

Beauty on the Margins

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 22, 2022

Where do we see God, the sacred of many names and no name? Where do we see beauty? Perhaps in the shift of the seasons, brown slowly transitioning to green, bursts of color emerging from the earth. Perhaps through the feeling of unconditional love towards a beloved, or through communal singing in a worship space, or a practice of prayer. All of this is beautiful, yes, but I also wonder of the sacred in those unexpected places. I wonder of beauty where we expect ugly. I wonder of God in the midst of a homeless shelter, or in a tent community, perhaps with the displaced indigenous peoples, or among the suffering in domestic violence shelters. I wonder of God and beauty in Buffalo, the aftermath of a mass shooting steeped in racism, or in Ukraine amidst a debilitating war. Where is the beauty?

To me, all that is holy and all that is beautiful overlap in sacred ways. The sacred presents itself through that which provides awe or admiration or meaning or hope. God is love and goes where love is most needed. Where is love more possibly needed than amidst a room of battered women, or a country steeped in warfare? Liberation theology tells us that God has a preferential love for those on the margins. Liberation theology tells us that we are closest to God in the unhoused with a cardboard sign alongside a traffic light, in those making drum sets out of buckets with a tin can in front of them asking for change. I use the word "God" today because that is the term used by liberation theologians, a theology steeped in Christianity but applicable to anyone working to heal an aching world. There are many ways to name and understand the sacred. I invite you to interpret my words with whatever name for the sacred feels true to you. Perhaps nature, Spirit of Love, Goddess, Allah.

Liberation theologian Dwight N. Hopkins defines God in his own words: "God is a just and holy Being whose justice is the partiality to the groans of those who are heavy laden with unjust

oppression.”¹ God is with those on the margins of society, partial to those who are suffering, connected intimately to the oppressed. The cries of the oppressed go directly to God. Hopkins continues, noting that God is not a solitary entity, but a co-creative being, working alongside each and every person struggling for justice.² God is not a passive entity, but one who works to liberate those at the margins – who works intimately with the oppressed to create a better life. We work together with the entity of God as we help feed the hungry and shelter the unhoused. We work for beauty – for the kinship of humanity, for a world rid of stereotypes and stigmas and judgements, for each individual to be seen as whole and inherently good and worthy, for each person to be seen through the lens of compassion.

In liberation theology, God is wherever and whenever those who are suffering cry out in pain. God is alongside those facing oppression as they struggle to make a way out of no way. Divinity is in the voice of the voiceless. Hopkins writes that the “fundamental act of God” is to emancipate those in bondage; to remain a force alongside the suffering. This is the most important task of the sacred – a force for liberation.³ Is this not a beautiful way to appreciate the sacred? Is this not awe – an entity that is pulled each day toward the place where people are suffering, and beauty seems devoid.

If this is the focus of God, what are we called to do as a people of faith? If God’s efforts and the focus of God’s care is for those on the margins, should not ours be in alignment? When we see the beauty within and around those struggling with addiction or acting in ways appearing to be immoral simply to survive, we change. Our hearts and souls open as we replace fear or scorn with love and compassion. For the sex workers, for the incarcerated. We are awoken from complacency. This is the difference between glamor and beauty – glamor facilitates superficial delight or joy; beauty demands something of us. Truly seeing beauty within the eyes of each person – this dictates change and authentic care for everyone, not allowing us to pick and

¹ *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/s Theologies in Dialogue* “Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religion” Dwight N. Hopkins pg. 106

² Ibid pg. 106

³ Ibid pg. 102

choose but to have that compassion for every soul in our midst. As a people of faith, this is our calling.

Beauty is found amidst the suffering. I wonder of the murals painted and shrines constructed in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd. Was that God? I'm curious of the flowers and candles and prayers in Buffalo. Is that the sacred working to heal? I think of music from the inner cities. Tupac Shakur who grew up in poverty but found his way to fame through rap wrote the lyrics:

I got love for my brother, but we can never go nowhere

Unless we share with each other

We gotta start makin' changes

Learn to see me as a brother instead of two distant strangers⁴

This speaks to me of the interdependent web of all life – we are all siblings, not strangers – each person on this earth is intimately connected to the other. That's how we make changes. We know each other through the common bond of humanity – we can each know a bit about every person on earth because we share the common experience of being alive. We are called to observe the humanity in each and every person, regardless of their circumstance. This is true beauty. This is the sacred.

Nancy Pineda-Madrid writes of suffering Latinas and the need to create heaven on this realm, not in whatever is to come next – this is what God desires. We are called through our faith in the sacred to be agents in a society working for liberation here, now, alongside whatever it is we hold holy – whatever the sacred is to each one of us. We march in the streets for justice. We find housing for those who have none. We don't know what comes next, after

⁴ "Changes" by 2Pac

death, but we know what it is like to suffer today. Pineda-Madrid understands that God is suffering alongside all the aching oppressed, intimately connected with those on the margins.⁵

Liberation theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, who worked intimately with suffering Latinas, wrote extensively of the “kin-dom” of God, not the kingdom. Kingdom reinforces hierarchical patriarchy. Kin-dom makes all humanity a family with God – no one is excluded. What this creates is a horizontal relationship with God – power with, not power over. A relationship of creativity that works to heal. And within this family, care is given to the ones who need it most. The kin-dom is not a theoretical family in the sky, but concrete in the here and now. We liberate another – we create beauty – when we work alongside the sacred to heal our siblings. We need to take responsibility to create faith and justice because our family is wounded.⁶ When we see a civilian town bombed, those are our siblings. When we see a black man harassed by police, that is our brother. When we offer food to hungry family, we are feeding our nieces and nephews. This brings us intimately close with the struggling. When we see each suffering woman as we would see our own mother or aunt, our hearts break open, and we create beauty. Just as God is with the oppressed, so, too, are we.

And so we see beauty in everyone – not just those we were enculturated to see beauty in. Not just tall, thin, white women. We were taught beauty standards simply by engaging with daily culture. And yet, there is a diversity of beauty all around us. Seeing this beauty – appreciating this beauty – this is an act of liberation. The rejected become beautiful. This breaks down stigmas and stereotypes as we see wonder in each person. Those on the margins become beings of awe. Unitarian Universalist minister Kristen Harper writes,

Look at me - I am black and you are white, but I too am beautiful

Look at my face, my hair, my clothes - they may be different but aren't they worthy of your gaze?

Look at my darkness, it contains light and love, rebirth and growth

⁵ *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/s Theologies in Dialogue* “In Search of a Theology of Suffering *Latinamente*” Nancy Pineda-Madrid Pgs. 187-199

⁶ *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/s Theologies in Dialogue* “Preoccupations, Themes, and Proposals of Mujerista Theology” Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz pgs. 139-140

Look at the way you see me, I am human, I have tears and fears,
I have laughter and joy
Look at me and walk with me
I too am beautiful⁷

Can we each claim that? The refrain “I too am beautiful.” The woman in the hijab, the addict on the street corner, the unhoused asking for change. Each of our siblings is beautiful in their own way. Different skin colors, hair textures, languages, faiths, vocations, socioeconomic status, country of origin. Impoverished or wealthy, hungry or well fed, able bodied or disabled. Everyone is beautiful. Let this break our hearts open as we work for liberation. In liberation theology, God has a preferential love for those on the margins. Let us, too, go where love is most needed. Let us work alongside God as co-creators of a just and compassionate world where every identity is one of true beauty.

Co-creation is dependent on our own human agency. In liberation theology, this human agency was given with “divine purpose” so that we can each do the work of God on earth. Co-creation becomes an “intertwining of divine act, human faith, divine gift, and human agency.”⁸ What does this mean to us? What is our co-creation as a people of faith? No matter what our understanding of the divine may be, we are called by a force greater than ourselves to be a source of healing in the world, and to work alongside this force for good. Who are you called to heal? My heart is pulled towards individuals struggling with mental illness and addiction. I want each of my siblings to know they are beautiful and worthy and capable of living a full life. We need a wealth of passions and commitments to heal each bud and leaf of our flower garden of humanity.

So I think of a typical scene in my own life re-framed through the lens of liberation theology. My husband and I love to drive down to Baltimore in the early evening. We drive in

⁷ *Voices from the Margins* “I Too am Beautiful” by Kristen Harper

⁸ *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/s Theologies in Dialogue* “Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religion” Dwight N. Hopkins pg. 103

listening to our favorite music, purchase a cup of hot chocolate, and walk around the harbor. Typically, I feel the sacred and the beautiful in my love for Eric, in the simple pleasure of a sweet treat, and the beauty of the harbor. But in focusing on those things, I lose sight of where my God really is. The sacred was in the teenagers at the stop light offering to wash our windshield in exchange for a few dollars. The holy was with the desolate woman in tears asking for help, in the man arguing to no one visible to our eyes. My siblings. Where God is shifts. Where beauty is shifts. Instead, I see the beauty in their eyes, in that spark in them that keeps them going. These aching people are saying in their own ways “I too am beautiful.” God is with them while they make a way out of no way. Beauty is when we respond to those on the margins. Through noticing and appreciating people through the lens of liberation theology, I am called to act – to co-create freedom and wonder and peace with my sacred. Even if there is nothing we can do in that moment, we can donate to causes. We can volunteer our time and energy. We can engage in advocacy work. We can simply offer love and acknowledgement to anyone who needs it.

So what does all of this mean in our Unitarian Universalist faith? I think an overarching aspect of the divine for many of us is simply love. The divine as love. This entire theology of liberation is based on this fundamental value – love. Preferential divine love and a call for mortal love between the siblings in our kin-dom. This love can be expressed as we work for everyone to know and appreciate their own inherent worth and dignity – to live full, fulfilling, meaningful lives. That is beauty. Each person we encounter is beautiful and worthy. We can co-create meaningful lives if we truly see this in one another. The kin-dom of humanity in our faith is the interdependent web of all existence. Even if not understood as sister, cousin, uncle, or niece, we covenant to live in this world understanding that our fates are intimately connected with one another. What harms one harms all; what saves one saves all. Each action ripples out indefinitely. We are called to weave humanity together with actions of love. Our 6th Principle calls us toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. In our faith these are basic rights owed to each individual we share this planet with, and we are each called to work towards these rights – we are committed to one another in sacred ways. I think, too, of

our 8th Principle, intentionally committing ourselves towards building a Beloved Community through our anti-racism, anti-oppression actions. We co-create this world each day with our own understanding of the sacred. We co-create through an unconditional love for all humanity.

Authors Cristina Mittermeier and Paul Nicklen write that beauty is “how we spend our time on earth,” that beauty has “everything to do with how we live on this planet.”⁹ So let us each go out into the world and live lives of beauty. Let us care and heal and create and liberate. Let us live our values in this sacred kin-dom and in doing so be a force for love.

May it be so, and Amen

⁹ “Why Is Beauty Important to Us?” Cristina Mittermeier and Paul Nicklen