Meditation - "Beautiful"
Scripture: Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-10
Sunday, August 10, 2025
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Our scripture reading is from the well-known and beloved reflection on faith in Hebrews 11. In this chapter the author of Hebrews, probably a student of the Apostle Paul, encourages the followers of Christ in the life of faith by sharing stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Hear now what the Spirit is saying.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith Abraham stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with Abraham of the same promise. For Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Amen.

The title of the meditation: "Beautiful"

The text: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, give us eyes to celebrate the beauty of faith, the conviction of that we cannot see and the assurance of that for which we hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Although her poetry was not published until 1890 following her death in 1886 at the age of 55, Emily Dickinson explored the complexities of life and death in a few short verses and became one of the most important figures in American poetry. She studied at the Amherst Academy for seven years and briefly attended the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before returning to her family's home in Amherst where she lived out her days. Beauty is Not Caused is among her poems published in 1890:

Beauty is not caused,
It is.
Chase it and it ceases.
Chase it not and it abides.
Overtake the creases.
In the meadow when
The Wind Runs his fingers thro' it?
Deity will see to it
That you never do it.

Dickinson's poem presents beauty as a transcendent, elusive quality that exists independently of human effort. It is not something to be chased or possessed, but rather something to be experienced and appreciated as a gift from God transcending the years and seasons of one's life.

Beauty, like faith, holds together the conviction of things not seen and the assurance of that for which we hope. Like faith, beauty involves trust and tenacity and allows us, like Abraham and Sarah, to risk the journey, to embrace the pilgrimage of our lives, trusting the God who leads us along the paths we do not yet know, the God who sojourned with us in Christ Jesus, embracing humanity and the beauty of the journey.

Julian of Norwich, whose fourteenth century writings are the earliest surviving English-language works attributed to a woman, is considered an important Christian mystic and theologian.

In one of her visions of Jesus, she realizes that he is handsome, and the "handsome mixture" that she notes in him is "partly sorrow" and "partly joy." His face speaks of a knowledge of life's delight and a knowledge of life's pain. It is not a face that is naïve to the world's sufferings or to the personal experience of sorrow. Nor is it a face that is so overwhelmed by sorrow that it loses its openness and wonder. To be truly handsome, to be truly beautiful, is to reflect in one's countenance, both life's glory and life's pain. It is not simply a sweet face, a pretty smile. It is a soul that has experienced the heights and the depths of human life.

When I learned Mary and Eleanor were singing "How Beautiful" during communion today as a gift to me, it brought a smile to my heart. The first time I heard this song sung was in 2013 during Saturday night worship and over these last twelve years I have witnessed how beautiful is the body of Christ within this congregation…a church family filled with souls who have experienced the heights and the depths of human life, who continue the spirit of advocacy for justice and mercy evidenced in our abolitionist founders, and who continue the journey with hands that serve, hearts that give, and faith that brings good news.

Last Fall, when Michella and Ben Arnold shared the good news of the unexpected gift of their son with our Bible Study, my heart leapt with joy. Mindful of my pending retirement, this gift of the son whom they would name Louie reminded me that the circle will be unbroken and God's faithfulness is from generation to generation. It was my hope and prayer that I would have the privilege of baptizing Louie and Eleanor would sing "What a Wonderful World" by Louie Armstrong in honor of Louie Arnold on the day of his baptism.

Not just because it is a pretty song, but because it reflects one who is truly handsome, truly beautiful. Louie Armstrong persevered against unjust Jim Crow laws and legalized segregation. This gifted young boy grew up in abject poverty singing on the streets of New Orleans, collecting pennies for different improvisations of the same tunes. He would rise to become a world-renowned jazz musician and then statesman when he served as Jazz Ambassador to Africa during the fifties; however, Louie quit his post in protest of the Little Rock 9 crisis when our government and the law did not support racial justice and equity. His protest led to intense criticism and blacklisting from the white community.

Several years later during the height of rock and roll, Louie resurrected his jazz celebrity with a song of racial harmony that became an international sensation at the end of his life. This song of gratitude reflects the grace and dignity of a man who rose above unjust laws to celebrate red roses, white clouds, the dark sacred night, and **all** the colors of the rainbow. How beautiful! Amen.