

Proper 11
II Sam. 7:1-14a
Eph. 2:11-22

St. Barnabas
Ps. 23
Mk. 6:30-34, 53-56

A Community of Character

“In Christ Jesus the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God,” writes the author of Ephesians. “YOU are...a dwelling place for God.” What might a people of that character embody?

On a terrace overlooking the Potomac River in Washington D.C. are inscribed these words spoken by the 35th president of the United States: “I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty.” That these words are written on the walls of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is, at the very least, poignant. For they suggest that there at the center of a place dedicated to the support of music, dance, and theater, surrounded by paintings and sculpture, is an awareness of something lacking. “I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty,” said Kennedy, implying that the most prosperous nation on earth is somehow wanting in those things that create character and give richness to life.

In many ways those sentiments are a shocking statement, but in other ways they are accurate. Learning must be useful, many say; education is for employment, they go on; instruction in the arts is superfluous, as evidenced in the slashing of funding for art and music when public school budgets must be tightened; scientific reductionism is the only valid mode of reasoning. At best our Puritan work ethic and the spirit of capitalism that ethic engenders have shaped the cultural values of our nation from its beginnings, but that work ethic also has a tendency to take an instrumental view of life. For example, how many women do you know who have listened to Mozart while pregnant because they were told that the complexity of Mozart’s music would be good for the brain development of their yet unborn child? Some people have even gone so far as to play Beethoven to stimulate the growth of house plants. This instrumental view of music views art as useful for something but only good for making children better at other, MORE useful things.

An intrinsic view of the arts, on the other hand, looks on art as a form of truth, not just affirmative and pretty, not commercially viable, but a vision of reality so deep as to reflect an aspect of the face of God: The image given vivid expression by the painter’s stroke of color forms truth. The tone emerging from silence which brings into being the sound conceptualized by the music’s original composer is truth. The life unveiled by the pen of a creative writer is a sketch of creation, an aspect of the face of God.

“I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty.” That Kennedy uttered those words in the early 1960’s is all the more remarkable, for some would say that our appreciation of grace and beauty has been on a downward trajectory ever since. It is true that there are now far fewer orchestras in the nation’s high schools than there were in 1960. It is also true that we live in an era in which a classical education is considered elitist. The celebrities of popular culture today are famous...for being famous. In “the comfortable vacuity of popular culture all reference points are current”¹; but, as Archibald MacLeish would say, “There is nothing worse than to be in style.” In other words, celebrity does not last, and style does not provide sustenance.

Our presence here this morning witnesses to the sustaining value of grace and beauty. We are here because Christianity has taught us the timeless capacity of faith to

¹ Robert Dallek and Terry Golway, *Let Every Nation Know*, (Sourcebooks, Inc.: Naperville, Illinois, 2006) 30.

express what is deepest in the human soul; for faith at its root is a longing to integrate moral beauty. Faith recognizes the intrinsic worth of wonder and grapples with how to incorporate that gift in a way that can be grasped in daily experience. Persons of faith seeking to integrate wonder and moral beauty would love to have a tangible method for bringing into their lives a way of living that is pregnant with possibility. But faith is a different mode of reasoning from that recognized by the culture that surrounds us.

Different fields of knowledge require different modes of reasoning. Faith does not use the precepts of scientific logic which say if proposition "A" equals proposition "B," and "B" equals "C," then it follows that "A" equals "C." This type of argument is rational. But the deliberative reflections of faith are not just rational. They are also reasonable.

Reasonable argument is what Cardinal John Henry Newman used in his classic *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* to prove the reasonableness of the existence of God. A reasonable argument is substantive, prudential, and practical; but its first principles or grounds are not self-evident, as are those of logic. They are temporal or circumstantial, generalized, and presumptive because they are inferred from prior experience. Faith and the Church are means of making moments of grace and beauty part of our lives, part of our character, part of our reasonable experience of God in ways that our rational selves cannot provide or explain; but our culture is afraid of these realities.

The ancient world recognized wonder as an aspect of what you and I today would call right brain reality. In fact they listed seven wonders: the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus.

Human beings began communities at Ephesus 6,000 years before the birth of Christ, and religion was of great importance to the citizenry of Ephesus. They even included their emperors among the gods they worshipped. When Alexander the Great, who was born on the same day that a disastrous fire destroyed the Temple of Artemis, offered to finance the ongoing reconstruction of the temple, the Ephesians declined saying it was not fitting for one god to make a temple for another god. The book of Acts tells us that a riot broke out in Ephesus when Paul's preaching of the Way threatened the worship of Artemis of the Ephesians.²

A visitor to Ephesus today can still make out a city of magnificent design: sculpture, painting, a theater and library survive. The remains of Roman roads, temples dedicated to Roman rulers, and market places are clear. The city boasted all that could be known of scientific materialism: Terra cotta pipes that supplied hot and cold running water and sewage facilities can be seen, but there is only one cobbled together pillar remaining of the great Temple of Artemis.

We know that Saint Paul lived in Ephesus for two to three years when it was the largest and most important city of the Roman Empire in western Turkey. He wrote numerous letters from there. Later, Christians in Ephesus were the recipients of one of the seven letters mentioned in the last book of the Bible, Revelation. Ephesus is a city referred to in multiple ancient documents, and the Christians there were referred to as followers of the Way.

But what was that Way and what do we know of the character of followers of the Way? The letter we call the Epistle to the Ephesians was written to create a community of faith, a community of character. Beginning last week, the Church reads for seven weeks a series of selections from the Epistle to the Ephesians, an entire letter concerned with the character of life the Church exhibits. And it is unfortunate that we don't read the entire

² Acts 19:23ff.

letter at one sitting, for it overflows with praise for grace and beauty. Twelve times we hear of the grace that is a free gift of God. Ten times we are bid to love. Faith, hope, and peace resonate throughout, instructing us in how to become citizens of the Way, members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Today's reading tells us that reasoning with faith creates communities with distinctive personalities, people who weigh possibilities on the basis of the gifts of grace. No longer afraid, followers of the Way have a goal, the goal to see life from an entirely new perspective, a perspective centered on the cross of Christ, who is our peace.

The author Mark Helprin gave voice to these characteristics in his evocative 1991 novel, *A Soldier of the Great War*. The novel tells the story of a young Italian man studying for a doctorate in aesthetics. All his plans are put aside when he is conscripted into the Italian army to fight in the Great War, the War to End All Wars, World War I. In exquisite prose, approaching poetry, Helprin writes the story of this young man's great war, a conflict to be fought with sword and steel surely, but at a deeper level a different kind of battle. For the story of this young man's greatest war is the struggle that you and I share with him, "less a contest than a mystery."³ The truly Great War is the struggle for moral beauty in life, the struggle for beauty between birth and death. For "the only mortal danger for the spirit is to remain too long without [grace and beauty]."⁴

St. Thomas called art "reason making." The Church, the body of Christ, gives you and me a community for reason making, not a stationary dwelling place but a foundation from which we can move the world from fear to a deeper appreciation of grace and beauty along the Way.

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³ Mark Helprin, *A Soldier of the Great War* (Avon Books: New York, 1991) 374.

⁴ Paraphrasing Helprin, 17.