

A FUTURE WITH HOPE: THE CASE FOR BEAUTY
Mark 14:3-9

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One of the most generous gifts I ever received was from the Lilly Endowment, a charitable arm of the Lilly pharmaceutical company. The Lilly Endowment has made a significant commitment to supporting America's mainline churches. They give money to seminaries, to research projects, and they also fund sabbaticals for clergy. They believe that ministers will serve their churches better if they occasionally have time away for rest and renewal. When I applied for the grant, I read the application materials carefully. I read the summaries of grants received in the past, and talked to some friends who had applied and been rejected. Most people who receive these sabbatical grants have a very specific unique project in mind - they want to climb a certain mountain, or study singing on an Irish island.

I thought hard about what I felt my soul needed, about what our church needed, and I realized I didn't have any clever gimmick to put into my application. I wrote that I wanted to revive my own creativity especially for the purpose of worship planning. At that time our church did not have a full-time Associate Minister or full-time Director of Music Ministry, so I was doing a lot of the worship planning myself with some lay and part-time staff involvement. The year that I wrote my application, I had officiated at five very difficult funerals in five months, for people who died by suicide. Experiences like that are obviously emotionally and spiritually draining.

I wrote to Lilly, "I feel like a chef who only eats in her own restaurant. I want to be fed by worshiping in other churches, learning from other worship-planners. And I want to be fed by beauty, the beauty of art and nature." I used the money from the grant to

worship in several other churches in the U.S. and Canada, and then Doug and I were able to travel for almost five weeks in Europe. We **did** soak up the beauty of the Normandy beaches, the Mediterranean coast in Italy, museums and churches in several countries. That trip was 8 1/2 years ago now, but I still feel the transformation it caused in me.

I think **everyone** could use a sabbatical, a sabbath, a time to stop our every day routines and purposefully seek out beauty. Soak up the beauty of music, trees, paintings, poetry, the lake, the sky, film - whatever it is that most moves you, the more the better!

I'm sure all of us agree that our God-given purpose in the time we have on earth is to leave the world a better place - whether that means raising children who are productive and kind, addressing climate change, helping to curb poverty and hunger, speaking out against hatred and bigotry...there are hundreds of ways to make a positive impact. But what **motivates** us to live into our purpose?

Facts play a role. When I understand more about climate change, I can make more informed choices. When I learn about the way that redlining laws caused people of color to lag far far behind in home ownership and the ability to pass on generational wealth, I understand this country's race problems much better.

Being in other environments is impactful. When I visit a third-world country and see for myself what kind of economic inequality there is in the world, I never forget that experience. When we delivered meals to families living in a hotel room on a cold, drizzly day last January, I realized how much need there is just a few miles from this sanctuary.

Stories are significant. Have you heard a story of bigotry told by someone you love? One of my college roommates was born in this country and grew up in a suburb of Chicago, but both of her parents were born in Iran. We were in college during the Iran hostage crisis. One day she left the grocery store with two big bags of groceries; she

started down the sidewalk to walk the couple of miles to the house where we lived. An older woman offered to give her a ride and she accepted. They chatted a bit in the car and then the woman asked her about her ethnicity. When Darya told her, the driver kicked her out of the car.

I have a relative who, when she was young, kept her sexual orientation secret for years, afraid of the repercussions. When she finally let her guard down with a friend, she unexplainably was fired for her job the very next day. It was no coincidence.

Hearing stories causes us to feel more empathetic.

Learning, facts, travel, mission trips, volunteering, stories, reading, podcasts, documentaries, meeting people with different life experiences - there are so many ways we can expand our base of knowledge and be better prepared for lives of meaningful action.

Here's what **doesn't** help to motivate us. If someone comes up to me in a parking lot and berates me because I don't drive a hybrid or electric car, I may feel guilty, but that guilt is a poor motivator. You sit down in front of the nightly news and watch story after story about the problems in the world. Do you then feel inspired to jump up and donate to various charitable causes? Sign up for volunteer opportunities? Or do you switch the channel, grab a drink or snack, and try to escape from all of that bad news as quickly as possible?

Feeling guilty and overwhelmed does not lead us towards positive, purposeful, long-term action.

What motivates me to buy a hybrid car the next time around is my feeling of love for this earth. It's my hikes in the woods, my memories of time in national parks, my bucket list of places I still want to see, and my passionate desire that my children and grandchildren live on a habitable planet.

What motivates me to create a more equitable world is the conversations I've had with people who are trying so desperately to get out of the cycle of poverty and finding roadblocks at every turn.

What motivates us to work towards safer, healthier communities is our love for one another.

Love is the only lasting source of motivation, so we are called to fall in love with the world, through experiences of beauty.

The woman in the gospel of Mark isn't named. She just appears, carrying a vase full of very expensive perfume called nard, used for preparing a body for burial. She breaks open the vase and pours the perfume on Jesus' head. She isn't named, but she is criticized. Some people in the room are angry. They begin talking among themselves, but surely loud enough for her to hear - "Why are you wasting that? You could have sold that whole vase and given the money to the poor!" They scolded her.

Mark's version of this story has Jesus defending her: "Leave her alone. She has done a good thing for me. She has anointed my body ahead of time." And in Mark's gospel, this story appears during Holy Week. The very next verse begins the story of the Last Supper.

Jesus also says this, words which cause us to wince a bit: "There will always be poor people, and you can always do something good to help them."

It sounds like he's belittling the poor; you could read it that way. Or maybe he's saying, "Look. Remember what the ancient book of Wisdom says? To everything there's a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. There's a time to be born, and a time to die. And my time is coming soon. There's a time to take care of the poor, and then

there's a time for sabbatical. A time to restore your energy, revive your spirits, soak up the beauty of the world, re-commit yourselves to the work of justice and compassion.”

The woman who used expensive perfume to bless Jesus knew that there is a time for beauty; there are even times that call for extravagance. Our souls need experiences of transcendence and transformation. Those experiences of beauty inspire us to live as disciples. They inspire us to live generously, they motivate us towards meaningful action.

When we feel our spirits are starting to grow weary, it's time to immerse ourselves in beauty and fall in love with the world again. The book of Genesis tells us that we were created in God's image. We were created in the image of the Creator - which means that we are created to be creative ourselves. We're not all painters or poets or pianists, but we can all find creative ways to live. One writer says this, “Why should we all use our creative power? Because there is nothing that makes people so generous, lively, bold and compassionate, so indifferent to fighting...”

We are meant to celebrate the good things of this earth. Creativity is a spiritual practice. Indulging in the experiences that bring us joy will help us serve the world with more enthusiasm.

I encourage you to think of something creative you might like to do this week. You are never too old, too young or too busy to take one baby step. Have you heard the story of the person who scoffed at the idea of learning something new, thinking he was too old? He said to his friend, “Do you know how old I'll be by the time I learn to play the piano?” His friend just looked at him and said, “The same age you'll be if you don't.”

God didn't create a world for our mind only, for our logical rational selves only. God created a world for all our senses. You're not too busy to pay attention to the sunrise or sunset one day this week. When we slow down for mini-sabbaticals, we not only see the

beauty that is all around us, but we find ourselves reconnecting with our own spirits, our own sense of purpose.

When we fall in love with the world and all that God has made, we find ourselves inspired to care for it and to create together a future with hope.