art taps into that which evokes such an experience; bad art never does. But even good art is lost on someone who approaches it poorly. A bad reader cannot even read good books well.

So, what is a good reader, a lover of literature? He is one who “receives” it, not one who “uses” it. To use art and beauty and literature is to approach it for other ends—to get something out of it, to unpack a worldview, to get a thrill, or an insight, a philosophy, or a truth. To *receive* it, on the other hand, is to love the art for its own sake, to be open to what it has to offer: “The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. . . . To value them chiefly for reflections which they may suggest to us or morals we may draw from them, is a flagrant instance of ‘using’ [texts for our own purposes] instead of ‘receiving’ [them for what they are].”¹³

One might think they hear echoes of Kant’s four “moments” of aesthetic judgment where beauty must not have a practical purpose but rather inspires a “disinterested satisfaction.”¹⁴ Yet the tone carries more of the melody of Augustine’s well-known distinction of *uti* (use) and *frui* (enjoyment) that pervades his own biographical reflections: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made.”¹⁵ In this vein, it hearkens back to Lewis’s earlier preoccupation with trying to capture and detain Joy, using and seeking moments that may yet give him the old thrill.

The user of art makes beauty an *object* that we act on, take from, apply to ourselves and our lives in order to make it a bit better or more tolerable, or more

interesting. For the receiver, beauty acts upon him, enlarges his being and his life. It gives *him* a new way to see things: “We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as our own. . . . My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.”¹⁶ It is the receiver who experiences, who *tastes* beauty, thereby developing a taste *for* beauty. It is like a lover of wine develops taste for wine over time, by sampling different wines and attending to what each uniquely offers. A user of wine—a drunkard, for example—cares nothing for the taste and so develops no taste for it, good or bad. Wine is just a means to an end.¹⁷

This idea of beauty’s transformative effect and the need to approach beauty with such an anticipation can be expressed again of the beauty of nature. And here Lewis finds Christianity and the *telos* of our redemption as the fulfillment of this aesthetic anticipation. In his most famous sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, he considers the possibility of *participating* in beauty:

We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can’t. They tell us that “beauty born of murmuring sound” will pass into a human face; but it won’t. Or not yet.

For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day *give* us the Morning Star and cause us to *put* on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*.

Meanwhile the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is a Monday morning. A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside.¹⁸

Yet what about the purpose of art in the here and now? Lewis's warning against merely *using* art and beauty is also extended to the *makers* of art. Art and beauty can influence culture, teach valuable lessons, convey the values of the artist, or critique the prevailing winds of the day. But that ought not be the *primary* goal of the artist. These other things—which are certainly important—can occur through other means. The artist takes up the craft for the sake of the art itself, to delight in its beauty. The artist is a “sub-creator” and like the Creator, does not simply reduce the making into a utensil, but delights in it—indeed *loves* it. As David Schmitt indicated in his presentation—the Creator looks and loves what he has made and invites us to do the same, “*behold, it was very good*” (Gn 1:31).

It is on this last theme, the relationship between beauty and love, that I wish to end. It is, in fact, where Lewis ends too—it is the end where his reflections point and it is also, literally, the end—in his final and greatest novel, *Till We Have Faces*, where he explores the place of beauty and love.

The story is a retelling of the myth of Psyche and Cupid—and Lewis follows the contours of the story rather closely with a few important exceptions. First, the story is told from the perspective of Psyche's older half-sister, Orual. Unlike Psyche who is bright and beautiful, Orual is ugly and ill-favored by her family. Nonetheless, she showers Psyche with love and affection—almost as a surrogate mother. Through a series of events, Psyche tells Orual that she has married the divine king of the Grey Mountain, and that though she is forbidden from seeing the gentle god's face, she lives in a beautiful palace in bliss. Orual is deeply jealous, not for the god but for Psyche, whom she loves with a suffocating, selfish, possessive love. She is angry with the gods and accuses them of stealing from her the love and affections of Psyche. She refuses to see her sister's happiness even as the god's palace is invisible to her. And so, she convinces her sister to look upon her divine husband's face at night after he falls asleep in her arms, triggering his angry flight and Psyche's exile.

Orual continues to tell the story of her own life as a successful ruler of her people. Externally her ugliness is hidden by a veil, and she becomes both feared and admired as a capable, if Machiavellian, ruler and queen. But internally the spiritual ugliness of her twisted loves through which she devours all her relationships—friends, lovers, family—is increasingly revealed, first to the reader, but finally to her. Her memoir, which began as an allegation and indictment against the gods, becomes now a confession of her own broken life, turned in on itself. She had decried the gods who stayed silent and hidden from her, only to realize that it was she that was hiding all along. She writes: “How can [the gods] meet us face to face till we have faces?”

In the end, she has a vision of redemption, both hers and Psyche's, as the divine bridegroom comes to meet them:

“He is coming” they said. “The god is coming into his house. The god comes to judge Orual.”

If Psyche had not held me by the hand I should have sunk down. She had brought me now to the very edge of the pool. The air was growing brighter and brighter about us; as if something had set it on fire. Each breath I drew let into me new terror, joy, overpowering sweetness. I was pierced through and through with the arrows of it. I was being unmade. I was no one. But that's little to say; rather, Psyche herself was, in a manner, no one. I loved her as I would once have thought it impossible to love, would have died any death for her. And yet, it was not, not now, she that really counted. Or if she counted (and oh, gloriously she did) it was for another's sake. The earth and stars and sun, all that was or will be, existed for his sake. And he was coming. The most dreadful, the most beautiful, the only dread and beauty there is, was coming. The pillars on the far side of the pool flushed with his approach. I cast down my eyes.

Two figures, reflections, their feet to Psyche's feet and mine, stood head downward in the water. But whose were they? Two Psyches, . . . both beautiful (if that mattered now) beyond all imagining, yet not exactly the same.

"You also are Psyche," came a great voice."¹⁹

So what is beauty here? Ultimately it is neither an objective thing nor a purely subjective experience. Lewis recognizes that even these are derivative of something greater even as truth is derivative of reality.²⁰ "And the greatest of these is . . . *love*." It is love that calls beauty into existence as its handmaiden, leading people not to desire beauty as such, but to desire He who is *beauty itself*. "Our whole destiny seems to lie . . . in being as little as possible ourselves, in acquiring a fragrance that is not our own but borrowed, in becoming clean mirrors filled with the image of a face that is not our ours."²¹ Reflecting the beauty of this face—in which is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" (2 Cor 4:6)—we are drawn to love him who first loves us and, in that love, makes all things lovely.²²

Endnotes

- 1 E.g., Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo* (fourth century BC); Immanuel Kant's, *Critique of Judgment* (1790); and Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).
- 2 C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *Essay Collection*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 141.
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 204–214.
- 4 For C. S. Lewis's view of scripture see Kevin Vanhoozer, "On Scripture," in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 75–88.
- 5 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Poems and Stories* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 175, 178–180.
- 6 C. S. Lewis, "The Grand Miracle," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 76–85.
- 7 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (1944), (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 25.
- 8 Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959).
- 9 C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), 76–77.
- 10 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), 89–90.
- 11 See David Rozema, "C. S. Lewis on the Transformative Power of (Theory-Free) Literature," in *C. S. Lewis and the Arts: Creativity in the Shadowlands* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2013), 79–91.
- 12 C. S. Lewis, "On Different Tastes in Literature," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 121. See also Lewis's discussion of Samuel Pepys's experience of beauty in his essay, "Transposition," in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 91–115.
- 13 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997), 19, 82–83.
- 14 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790).
- 15 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10, xxviii.
- 16 Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 137, 140–41.
- 17 Rozema, 83–85.
- 18 C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," (1941) in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 42–43, 45.
- 19 C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 350–351.
- 20 Cf. note 2, above. Lewis will often distinguish "truth" as a second-order articulation and formulation about reality and reality itself as the primary-order, embodied more naturally in myth and history, e.g., "doctrines' . . . are translations into our concept and ideas of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection," (Letter to Arthur Greeves, Oct. 18, 1931), *Collected Letters, Vol. 1*, ed. Walter Hopper (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 977.
- 21 C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," (1939) in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 8.
- 22 Luther, Heidelberg Disputation (1518), LW 31, 41: "The love of God does not find but creates that which is pleasing to it."

*Homiletical
Helps*

Preaching Matthew

Jeffrey Gibbs

Editor's note

This essay appeared in the Fall 2016 issue of Concordia Journal. It gives a longer view of preaching for the upcoming church year which, for the Three-Year Lectionary, focuses on the Gospel of Matthew. In this essay, Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs highlights major themes in Matthew that the preacher will want to keep in mind while developing sermons for God's people. Another helpful preaching resource can be found online at Concordiatheology.org where Dr. Gibbs, Dr. David Schmitt, and Dr. Ronald Rall discuss preaching on Matthew. And of course, we would be remiss if we did not mention Dr. Gibbs's excellent commentary on Matthew's Gospel published by Concordia Publishing House.

Formal Considerations (Method, Genre, etc.)

I have three suggestions here. The first is that as you consider the assigned Gospel text for any given Sunday, you should feel free to expand it or reduce it, that is, to take in hand either more or fewer verses. The second encouragement is that in preaching texts from Matthew, you make it your goal to preach the particular message of the text itself and not be distracted by some related theological meaning. The third consideration has to do with parables. The lectionary schedule guides us into preaching from parables fairly often, and I encourage you to take seriously some basic hermeneutical principles. Let me comment on each one of these suggestions in turn.

Far be it from me to criticize the good people who decided the limits (that is, the beginnings and the endings) of the Gospel readings for Series A, Matthew texts. Let the one who is without pericopal sin cast the first stone! Just on the face of it, however, it's a reasonable thought that some of the divisions into units will be more faithful to the flow of Matthew's Gospel, and some of the divisions will be less helpful. Working carefully and humbly and with as many helps as you need, you

should feel free to use either more verses or fewer verses than the ones assigned. A glance at the lectionary listing of texts, for instance, shows that the following are offered: Matthew 5:13–20, 10:21–33, and 13:44–52. None of these, in my opinion, are helpfully delimited units. Matthew 5:13–16 is clearly a unit, offering Jesus’s “salt and light” sayings that naturally follow as the “now what?” after the blessings bestowed in 5:3–12. On the other hand, Matthew 5:17–20 presents a noteworthy and somewhat abrupt change in subject matter; in my judgment, it is the most exegetically challenging unit in the entire Gospel. One or the other would do—it would be impossible to try to treat them together. It would be a mistake to try to preach one sermon based on Matthew 5:13–20.

When it comes to Matthew 10:21–33, I can begin by noting that scholars have struggled long and hard over how to perceive the structural parts of Matthew’s missionary discourse (10:5–42). I am not aware, however, of anyone who would run verses 21–33 together as a coherent unit. I would argue, to the contrary, that there is a major break in thought between the difficult saying in 10:23, and 10:24–42. Part of the difficulty in preaching the verses leading up to and including 10:23 is that they bear the unmistakable stamp of historical particularity—their meaning is strongly connected to unique features of the apostles’ first-century mission. With verse 24, however, Jesus’s words become more general, and so therefore more generally applicable to believers in all ages, including our own.

Finally, Matthew 13:44–52 (however one interprets these parables) takes two small parables that are pretty clearly parallel in meaning (the Treasure and the Pearl) and joins them with the Dragnet that has strong affinities with the Wheat and the Weeds earlier in the chapter—but not with the two parables that precede. On the assumption that sermons ought to have a unified message, it’s hard to imagine preaching on all of these verses in one sermon. My first point, then, is simple enough. Do your homework, stay humble, but realize that you don’t have to follow the limits of the texts as assigned in the lectionary.

My second somewhat formal (or procedural) suggestion is that you strive to preach the message of the text, and not to use the text as a vehicle for something else. It might seem as though I’m saying something that doesn’t need to be said, and when said out loud and in public, that might be true. But there are all sorts of forces at work—some of them theological and some of them merely human—that can militate mightily against doing what I, at least, was exhorted and trained to do by the sainted Gerhard Aho. That is, in this sense every sermon—unless otherwise consciously intended, as in a topical or doctrinal or catechetical sermon—should be an exposition of what the text says, its particular message.

On the human level, this is difficult to do for at least two reasons. First, it’s hard to study texts carefully and calmly and to postpone trying to apply a text until I know what it actually says. The demands on parish pastors are endless, and it

is easy (I know, because I've done it plenty of times) to engage in "drive-by exegesis." That is, you make a quick approach at the text, passing it by at high speed on your way to a hospital or an appointment or a meeting, and then leaving it behind on the assumption that you've understood what it is about and you're ready to apply the text to Christian existence today.

The second human reason that makes it difficult to preach the message of a given text is what James Voelz (and many others) calls our own "second text." That is, my experiences and my memories and my predilections of all kinds are constantly at work to guide (or perhaps mis-guide) how I read a text. This is always the case, and so every preacher should be aware of just how difficult in practice it can be to preach the message of the text.

In terms of theological distractions that might prevent me from preaching the message of a text, in our Lutheran circles perhaps the most common mistake is to make the proper distinction of law and gospel into either an interpretive lens through which to discern a text's meaning on the one hand, or else (and worse) to assume that "law and gospel" should function as the outline of the sermon itself. Not every text in Matthew contains law. Not every text in Matthew contains gospel. To be sure, every text in Matthew (and the rest of the Scripture) must be understood *in light of* the proper distinction of law and gospel.

But "where is the law?" or "where is the gospel?" are not the first questions to ask when studying a text with the goal of preaching on the basis of that text. The first question is simply this: what is this text about? What is the message of this text? Once that has been discerned, then all our Lutheran distinctives can and should be active and never be left behind. And I realize that it is easier to say what I am saying than it is to actually do it. Nevertheless, when preaching a sermon that is supposed to be based on a given text, what is to be preached is the message of that text in such a way that properly distinguishes law and gospel.

Other prior theological commitments can also interfere with appropriately reading a pericope, in Matthew or anywhere in Scripture. I might mention briefly here one particular example, simply because over the years I have had the chance gently to re-direct the focus on students in the process of studying it. I'm referring to the account of Jesus's baptism (Mt 3:13–17). Here the danger is that the powerfully developed (and correct!) Lutheran doctrine of Christian baptism will lead to an abuse or (at times) an almost complete neglect of the message of the text. To state the matter bluntly, these verses recount a shockingly unexpected turn of events, namely that Jesus, the perfect Son of God, was baptized by John the Baptist who was administering a baptism of repentance to sinners. John himself objected to this possibility and tried to prevent it from happening. Jesus then speaks to John (3:15), teaching and redirecting him and winning his acceptance.

The text does not, however, say anything directly about Christian baptism;

not one thing directly. We are invited to ponder the reasons and the possible results of *Jesus's* baptism—why John found it surprising (to say the least) when the Father clearly approved, what it means for Jesus to be God's Son down there in the Jordan River, what it meant for John and Jesus (note “us,” not “me”) to “fulfill all righteousness,” what the Father's approval and the Spirit's descent say about the fact that *Jesus was baptized*. The text is a rich source of good news about the Lord Jesus. Often, however, it becomes a launching point for a perfectly orthodox sermon about Christian baptism—except that's not what the text is about.

My third formal or methodological suggestion has to do with parables. No one, of course, can completely articulate the intricacies of parable interpretations. For that matter, there is no absolute agreement on how to interpret the parables of Jesus, or even what precisely counts as a parable. (If you want to know what I think, I can refer you to the discussion in *Matthew 11:2–20:34* [CPH, 2006], 659–673.) By way of a small and fairly obvious suggestion, the old claim that a parable only has one point of comparison has a very dubious pedigree, and it is scarcely helpful in any way. It comes from the work of Adolf Jülicher, a classic European liberal scholar who denied the authenticity of the dominical interpretation of the parables! To be sure, in a way a parable is chiefly about one thing—every text is chiefly about one thing. But some of the parables are very complex, with smaller aspects of the story bearing theological significance—as Christ's own interpretations make plain enough. The challenge consists in trying to cautiously figure out how much of the parable, or how many of its features, bears a theological meaning that contributes to the one thing the parable is chiefly about.

I do have one larger suggestion, however, and it pertains to virtually all of the parables in Matthew. The parables of Jesus concerning the reign of God (more on that phrase below) function as divine revelation. Their primary purpose is to *disclose* or *reveal* what it is like, or what it will be like when God comes into Israel and the world to establish his rule in Christ Jesus. So, for example, the parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 reveals something of what the earthly ministry of Jesus, that is, the reign of God, is like. The parable of the Ten Maidens reveals something of what the final consummation of the reign of God in Jesus will be like. Before trying or thinking to apply the parables “to our lives today,” ask, “What does this tell me about Jesus and his ministry, and what difference does *that* make?”

Along these lines, then, as far as I can tell every one of the reign-of-God-parables reveals that that kingly rule comes (especially in the present time) in an unexpected or exaggerated or shocking sort of way; it is not *like* anything people ordinarily expect. Farmers, for instance, do not sow seed on all of those kinds of soil. Nobody does that because it is profligate and wasteful and (especially) *inefficient*—but that's what God's reign in Jesus is like and it explains why so many people opposed Jesus in his earthly ministry, as Matthew 12 powerfully narrates. No one really would sell all of his

possessions in order to own a single pearl—but that’s what God’s reign in Jesus is like. It’s almost impossible to imagine a master forgiving a debt of ten-thousand talents, and equally difficult to imagine a servant forgiven such a debt and not being willing to forgive a fellow servant. No farmer in his right mind lets weeds grow up with wheat—but that’s what God’s reign in Jesus is like. The parables of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel must first be read as revealing what God’s reign in Jesus is like—and then that is the thing to be applied and proclaimed in a Lutheran, properly-distinguishing-law-and-gospel sort of way.

Material Considerations for Preaching Matthew

The brief comments above on the genre of parables inevitably brought up “the reign of God,” and that is a natural segue into comments on three material or theological aspects of preaching from the Gospel according to Matthew.

The Βασιλεία of God

Let me begin by saying that although in Matthew’s Gospel the Lord Jesus most often is reported as teaching on or about “the reign of the heavens” (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν), there are four instances where he explicitly speaks of “the reign *of God*” (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ). For all practical purposes (and in light of many parallels in Mark and Luke where “reign of God” is parallel to Matthew’s “reign of the heavens”), the two phrases in Matthew mean the same thing. But that is precisely the question which, in my judgment, needs a careful articulation and understanding for preaching.

Sometimes I am asked what the Gospel of Matthew is about. The basic answer, of course, is the predictable one: Jesus. But the next answer, which elaborates on the first, comes quickly to mind; the Gospel of Matthew is about the reign of heaven, the reign of God, the βασιλεία. Not only does Jesus speak and teach in dozens of places about it. Matthew, the evangelist whom we hold to be inspired and fully reliable in every way, chooses to *summarize* the content of Jesus’s public preaching and teaching like this:

From then, Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the βασιλεία of heaven stands near!” (4:17)

And [Jesus] began going around in the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Good News of the βασιλεία and healing every disease and every sickness in the people. (4:23)

And Jesus continued to go around all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Good News of the βασιλεία and healing every disease and every sickness. (9:35)

These Twelve Jesus sent, commanding them and saying, “as you go, preach saying, ‘The βασιλεία of heaven stands near.’” (10:5, 7)

Think of it this way. Ask *Matthew* the question, “What was Jesus all about?” He would say, “The βασιλεία of God.” Every part and every text in Matthew’s Gospel has to be understood as it relates to this reality, namely, that in Jesus, God’s βασιλεία has begun to manifest itself in the world. A new thing, long foretold, has now begun. It will last until the Day when it is consummated, when the Son of Man returns as Judge of the living and the dead.

If the βασιλεία is that important in Matthew, then it behooves us to be as clear as we can about what it refers to. Here I would strongly encourage my readers to develop a new way of speaking. The English word “kingdom,” I fear, evokes in the minds of most listeners (if they are listening to such a churchy word at all) connotations of territory and space, a place. Not a few people hear “the kingdom of heaven” and they think this refers to “being in heaven,” that is, to the interim state of the soul with Christ between the moment of death and Christ’ return in glory. This is completely wrong; the “reign of heaven/God” never refers to this promised rest.

Individual texts emphasize, of course, now one aspect of God’s βασιλεία, now another. I would argue, however, that the phrase always refers to God’s *activity*, God’s *deeds in Christ* that have begun now in Israel and the world. The “kingdom” refers to God’s *royal ruling* in Jesus to reclaim people (and create a new community) and ultimately to restore the entire creation. This is why Jesus’s miracles can be regarded as “signs of the reign of God.” Sin, demonic possession, sickness, chaos, and death are all manifestations of the world’s sinful brokenness; they are prime examples of the reign of Satan. This is why Jesus, bringer of reign of God, forgives, exorcises, heals, calms, and resurrects. He shows, in proleptic or anticipatory fashion (more on that in a second), what God’s reign is for and what God’s reign ultimately will be like. Creation restored. Satan’s dominion broken and shattered. People—body-and-soul people—forgiven and healed and raised up.

Two more suggestions about understanding (and preaching) the reign of God. The first is that, like the truth of Jesus’s *authority* in Matthew, the reign of God can mean good news and salvation—and it can also mean judgment. With regard to Jesus’s authority, one might say that if you approach him with needs and helplessness and faith, then his authority is *for* you to forgive and heal and restore. If, however, you approach his authority in opposition, in hatred, in unbelief, then his authority will confront and rebuke and ultimately condemn you. For all authority has been given to him.

So it is with the reign of God in Jesus. It encompasses both (as we might say) law and gospel, judgment and salvation. God is re-establishing his reign in Israel and in the world. He *will* do that. Many of Jesus’s parables of the reign of God, however,

express a theme of separation, of dividing the wheat from the weeds, the good fish from bad, the wise maidens from the foolish, and so on. For such as acknowledge that they are poor in spirit, helpless children, babies to whom everything must be revealed—for them his reign comes as inexpressible good news. For such as oppose and seek to destroy or dishonor Jesus, God's reign still will come and you cannot stop it. But the reign of God will come against you as fire, as outer darkness, as weeping and gnashing of teeth.

One final thing about the reign of God, that is, about the theological center of the Gospel of Matthew. Because it comes already but has not yet come in fullness, the present manifestations of the reign of God in Jesus will often seem weak and hidden and impotent. The seed sown often will not bear fruit. From the day of John the Baptist the reign of God—of almighty, omnipotent, omniscient *God*—suffers violence and violent men are seeking to snatch it away. Healed and restored for a time, limbs and legs will again weaken and wither, and men will die. Eschatological Elijah's head is severed by a two-bit puppet monarch and presented to an adulterous and jealous wife on a plate. The King himself will first willingly and powerfully become weak, will reign from a cross, will be rejected and abandoned by his own Father—only to be raised in immortal triumph and be installed into the place of all authority and omnipresent blessing for his church. The Gospel of Matthew, with the entire New Testament, testifies to the hiddenness of God's work in Christ, the weakness of the kingdom.

Matthew's Gospel Language

As I indicated briefly above, I think that “good news” or “gospel” is a smaller category than “the reign of God,” so to speak. The latter refers to all of God's deeds in Christ which are law and gospel, judgment and salvation; the reign of God is like a dragnet that in the end both cherishes and saves the good fish and destroys the rotten ones. The gospel is, to be sure, the gospel *of the reign of God*, but as we normally use the word, it refers not to the judgment aspects of God's reign but to the saving and redeeming actions.

And the good news in Matthew is not often expressed in the vocabulary of St. Paul or St. John, if I can say it that way. For Paul, good news comes to expression as justification, or redemption, as union with Christ's death and resurrection or forgiveness of sins. There is, of course, a wide array of expressions for the gospel in Paul. John, too, has his own favorite ways of proclaiming good news: light in darkness, new birth, and so on.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks plenty of good news, but there is something of a distinctive idiom. Often it is, not surprisingly, the language of the reign of God. It can be very, very good news to hear that God in Christ has come to reign over me—especially if I realize that I am helpless without him and desperately in need of his

restoring and protecting reign. For my money, the most powerful and (exegetically) most significant gospel proclamation in Matthew's Gospel is the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the reign of heaven." If Paul had written that proclamation, he might have said, "Redeemed are those who are enslaved, for Christ has set them free." And if John had written it, he might have said, "Enlightened are those who were in darkness, for Christ is the light of the world." Matthew likes the theme of the mighty and gracious God coming to reign in mercy over the small and the ignorant, the powerless and the weak. In Matthew, Jesus preaches good news to the poor (5:3; 11:5), even as the Father reveals the mysteries of the reign of God to helpless infants rather than those who regard themselves as wise and understanding (11:25–27). In Matthew, the weary find Sabbath rest in the Sabbath's Lord (11:28–12:8). Forgiveness comes through Jesus's work, to be sure (9:1–9; 26:28). But more often Jesus is power for the powerless, wisdom for the ignorant, and significance for children who have no status or little social significance. Indeed, only those who turn and become like children will enter the reign of heaven on the last day (18:1–3).

The Call to Discipleship

One final observant about the content of Matthew's Gospel and preaching on it. In Matthew's narrative you become a disciple because Jesus calls you to follow him and because the Father reveals the truth to you; no one follows by his own reason or strength. No one follows Jesus because he is sufficiently strong or committed—you begin as the poor in spirit, as the mourners, as the powerless and the hungry who need God to satisfy. And such you remain at all times.

Nevertheless, following Jesus entails also obeying him, and although Matthew gives us virtually nothing explicit about the Holy Spirit's empowerment and indwelling, following Jesus means that you will (at times, at least) obey him. This means that preaching from Matthew texts will, when appropriate, involved exhorting the people of God to live lives of good work that will act as salt and light in a rotting and dark world. That exhortation will not return empty—at least, not always. It will bear fruit.

One sometimes hears it said that Lutheran preaching will not exhort to good works, or at least will not end on such a note. This is an over-simplification. Of course the exhortations to follow Jesus in obedience will be done in such a way that properly distinguishes law and gospel. But texts, perhaps especially from some of the great discourses in Matthew, lend themselves to exhorting believers to the new life of obedience. When Jesus tells his disciples to forgive one another, he means it and he expects it to happen. And, to borrow from Paul's idiom, because we are in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we believers will be able to forgive one another, even if it takes a while or has to be repeated over and over. When Jesus tells his disciples not to serve two masters, or to love their enemies, this means that the preacher can tell Jesus'

disciples today the same thing—and expect them to do it. Again, we do not do it in a Roman Catholic or an Evangelical sort of way. We always distinguish law and gospel properly. But preaching Matthew at times will naturally mean saying to God’s people, “We who are following the crucified, risen, and reigning Jesus are supposed to love one another. Repent of your coldness of heart, and begin to do that again—today.”

Conclusion

So . . . may the Spirit help us all as in Series A we begin by studying, pondering texts from the Gospel according to Matthew and asking the question, “What is this about?” May that same Spirit lend energy and creativity, faithfulness and eloquence to proclaiming and applying textual messages to the lives of God’s people. The reign of God has come near in Jesus. We pray that his reign may come among us as well. With the whole church, we pray, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

Endnotes

- 1 See the discussion in James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 208–211.

Reviews

OVERCOMING LIFE'S SORROWS:
Learning from Jeremiah. By R. Reed
Lessing. Concordia Publishing House,
2021. Paper. 288 pages. \$15.99.

Reed Lessing has been a prolific contributor of Old Testament commentaries. *Overcoming Life's Sorrows* is a departure from that genre. Lessing acknowledges that departure while also stating that this book is not a series of devotional reflections. Instead, he offers something unique. Far more substantial than devotionals yet void of the detailed textual notes and analysis of a commentary, *Overcoming Life's Sorrows* may best be described as a series of pastoral care sessions. The pastoral character of the book is heard in its sermon-like calling for the reader to enter the text and so identify with Jeremiah in his sorrow and hope. With such an approach, it is not surprising to find the book to be intensely personal as Lessing notes his own identification with Jeremiah in sorrow along with his shared hope in the God who tends to the sorrowful.

Though not a commentary, *Overcoming Life's Sorrows* gives attention to the matters that commentaries often address. The first chapter, entitled "Meet Jeremiah," presents a thoughtful summary of the historical context in which Jeremiah lived, served, and suffered. The historical survey of Jeremiah's world could be used by a pastor, student, or congregation member in preparation for studying Jeremiah.

The initial chapter is followed

by twenty-four chapters each entitled "Overcoming through . . ." with a unique means by which both Jeremiah and Lessing have overcome in Christ. That each chapter title names the means by which the faithful overcome in Christ rather than naming what is being overcome is indicative of the book's focus upon hope that conquers sorrow. The final chapter breaks the pattern of chapter titles with the summary question, "Who Overcomes?" It ties together the threads present throughout the book, namely, Christ's care for his beloved.

The substantial weight of the book is also evident in its dynamic of combining literary analysis and theological application. That dynamic is reminiscent of a commentary, yet it is complemented by illustrations that go beyond Jeremiah as one might find in a sermon along with personal anecdotes. Through this approach, Lessing brings the reader into the theology of Jeremiah without it being overwhelming. Not only does this open the book to a broader readership, it reserves sorrow as the book's overwhelming matter, but not before the God proclaimed by Jeremiah and Lessing.

The combination of literary analysis with pastoral application is evident in passages like the following. "Jeremiah presents a fragmented, disassembled book because that's what life looks like during deep sorrow. It's anything but neat and tidy; that's why Jeremiah gives us a helter-skelter book that matches our helter-skelter lives. The prophet leaves

us with a hodgepodge of a book because that's the nature of life after loss. The literary shapelessness of Jeremiah mirrors the fragmentary nature of our sorrow. The book is messy because it wants to reflect the messiness of a life beset by deep sadness" (31).

Similarly, the book's realistic tone that does not deny suffering, but proclaims that it is overcome in Christ is illustrated by Lessing's treatment of Jeremiah 31:15, 17. "God acknowledges Rachel's unspeakable grief. But He doesn't leave it at that. . . . Rachel's deep pain will be replaced with deep joy. . . . None of this depends upon our grit and determination. It all depends upon God's resolute faithfulness and solidarity with His people. Just as Rachel remembers the past with angst, so does God. . . . We don't deny grief, but neither will we allow it to destroy us. 'Utterly.' It's God's resolve and our certain hope!" (219–220).

Lessing has produced another gift for the church. *Overcoming Life's Sorrows* is a great resource for pastor and parishioner as they faithfully face life in a fallen world. But it is not only for pastor and parishioner; it is a resource for all because all know sorrow, and all are blessed to hear the word of Jeremiah that proclaims Christ who overcomes sorrow.

Kevin Golden

KIERKEGAARD AND LUTHER. *By David Lawrence Coe. Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020. Hardcover. 274 pages. \$105.00.*

Kierkegaard thought that Lutheranism, the medieval corrective to Roman Catholicism, needed correcting. And, as Coe observes, Kierkegaard "saw his own writing as a corrective" aimed to prevent (Danish) Lutherans "from existentially taking in vain Luther and the significance of Luther's life." The corrective would be a straightforward recovery of Luther, unless, as Kierkegaard sometimes suspected, Luther was the cause of Lutheranism's problem because he overemphasized "Christ as gift" and neglected "Christ as pattern." Coe's aim is to demonstrate that the problem "does not lie with Luther" by showing that "Kierkegaard missed and misjudged" that Luther was much closer to Kierkegaard's *dialectical* theology.

I italicize "dialectical" because the term, along with paradox, indirection, lacunae, and so on ought be forbidden when commenting on Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is purposefully unclear because he intended to force his readers to the clarity of a personal confession. He opposed academic critical thinkers who lectured endlessly about the failings of this or that point of view but lacked the understanding that the purpose of knowing is to inform actions which express one's personal purpose. This purpose was "to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die." To be sure, Coe's book is an academic treatment of a crucial and complex question

about what has gone wrong with Lutheranism and if Luther is the cause or the corrective. So, I apologize if my commitment to simplicity distorts the complexity of Coe's argument.

There are three parts to every argument; analysis of the problem, imagining a solution, and specifying the means by which we move from disorder to order. Coe is mainly concerned with an analysis of the disorder. How simply can this disorder be stated? The Lutheran account of the gospel has developed an awkward relationship or perhaps an allergic reaction to the law. The technical term is *antinomianism*—against law. Antinomianism makes it impossible to pray with the psalm, “O Lord, and I follow your commands. I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly” or to know what Jesus meant by claiming not to abolish but to fulfill the law. The problem is well known and unsolved at least since Kierkegaard.

Antinomianism is an especially keen problem for those of us who recognize and appreciate the immense pastoral importance of distinguishing law and gospel when face to face with a struggling single individual. Yet somehow this pastoral theology took a theoretical turn that put the law in a toxic relationship with the gospel. As such, Lutherans find it difficult to simultaneously affirm that salvation is by grace apart from the works of the law *and* that the Christian's life is one of obedient striving “to live a life patterned after the life of Christ.” Kierkegaard argued that the antinomian divorce of

gospel from law offered a cut-rate grace that leaps over anguished repentance and “degenerate(s) into indulgence and its praxis into quietism.” Luther's “original fervor” that is “power in actuality” is displaced by a boring “mediocrity” where “grace alone does everything . . . so everything can remain as it was before” (Bonhoeffer). But if Kierkegaard is a Lutheran thinker, then his *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing and Works of Love* (among others) demonstrate a Lutheranism where the gospel's promise of forgiveness puts us on the lifelong path in the passionate pursuit of edification.

Coe aims to make Kierkegaard a Lutheran by demonstrating the “confluent correctives and dialectical concord” between Kierkegaard and Luther. What joins Kierkegaard to Luther is not an argument but Luther's experience of *anfættung*/affliction and Kierkegaard's focus on anxiety *cum* despair. The sign of this agreement is the shared existential experience of the “sigh” which is the body's spontaneous expression of the soul's struggle to make sense of existing. The “sigh” leaves behind the academic concern to sift through Kierkegaard's reading of Luther to the question of whether or not Kierkegaard is Lutheran when addressing the modern existential problems of anxiety and despair. If he is a Lutheran, then *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness unto Death* demonstrate how a thick theology of grace not only is not antinomian but rather liberates the sin-sick soul to freely enter, with fear and trembling, the

depths of anxiety and despair. There, in that struggle, we discover the truth of repentance and forgiveness which frees us to continually pursue “the crucial thing . . . to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.”

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AMERICAN AWAKENING: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time. *By Joshua Mitchell.*
Encounter Books, 2020. Hardcover.
296 pages. \$28.99.

Anyone looking for a guide to contemporary American politics and life will benefit from reading this timely and incisive book. Further, Christians who have rightly perceived religious overtones in political rhetoric and activities over the last few decades, while experiencing the loss of religious contemplation within the church will appreciate much of Mitchell’s analysis. In short, this book is approachable, compelling, and commended to all American Christians, especially those who care deeply about both the church and state.

Mitchell’s primary argument rests on opposing what he calls “liberal politics of competence” with the issues he sees as afflictions of our day: identity politics, bipolarity, and addiction. Identity politics is the subject of the first of his two sections, and the remaining are tied together in the latter section. He demonstrates that each of these afflictions runs deep in our society, and

when linked together are disastrous for humans on many levels. Finally, he also includes reflections on the politics of what he calls the “Wuhan flu” pandemic, as real time confirmation of his analysis.

Much of Mitchell’s criticism of identity politics is similar to the diagnoses offered by others, but his analysis includes a spiritual bent. Thus, rather than understanding identity politics as simply a political problem, Mitchell demonstrates the religious elements of identity politics. Mitchell argues that “the collapse of the mainline Protestant churches shunted the idea of transgression and innocence from religion into politics” (33). In this he offers a lens of understanding identity politics as a battle between those who are innocent and the transgressors, a category that in Christianity includes the divine scapegoat, while in American politics the transgressors themselves must be scapegoated. Whereas Christianity sees all men as equally transgressors, and only God himself as innocent, identity politics posits that groups of individuals who have been harmed must be seen as innocent, and those who have done the harm, or the decedents thereof, as the transgressors.

According to Mitchell, identity politics has become even more formidable because “after 1989, it has appeared to many that the long labor of history, with its never-ending competition and war between nations, is at an end, so that we may ease up, or let off entirely, on the disciplining demand for competence” (35). It does not take

much to understand these comments in light of the promised judgment day, and indeed Mitchell engages St. Augustine to demonstrate that identity politics depends on a twisted understanding of Christianity in order to find itself a fitting home in people who believe that they have fully repudiated Christianity.

Mitchell's understanding of identity politics also includes the fact that an ever-stronger growing state provides fewer occasions for citizens to build their world together. As this happens, citizens become susceptible to the other two afflictions that he mentions: bipolarity and addiction. Mitchell posits bipolarity as an oscillation between *management society* and *selfie man*. *Management society* is "that arrangement in which liberal citizens become small and insignificant and renounce their liberty" (140), while *selfie man* "has insulated citizens from one another while at the same time giving them the opportunity for heretofore undreamed-of self-elevation" (144). The result is that citizens look up not to God, but to global managers, yet are curved in on themselves as they snap their selfies.

Finally, Mitchell turns his arrows toward addiction, arguing with Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that we have substituted supplements to life for the real things of life, and this addiction to the supplements has consequences. From plastic water bottles for tap water to the Facebook friendship for real companionship to various governmental plagues, the supplements in our world have become substitutes for our world,

and the problems they cause are not being dealt with well.

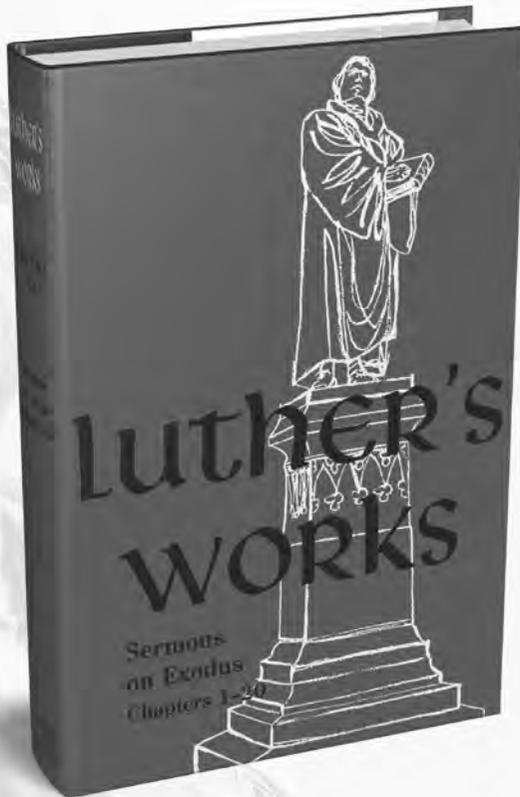
Mitchell finally suggests three pillars for renewal that we should build on. First, a renewed commitment to the middle class; second, healing the wound of slavery; and finally, having a modest foreign policy, while focusing more on domestic concerns. The challenge, he asserts, is not at all uncommon or easy: it is the challenge of overcoming human pride.

There is much to be commended in Mitchell's writing, and it is a good guide for a Christian who is trying to make sense of the way things politically have changed since the 1990s. Further, Mitchell weaves theological care and concern throughout the book, and is unafraid to demonstrate a fidelity to Christ as the divine scapegoat, and the only one who can fully restore innocence to those who are transgressors, which indeed is all people. To that end, the book is well worth reading. Two concerns arise, however. First, his placement of identity politics as the fruits of Christianity is, in my opinion, misleading and inconsistent with other authors. Placing it at the end of liberalism seems better, though the repurposing of some Christian teachings is a keen insight. Second, though Mitchell rightly notes that there is no solution to be found in the world, he remains convinced that liberal competence can save the day. If identity politics is the end of liberalism, then we must begin to rethink the project as a whole. Regardless, Mitchell accurately articulates the afflictions, and provides

us with much to consider for faithful living. He provides a helpful reflection on the need and place for the Christian voice in American society.

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