

## An Hour of Beauty

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September 10, 2017

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 12:22-27  
from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*

He continued this subject with his disciples "Don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body.

Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more. "Has anyone by fussing before the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? if fussing can't even do that, why fuss at all?

Walk into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don't fuss with their appearance – but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

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The epic flooding and devastating hurricanes that hammered Texas and Louisiana this past week have given us unforgettable images of daring heroism, as well as tragic suffering. As the loss of life continues to mount and thousands remain in shelters, another hurricane, Irma, wound itself into a category 5 storm and smashed into Florida. Then there was the devastating earthquake in Mexico. Seventy-five wildfires burn across the West, many nowhere near contained. Resources of local, state and national agencies are stretched thin in the face of these disasters. Some Red Cross volunteers from Marin are in Oregon sheltering those who have been evacuated from towns in the path of raging wild fires. Other Red Crossers from here are in Houston or headed to Florida. We pray for those impacted. We send donations.

Also on our minds are the continued provocative actions of North Korea and the cruel announcement by Attorney General Sessions that the President had decided to end DACA, the order President Obama signed that permitted over 800,000 children of undocumented parents to remain in this country legally. These are, my friends, hard times.

I remembered this week a two-week vacation trip through Northern California and Oregon with four German friends in 2004 during the second gulf war. We traveled through some of the most beautiful natural beauty on this planet – Muir Woods, the north coast between here and Mendocino bursting with spring flowers, the Giant Redwoods of Humboldt County, the lush forests and flowing rivers of central Oregon, Crater Lake with over ten feet of snow still surrounding its rim, Lake Tahoe, Yosemite with its magnificent thundering falls and spectacular dogwoods, and finally Point Lobos on the Monterey Peninsula with its luminous, mystical light and the majestic interplay of ocean, cypress trees and seals.

Each day we took in this immense beauty, and each day we were reminded of the Iraq war through a glimpse of a headline or by a phone call from Germany from the son of one of our traveling companions, or from a troubled Viet Nam vet who filled our propane tanks one morning in Truckee. Each day the nourishing beauty of the earth fed us, and each day the depressing reality of war drained us. As we prepared our evening meals together, we talked about the highlights we had seen, shared our grief over the war news, and talked about ways to continue working for peace.

This experience reminded me again of how important family, friends and community are when times are hard. Times like now. It also reminded me of something I read recently that underscores how important it is to have some beauty in our lives every day.

In his book, *The Muses Among Us*, Kim Stafford tells this story about his grandmother who lived on a small Kansas farm at the end of the nineteenth century:

There is a story in my family that my grandmother's physician, during her pregnancy, prescribed an hour of beauty a day. There is no report of dietary restrictions, exercises. No, she was simply to take her music, or her sunset, or the unworked colors of the quilt spread by the lamp before her. While others did chores, she sat on the porch and watched the slow inevitability of the twilight, heard the crickets chanting the beginning of the world of night by night. She was to take the roll of pasture by evening's mist, the looming shape of the barn and of elm, the warm September moon hung low over the corn rows. She was to take these things to nourish her child, my mother, within her.

Stafford concludes:

I feast on this story. It teaches me the fundamental practicality of close witness of the world...

Then he asks us:

What is it like to live your life story, to feed on the beauty meant for you alone, to insist on the conditions that make it possible to live the precise, full life you are here to accomplish?

The prescription of an hour of beauty every day that the physician prescribed for Kim's grandmother is, I believe, a spiritual prescription for those of us who grieve over the tragic flooding, who struggle with depression over what is happening to our country, who fear a war with North Korea. Kim's grandmother nourished a fetus within her with the beauty provided by Kansas farm country.

The doctor's prescription for Kim's grandmother is similar to Jesus' teaching to the disciples in the Sermon on the Mount about how to deal with their anxieties: "Walk in into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don't fuss with their appearance – but have you ever seen color and design quite like it?" I have walked the hills above the Sea of Galilee in the spring, and like here, the hills are a magnificent patchwork of vivid color and amazing design. I like to think that Jesus on more than one occasion invited his disciples to pay attention to the beauty of nature as a way to shift their energy from fear and anxiety to inner peace and courage to face the next challenge, perhaps by taking in the beauty of a full moon shimmering on the waters of the Sea of Galilee.

Here, of course, we have the awesome beauty of Marin and Northern California to nourish hopes we hold within us for peace, for justice, for a healthy planet. We have the beauty of flowers and gardens in our homes to nourish our connection with the earth, and we have the beauty of the space here at CCC to nourish our connection with God.

I often am led into the beauty of this place while walking the labyrinth, as in the spring in 2004 when we celebrated the Equinox with a labyrinth walk for peace. I tried to express something of that beauty in a poem I wrote that evening entitled "Accepting What We Receive."

### **Accepting What We Receive**

A canvas labyrinth blankets  
the church's tile floor and around it  
oak branches embrace candles lighting the way  
for those who seek to welcome spring  
and to accept what they receive.

Music ripples out over the graceful path  
from a piano hidden in a darkened corner,  
and from another corner near the window  
golden light from the setting sun softens  
a song sung by a baby receiving mother's milk.  
Four people in the labyrinth's center pause,  
join hands and listen.

Later, as day's light travels farther west,  
the baby's father walks the labyrinth with deliberate softness,  
while his beloved son snuggles in sleep upon his chest.  
Cradling the child - and this moment - with eager tenderness,  
he begins to feel how to hold without holding on.

Mother goes on ahead, cherishing her brief solitude.  
She inhales the peace of the center, waiting  
for her husband and son to reach her.  
As the couple embrace, their son  
draws them into a trinity of intimacy and  
from the four corners, candlelight rises up into the darkness  
and streams toward the center where  
it merges, eddies and then falls silently  
over the young parents and their son,  
baptizing them with a holiness  
made of both light and darkness.

The next labyrinth walk is the Autumn Equinox Celebration on September 22<sup>nd</sup> , with a picnic to follow. It is meant for us and for our family and friends. It is a time to feed on the beauty of this place, this community when it gathers together.

My friends, let us take Stafford's question into our hearts: What is it like to live our life story, to feed on the beauty meant for us alone, to insist on the conditions that make it possible to live the precise, full life we are here to accomplish? Let us feed on the beauty meant for us alone, a beauty that is so vital to our mental, physical and spiritual health in these hard times. Let us feed on that beauty for at least an hour a day. It is, I believe, how the Spirit brings peace into our hearts and gives us courage for the struggle.

Amen.