

The Call of Beauty
Rev. Ann Kadlecek
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
June 1, 2025

Reading by John O'Donohue, from his book "Beauty, the Invisible Embrace."

Sermon

O'Donohue wrote that shortly after Sept 11. It's held up well – in a time when the foundations of democracy are cracking, and all the ongoing violence breaks our hearts, some natural ease has indeed been broken.

And now, he says, is the time to invoke and awaken beauty.

When the poet speaks of beauty, I don't think he means glamour, or sexiness, or ideal proportions, or being pretty or decorative, or perfect ... but something more ... life-giving. More essential. Something that touches us, moves us, gets us through bleak times – something that we know by its impact on us, rather than how it measures up to some ideal, or how others react; something we need enough to seek it everywhere – because it could be anywhere.

Even amid uncertainty, anxiety and brokenness.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery. The goal is not to return a broken pot to its original condition, or to hide the fact that it was broken. The idea is to carefully bring the pieces together and bind them with a lacquer that contains gold. Not hiding the break, but highlighting it, resulting in a repaired pot where every break is now a gold seam. In this artform, there is beauty in the fragments, and in the care with which they are brought together into something that many would say is even more beautiful than the unbroken piece ever was.

I think the poet would find beauty in imperfect pottery. And in imperfect humans. Each of us here. You, personally. And I think he would find beauty in imperfect communities. However damaged we might feel at times, there is beauty in each of us, and in the care with which we bind ourselves together into something that is not perfect, but is even more beautiful.

And yet, the poet says, we neglect that beauty. Why?

In part because it takes practice to see the beauty in ourselves, and in a world where so much is just wrong. In focusing on all that is not as we would have it be, as we humans tend to do, we can lose sight of what is beautiful.

And we also live in a world that calls things beautiful that are not what the poet has in mind – we can be distracted by those things ... Or just consumed by the tasks of our living. It can be hard, sometimes, to look up and appreciate the beauty of each of us, and the beauty we create together.

I think Capek had this in mind when he came up with the flower celebration. It's comparatively easy to notice beauty in flowers. And as a metaphor, flowers can be an entry point for practicing seeing the beauty here. And an invitation, perhaps, to find in ourselves that same recognition of beauty when we're looking in a mirror, or at other imperfect and diverse humans, as we do when viewing a sunset, a work of art, or flowers.

In that spirit, I look around this sanctuary, and I see beauty. And most of it is not in a vase.

I see the beauty of friendship, connection and care. The beauty of courage to face hard things, of commitment, and kindness and resilience. The beauty of music, and movement, and stillness. A chalice flame. The beauty of sharing and learning and celebrating with each other. The beauty of our aspirations. The beauty of welcome, and appreciation, and children with energy! The beauty of imperfect and yet shining people who share their gifts and seek to create Beloved Community amid all the reasons not to – bound together by a love that reveals itself as it holds us together, even more beautiful than gold.

There is so much beauty here. “Sometimes,” says Christian Cooper of Central Park birdwatching fame, “Sometimes, to recognize something as beautiful, all it takes is a change of perspective.”

There’s a story about Capek that I’ve heard in different places. It’s one of those stories that lacks a solid primary source, but it is said that, while in the Dachau concentration camp, Capek held one last flower celebration. There weren’t any flowers, of course, but he and other prisoners searched the camp for any glimpse of beauty amid the bleakness - a piece of a struggling weed, a stone ... anything. When they were gathered, Capek put these objects in a pile and preached once again about inherent dignity and the beauty of a community of love and care. And then, each participant left with some objectively worthless item now imbued with this symbolism, its beauty – and theirs - revealed.¹

There is beauty even in the hardest of times.

And this beauty, wherever it is found or created, is here to be noticed, appreciated and shared. Our task is perspective-shifting, so that we watch for it, name it, praise it, express gratitude for it – and tell others of the beauty that we see ... in them, and around us.

And then ... “in the presence of beauty,” says John O’Donohue, “it’s not a neutral thing - it’s actually calling you ... — to be yourself and to transfigure what has hardened or got wounded within you.”² The beauty around us calls us to awaken and reveal our own.

I used to regularly drive past a huge field of sunflowers. When they’re blooming I love watching them all orient themselves toward the sun. When they turn to face east early each morning, in preparation for the rising of the sun, they also open. I imagine the call of beauty as something like that, where – in seeking it and orienting ourselves toward it, something within us opens, and our individual and collective beauty awakens.

And beauty does more than awaken us. Mary Katherine Morn (president of the Unitarian universalist service committee, who also gave the sermon at our cluster service in March) says:

Beauty does more than awaken us.

It also admonishes us.

It demands something...

We are here, in religious community, not to hide from the anguished cries or the tender lullabies.

We are here, in religious community, not to protect our hearts from breaking.

We are here together to borrow courage for the task of coming alive.

¹ E.g., <https://davidrweiss.com/2023/06/10/norbert-capek-and-the-flower-communion/>

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>

We are here so that together we might heed the admonitions of beauty.

Answer its call to create; protect; and preserve.³

We're not here to protect our hearts from breaking. But we might be here - together – to bind the pieces in a way that makes them ever more beautiful. And in so doing, to borrow the courage we need to answer the call of beauty to create, protect and preserve.

Beauty is right here, right now. And no matter what else is going on, I hope you will never lose sight of it for long, for - the poet tells us - we need it, especially in the hardest times.

So ... where do you see beauty? Where do you see it in each other? In yourself? In the ways you come together? And what might it be asking of you, now?

May we never neglect the beauty in ourselves, in each other, in this world, and in this church.

And as we move into the future, with all the joys and hard times yet to come, let us bind ourselves together in ever more beautiful ways, always listening for the call of beauty.

May it be so.

Amen.

³ Quoted without citation in Soul Matters packet "Beauty" and elsewhere.