

Sermon 9-22-19  
Paul Purdue preaching

Our youth group sat along the inlet wall watching the sun set around us. After a day cleaning up residual hurricane debris, our host church suggested an after dinner ice-cream picnic. We carried a cooler with cones, cold drinks, and half gallons down to the beach. The sky radiated pink and purple streams behind the Cape Hatteras' lighthouse. The beam became visible only as the ocean grew dark. The white caps of waves outlined powerful tides as a gaggle of skilled surfers rode the fading light and dangerous tides. Some in our group had never seen the ocean. All week long Shawna spoke of the Atlantic's beauty and power. The beauty and skill of surfers released ever more effusive praise! Fifteen year-old Edward, a considerably more seasoned traveler, offered an unsolicited critique, "Well, this sunset is lovely, but you really should see a sunset in Hawaii-out over the Pacific!" Streetwise and awake, Shawna did not miss a beat. After pausing in deference to Mother Sun, Shawna sighed deeply and hard checked Edward's privilege, "Maybe you need to learn to enjoy the place where you are." I muffled a good natured laugh and smiled warmly at them both. Edward was privileged to a Hawaiian sunset, but was no villain, just a teenager trying to get comfortable inside his own skin.

Do we know how to enjoy the places where are? In Philippians 4: 4-13, Paul speaks of the secret of being content no matter where we find ourselves, even in a Roman jail. Have you rehearsed habits of daily worship long enough to mute the market gods who woo us go somewhere better, do something better, and just be better? Stop, and spot the beauty!

In this week's home devotional guide, Pastor Kate shares, "We have heard the Good news: God loves us. We have deep, sacred worth. We have been named "beloved." Sometimes these truths are very hard to believe. In her book, Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anne Lamott writes: 'You have to make mistakes to find out who you aren't. You take the action, and the insight follows: You don't think your way into becoming yourself.' Sometimes in order to come to believing we are beloved, we just have to start living into it. The "living into" part takes some faithfulness because it isn't easy, but eventually, it becomes more of a rhythm. Over and over and over and over, we live as new creations, beloved of God."

Did you rehearse the sacred lines over and over again? Did you use your paper frame to reframe the world? Did you stand before a mirror and sing Isaiah's song, "But now, says the Lord—the one who created you, you tricksters, the one who formed you, you strivers: Don't fear, for I have paid your debts; I have called you by name; you are mine." Did you tuck your children into bed with Jesus' lullabies, "God knows even the number of hairs of your head! Don't be afraid. You are of infinite sacred worth. You are created in the very image of God. The Creator made us all of sacred worth." Maybe this week? Maybe this guide?

Let us imagine hitting the mute button on the market god's marketing plan of "crave, consume, compete, repeat." Let us dream of daily rhythms that remind us of our sacred worth. Let us realize our privilege as people created and loved

by God. But what will we do with the privilege of a Cape Hatteras sunset, a fearless citizenship, or just a delightful cup of coffee? What did our Creator create us to do? Are we made to consume or create beauty? If we are made in the image of God, what images will we reflect back into the universe?

If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the New Creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things are coming. All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to God's self through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. God was reconciling the world to God's self through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. And God has entrusted us with this message of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors. God is negotiating peace with the world through us." What do we do with our privileged state? We love God; we spot the beauty. We love our neighbors; we reflect love back to the whole world.

God longs to do new things within and through us. Paul writes "the wellspring of our actions is the love of Christ." A wellspring of love changes our way of being. Maybe, a fountain of God's love so nourishes us that we become free to love our neighbors. But maybe our loving actions grow a spring of love within us. A lot of the faith of my childhood and my early preaching focused heavily on God changing hearts and maybe not enough on God changing behavior. In America, we love quick fixes, pills, refreshments, and feel-good faith. Christian faith is an easy fix. Denying ourselves and taking up our cross is not fun. Forgiving is not easy. A generous spirit involves giving things we enjoy away. Perhaps, contentment does not arrive by simply believing the Good News of God's love, but by becoming a conduit of God's love emptied out into the world.

Will you plant love and beauty? Will you represent Christ? Will you work as Christ's ambassador? Will you not just sponge up love, but reflect it back to the world? Hear the ambassador's job description: "Stand with the hopeless, the grieving, the humble, the hungry and thirsty. Be merciful, kind-hearted, and a peacemaker. Know that market forces and religious leaders will harass, insult, and say all kinds of junk about you. Be the salt of the earth. Be the light of the world. Shine good works. Absorb insults. Give your stuff away. Be faithful. Tell the truth. Love your enemies. Pray for opponents. Don't judge. Give freely. Pray often. Forgive. Take up your cross. Suffer for the redemption of the world." And yet when we represent Jesus, we find a meaning-filled life. Has the church focused too much on Paul's idea of a changed heart and not enough on Jesus' message of changed behavior? Let us not just soak up the love of God, let us reflect love to our neighbors, the hungry, the oppressed, any strangers, and any opponents.

Step one: stop and spot beauty. Know you are beloved. Step two, create beauty. Love the world.

Back when I had just left the Southern Baptist Church, we had these hippie neighbors from the northeast. One was agnostic and the other a pagan. They cursed a bit, yelled a lot, and funny smoke drifted over the fence many nights. They used organic flea products that did not work, so our Millie battled their Sadie's fleas all summer. I counted their fleas against them. We

were cordial, but I am sure they sensed my unconscious judgment, as I did their subtle stereotyping of me. In the spring they planted a huge garden. One Saturday, they tried to put up a rolled wire fence to keep Sadie out. It did not go well. My offer to help was not well received. As evening came, they gladly accepted my second offer of some better tools. So I and a borrowed come-along came over. Have you ever put a fence up with a married couple who are embroiled in a fight? I have. When Bill went to pick up pizza, Jennie quipped, "He's so smart but maybe the most mechanically declined person in the whole world." We laughed and hustled to finish before dark. Connie and I sat on their back porch past midnight talking about his research with Central American frogs and climate change and her plans to grow herbs for her natural soap business. In time we came to hold affection and appreciation for our neighbors not through belief or prayer, but as we shared a task and a meal. There was no Nobel prize awarded for our unlikely friendship, but I am certain kind acts lead to genuine kind feelings.

Divine love creates a new thing in us. Paul wildy asserts that knowing God's love means "we no longer recognize people by human scales and standards." Just pause right there and ponder that. When we see people as created in the very image of God, we ascribe sacred worth to them. Love sees people differently. Love can not treat another child of God as a commodity. Love does not judge or define a beloved person by a category: hippie, pagan, but gives them a name. God names us 'beloved'. When we come to understand or maybe practice our belovedness, we see others with a new lens. And a new lens may grow greater love in us.

I love the church, but friends, the church must not stop living like the spoiled children of God. We must give away our privileged status as children of God. Where do you see Jesus holding onto privilege? Read the Gospels and you will find Jesus working among the poor, powerless, prisoners, refugees, disinherited, hungry and hurting. But you will also find Jesus hanging out with the hurting powerful: Matthew (senior IRS agent), Zacheaus (direct report to Governor), Peter (owned multiple commercial fishing boats), Mary Magdalene (wealthy fashionista), Joanna (hung out with King Herod). Luke tells us wealthy women provided financial support for Jesus ( Luke 8:1). Matthew left everything behind. Finding a wellspring of holy love, Zacheaus gave away half of his fortune and restored any damages made by his craven business practises. A wellspring of love gives us a new lens to see the world. Let us reflect God's love back into the world.

Let us stop and spot beauty. Let us dance in forgiveness and love. And let us be so filled with love and grace, become people who create beauty, justice and love for others. Amen.