

## Sermon for July 23, 2017 – “Reflection”

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT – Year A – Texts: Psalm 27; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

### Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Rev. Jeff Colarossi

Visiting the modern art museum, a lady turned to an attendant that happened to be standing nearby. She said, “This, I suppose, is one of those hideous representations you call modern art?” “No, madam,” replied the attendant. “That’s a mirror.” There is something intrinsic to humanity that is drawn to beauty. There is something of an aesthetic desire in us. An aesthetic appetite as one scholar put it. Even infants are attracted to certain objects and even faces because of complexity and color and light. Those elements which aesthetic theorists have considered the very substance of beauty, form, and attractiveness. Moreover, this desire for and recognition of beauty is something unique to human beings. Your average household pet does not contemplate a sunset, nor does it ponder the beauty of the landscape. While it’s true the heavens are declaring the glory of God most of the creatures on the planet are oblivious to this fact. But what exactly is beauty? We say that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder...” And that’s probably true, but in our culture these days there’s seems to be little agreement. Beauty, as one scholar puts it, is in crisis. Why? Well, mainly because it’s been so devalued in the reigning confusion of popular culture. The fact is that for the most part we’ve come to use the word “beautiful” in an altogether awkward and inappropriate context.

We speak of beauty, but what we really mean is prettiness, attractiveness, likeability, even sexually appealing. None of these things, however, is true beauty. Yet popular culture increasingly confuses the artificial for the real, the pretty for the beautiful, the untrue for the true. A Christian understanding of beauty as one might imagine is entirely different. Our understanding actually finds its origins with Plato. Plato understood that certain things, transcendental things, things like “good”, “Beauty”, “Truth”, “Real-ness”, as being essentially reducible to the same thing. **One** thing...and that “one thing” is the source of these things. If there is one good then that good must also be one truth, one reality, one beauty, are unified in the One. For Plato, however, the One had no name. For St. Augustine the One did! For Augustine, the One was none other than the one true, holy and living God. Augustine took Plato’s metaphysical speculations into the very heart of the Gospel and he suggested that Christians uniquely understand that the good, the beautiful, the true, and the real, are indeed one because they’re established in the reality of the self-revealing God. The triune God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God alone is beautiful...God alone is good...God alone is true...God alone is real. That’s not to say that nothing else reflects beauty, truth, or goodness; quite the contrary. I’m simply saying that God by virtue of who and what He is, is the source of all that is good, beautiful, true, and real. Augustine understood this. He understood this very well. In his writings, he said this: “I have learnt to love You late, beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love You late! You were within me...and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and...I fell upon the lovely things of Your creation. The beautiful things of this world kept me from You, and yet, if they had not been in You they would have had no being at all.” Augustine’s saying is that what was calling him wasn’t beauty...it was actually His Creator. He was temporarily distracted by the **apparent** beauty in the world. But ultimately remembered that the beauty around him is merely a reflected beauty derived from the fact that God is their Creator.

In his essay, “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis alludes to our deep desire to be transformed by the beauty of God. He wrote: “We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words...to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” If this is so – how exactly do we become part of this beauty for which our hearts long? I suggest that we do so by becoming mirrors ourselves. Mirrors are mysterious on a number of levels. How do they work for one thing? I mean I realize that the conventional modern mirror is usually nothing more than a sheet of glass attached to a thin layer of metallic backing, but how do they actually work? And so well? It seems as if mirrors have been around forever in some form or another. But, mirrors as we know them today haven’t been around that long. As early as a thousand years ago, mirrors were still just polished discs of plain metal. They cost more than most people of that era could afford. A peasant who wanted to see his or her reflection had to go look in a pond like everyone else, and they had to stand in line to do it. Full-length mirrors are an even more recent invention. They’re only about 400 years old. I remember the first time that our dog Isaac saw himself in the mirror, back when he was a puppy. Consternation and much barking ensued together with tiny lunges and startled retreats as the corresponding little ball of fur charged at him and retreated in perfect imitation. Isaac had discovered the mysteriousness of mirrors.

Mirrors and the mirror-like have fascinated humans for millennia. They have an almost magical quality. Narcissus, enamored of his own beauty, died when he became spellbound by his own reflection in a pool of water. A mirror flattered the sinister but stunning Queen in Snow White, and then angered her by shifting its favor to the younger maiden. Anyone familiar with the “The Picture of Dorian Gray”? Here, we find a portrait that mirrored the increasing decrepitude of the man who sold his soul to preserve his outward appearance even as he descended into a life of crime and debauchery. In Alice “Through the Looking Glass”, the heroine entered a strange world through the mirror above the mantelpiece.

Mirrors seem to have drawn the attention of the apostle Paul as well. He drew on them as a motif a number of times including in the passage that we just read...**“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory...“Which comes from the Lord – who is the Spirit.”** Now, the actual Greek word translated here as “contemplate” is actually a bit ambiguous, and like lots of Greek words they have a number of meanings. John Calvin explored two of them. He wrote, “It is true that the meaning of the verb is doubtful in Greek for it means sometimes to hold out a mirror to be looked into...and sometimes to look into a mirror so presented.” When I first read that I said, hmmm, very interesting. Checking my handy-dandy Greek lexicon, the definition given there is “producing reflection”. But, the various translations range from “contemplate” or “behold as in a mirror” – to “reflect” or “display.” I’ll admit, this is more than a little confusing. So, which is it? Which is the best translation? I wonder if maybe Paul chose that particular word because of its ability to capture **all** of these meanings; something tells me that’s exactly what he did because it seems to me that from the perspective of the mirror itself at least three of them occur at the same time. It’s all part of the mysteriousness of mirrors.

You see, **reflecting** can be done by a mirror only if it **beholds** something. Both things happen in the same act. And in reflecting the mirror **displays** the beholden. But a mirror’s ability to reflect, behold and display is limited. Limited by its relative clarity. What do I mean by that? Well, let me ask, how many of you like to browse in antique shops? Or at yard sales? Have you ever looked at old mirrors? I mean the **really** old ones? The ones I’ve seen have been quite fascinating. Jane and I have one whose speckled surface gives it a kind of faded beauty, one reminiscent of those old sepia-colored photographs of that era. Now, these kinds of mirrors work well with shabby chic décor.

But the problem with them is that they don't reflect things accurately. If you want to check whether your tie is crooked before you leave for work or for church you probably won't be able to see it clearly. We're all like the old mirrors piled up in the back of the antique store. But over a period time, like stained linen hung out in the sun to be bleached, the specks and splotches in our mirrors are smoothed away as we stare at the Son. That is – the Son of God. And the more we gaze into His face the more precisely we reflect His visage. So, like the Psalmist in our first reading we need to say...**“One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek...“That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple.”** And there, as the Glory of God's Presence shines upon us, we will be transformed.

There was a time when it was believed that to look upon God's face or enter into His presence meant death. God actually says to Moses on Mt. Sinai, **“you cannot see My face; for no one shall see Me and live.”** Isn't it startling that we're now invited to do exactly that? Isn't it amazing to understand that we're shaped into His likeness? But as we consider these questions, more important ones remain, questions like: where may we **behold** His soul-shaping likeness? For starters, in the pages of scripture. From His hovering above Creation in Genesis, to His Glorious enthronement in Revelation. We seek Him in worship, in the words of hymns, in the music, but also in those quiet moments. In the stillness of listening. We catch intimations of His beauty in stars, rainbows, trees and all throughout Creation. We see the contours of His body in the fellowship of our church family. We engage His face when we proffer a cup of water to the thirsty child or when we connect with someone who's sick or lonely. And we catch glimpses of His work in the history of our church and those of our family's. But, I think the most important question is this, and here brothers and sisters is the thing, how do we **reflect** Christ? We reflect Him when we imitate His holiness, when we choose what **He** deems right and pure. We reflect Him when we adopt His holy habits; His disciplines of prayer, solitude, discernment, studying Scripture, fasting, meditation and more. We reflect Him as we suffer for the sake of or alongside others as we show love to our neighbors and enemies. In doing all these things we reflect Christ, God's Son, to a watching world. And the more we do these things, the more like Him we become.

Hear Paul's words once more...**“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory...Which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.** Unpacking that we discover several important truths. We find that the process takes place in community (**“We all”**). It takes place over time (**“being transformed”**). By the power of the Holy Spirit (**“which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”**). With a special emphasis on Christ as the image we're to focus upon. We're living mirrors that gaze at the Son, the One who first gazed at us. We imitate him. We present him. And as we keep our eyes focused on the Glorious One who stands waiting for us, we ourselves become “brighter and more beautiful.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.