

EP 7A Matthew 5: 38-48

To say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is not to say very much about the object at hand. Maybe it is a thing of beauty, but on the other hand, maybe not. It all depends. The annoying contemporary expression of non-commitment – “whatever” – comes to mind.

Could it be that there are things or objects or experiences or human actions that are intrinsically beautiful whether or not we lend them such a designation? Or is beauty only, we could say merely, a variable subjective judgment? Or love only really so when we say that is what it is?

Could we say that there are some things so wonderful, so extraordinary, so beautiful, so breathtaking that only the blind, the callous, the indifferent could fail to comprehend their greatness?

I have often thought that beauty, the beautiful, however it is apprehended, has been underrated as a path by which God comes to us and we go toward God – a means by which God enchants us. That in some mysterious sense we are blessed and healed and transformed and reconciled and raised - by the sheer beauty of God’s coming in love among us in the One we call the Christ.

I heard somewhere that there was a certain art critic who said that she had a sure way of identifying ancient Maltese art objects: and that was that she found herself crying before them.

John Keats had a similar response to beauty and excellence. He said that the thought of his beloved Fanny Brawn, or anything that he associated with her, “goes through me like a spear.”

Philip Hallie tells about a similar experience of beauty that overwhelmed him in his book “Lest

Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness  
Happened There.”

Faced with the Nazi occupation of much of France and its collaborationist Vichy government, and the looming unfathomable evil of the Holocaust, the small French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon responded with deep and mysterious goodness.

The largely French Huguenot village, marked with the memory of its own persecution by the Catholic authorities from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and led by their Reformed Church of France pastor, Andre Trocme, sheltered 5,000 people, a majority of who were children, saving many from certain death.

From the moment in 1940 when the Jewish woman knocked on the door of their parsonage, Pastor Andre Trocme and his wife Magda Trocme, and soon nearly the whole village of farmers, shop-owners and pensioners took in refugees, sheltering and hiding them from the German SS.

The citizens of that community refused to cooperate with the Vichy government, refused to take an oath to Marshall Petain, and refused to ring the church bells in his honor; embarking instead on a campaign of peaceful non-violent civil disobedience against the authorities.

In order to assist in providing supplies to the 30,000 foreign Jews held in internment camps in southern France, Trocme initiated a working relationship with an American Quaker. He was told that release of some from the camps might be arranged, but there was no place for them to go, since no one was prepared to offer them shelter.

Trocme assured the Quaker organization that his village, Le Chambon, would take as many as they could. Release was negotiated for many Jews, especially children. Others in danger

found their way to the town as individuals, once word of mouth identified Le Chambon and the surrounding vicinity as a hospitable place of refuge.

At the risk of their own death, they schooled the children, fed all of them, organized travel and safe houses for as many as possible to neutral Switzerland.

In order to maintain an appearance of normalcy and to conceal the presence of the Jews in the communities, the children frequently attended the Reformed worship services, and youth organizations. Nevertheless, Trocme also encouraged these Jews to hold clandestine Jewish services.

They forged identification cards and ration card for the refugees. When the Nazis would come to search and question, they hid the refugees in every imaginative place.

A key secret phrase, used to alert someone that more refugees were coming, was simply, "I am sending you more Old Testaments."

Pastor Trocme and his townsfolk developed coded ways of warning others of the impending visits by the authorities - signals that would send refugees into hiding. They defied the authorities at every turn.

And this they did with open hearts and arms, and with full realization of the danger to themselves. Although many were saved, there were also many who were not saved, and among those many children.

On a weekend when the authorities came with buses to assemble and transport refugees, Pastor Trocme refused to cooperate, saying, "I do not know Jews. I know only of people."

Gathering for worship on that Sunday morning, the large church was filled, and the pastors preached on the text from Deuteronomy 19, "Therefore I command you, you shall set apart three cities....then you shall add three other cities to these three, lest innocent blood be shed in your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, and the guilt of any bloodshed be upon you."

Citing this "City of Refuge" passage, they encouraged the congregants, and indeed all the people of the surrounding precinct, that having welcomed these refugees from the Nazis, they must not only do good, but prevent harm, lest innocent blood be shed. A loving duty that could bring harm down upon their own heads.

Trocme's interpretation of this scripture went beyond doing good and not harm. It was a heavy obligation that was being invited. They were being called both refuse to do harm and act to prevent others from doing harm.

The love Pastor Trocme and his associate preached was not simply adoration; nor was it simply a love of moral purity, of keeping one's own hands clean. Not a love of private ecstasy or private retreat from evil. It was an active, dangerous love that brought help to those who needed it most.

This and more is the story Philip Hallie gives to us in his book, "Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed." The writing of which is a story in itself.

Hallie, a college research professor, had been studying cruelty, and in particular the grinding cruelty during the 12 year power of Adolph Hitler. He had studied the tortures white men had inflicted upon native Indians and then on blacks, and was now concentrating on the torture

experiments of the Nazis.

He knew this material well, and when not angered by it, had become bored at the repetitious pattern of cruelty. Hallie came to wonder if he himself had become a captive to the madmen of his research, consumed with bitterness and indifference himself.

A particular day he came upon an article about a little village in the mountains of southern France. He writes this: *“About halfway down the third page of the account of this village I was annoyed by a strange sensation on my cheeks. The story was so simple and so factual that I had found it easy to concentrate upon it, not upon my own feelings. And so, still following the story and thinking about how neatly some of it fit into old patterns of persecution, I reached up to my cheek to wipe away a bit of dust, and I felt tears upon my fingertips. Not one or two drops; my whole cheek was wet.”*

Assuming that he was tired and losing his grip on his research, he left his college office and went home to his family and then eventually to sleep. But in his half-sleep, again, he was back to the images that had made him weep.

He writes: *“I saw the two clumsy khaki-colored buses of the Vichy French police pull into the village square. I saw the police captain facing the pastor of the village and warning him that if he did not give up the names of the Jews they had been sheltering in the village, he and his fellow pastor, as well as the families that had been caring for the Jews, would be arrested. I saw the pastor refuse to give up these people who had been strangers in his village, even at the risk of his own destruction.*

*“Then I saw the only Jew the police could find, sitting in the otherwise empty bus. I saw a thirteen-old boy, the son of the pastor, pass a piece of his precious chocolate through the window to the prisoner, while twenty gendarmes who were guarding the lone prisoner watched.*

*And then I saw the villagers passing their little gifts through the window until there were gifts all around him – most of them food in those hungry days during the occupation of France.*

*“Lying there in bed, I began to weep again. I thought, Why run away from what is excellent simply because it goes through you like a spear?...But why not know joy? Why not leave room for comfort?”*

Hallie writes that he left his tossing sleep and returned to read again those few pages. *“And again to my surprise, again the spear, again the tears, again the frantic, painful pleasure that spills into the mind when a deep, deep need is being satisfied, or when a deep wound is starting to heal...Those involuntary tears had been an expression of moral praise, praised pressed out of my whole personality like the juice of a grape.”*

Given all the variety of human relationships we experience, pleasant and painful, useful and inconvenient, friendly and hostile, uplifting and threatening, the community of faith – we, need a polar star, a governing vision, for our relationships.

Our Gospel for today that continues Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount presents a peaceable vision of deep spiritual beauty.

Could it be that Jesus is encouraging a Gospel ethic that when given expression, as imperfectly as it may be, is a thing of beauty, a beauty that pierces our hearts when we experience it?

Something that appears beyond comprehension to life as usually experienced?

We are invited by Jesus in today’s Gospel to enter a conspiracy of goodness.

- To risk the next blow
- To offer the second layer of clothing
  - To go the further distance

- To freely open our resources to others
- To seek love for those who stand against us
- To live out the ravishing love of God for each and all.

Jesus is not after the mere improvement of the world's systems, but the vision of a new world – human living that becomes a sign of God's rule of peace and justice.

And when that goodness breaks in and breaks out among us – as it did in the village of Le Chambon – it is a thing of beauty – because it reflects the character of God – a perfect Love with power to beckon others into healing and reconciliation – a beauty that surely does pierce the heart.

Beautiful enough to inspire living beyond ourselves and to draw us and to draw others into God.