**My Grandfather's Apron**

**June 16, 2019   Rev. Janet Onnie**

For several years I have been trying to appreciate the art of Mark Rothko. Jim Mullen is moved by Rothko, and since I respect Jim Mullen, I’ve spent what seems like hours staring at Rothko canvases that were black. All black. Then I spent more hours staring at a canvas that was red. Heck, I even saw “Red”, the play about Rothko. Twice. Despite all that trying I still don’t ‘get’ Mark Rothko. Nor do I ‘get’ composer, John Cage. Cage isn’t a complete waste of time. Fifty-two years ago I met my beloved after I walked out of a concert of Cage’s electronic music compositions. But, again, the effort was expended because someone I knew and respected resonated with the music of John Cage. If someone I respect finds something beautiful I think it behooves me to try to figure out why. To see if I can expand my horizons to find beauty in something that, at first glance, engenders nothing more than a disinterested yawn.

​During last week’s reflections on the sermon Barbara Woodson gave a compelling testimonial to bedbugs. She said she came to appreciate the beauty of their design once she moved beyond the discomfort they inflicted on her. I have had the same experience with cockroaches. After some study – and even a sermon – the lowly cockroach became accessible as a thing of beauty.

When respected people find things as diverse as Rothko’s art, bedbugs, cockroaches and John Cage’s music beautiful you may wonder if there are no universal standards of beauty? What makes something beautiful? Is the sunset beautiful because we were taught that sunsets (and sunrises) are beautiful things? Or Are blond, blue-eyed pink-skinned people inherently more beautiful than dark haired, black-eyed, brown-skinned people? If so, why?

​Last week we focused on the beauty of the natural world. This week I want to explore beauty as it applies to people. First let’s talk about the tangible – the physical appearance of a person.

​I’ve been thinking of all the ways that our culture, our media, and the advertising world have created a ‘beauty’ industry...leading us to believe that beauty can be found in only certain styles, body types, ages, abilities, colour, weight, etc... And that unless we can attain that impossible ideal of beauty, we are to believe that we are NOT beautiful. We must look a particular way, buy expensive products, even undergo painful surgeries and procedures, in order to try to meet that beauty standard.

​Research shows that seven out of ten girls don’t like how they look by the time they are seventeen. And while much of the multi-billion dollar beauty industry targets women, I do not believe that women are the only victims. Not only do men get similar messages...about masculinity, strength, hair, musculature, height...I believe that across the gender spectrum, we are ALL deeply affected by externally imposed standards of beauty. Those external standards affect not only our own self-esteem, but our ability to see and connect with one another in authentic ways. The beauty standard is one of the principle ways in which we sort and select who, and what, is worthy of our adoration and love.

​Rev. Julie Stoneberg pointed me to a website for a ‘self- esteem project’ sponsored by Dove soap. Of course, I’m suspect, because, after all, this is a form of advertising, but still, I think their mission is a good one. There I found a powerful video called “The Evolution of Beauty” which shows in time lapse photography, the complicated, long process it takes to finally arrive at the ‘face’ of beauty that we see plastered on billboards. I think you’ll find it interesting. (Show Video) The final caption... “No wonder it seems unattainable.” That image is false, painstakingly created and artificially modified, mostly, out of a desire to sell products. Who decides what physical beauty is? And how does that relate to the inner beauty of one’s character?

I don’t know if I would call my grandfather ‘beautiful’. He was a small, wiry man with a thick head of hair and a slow smile. I don’t remember him ever articulating a thought about his appearance. Or anyone else’s appearance. He was a dairy farmer. Every morning and every evening seven days a week he went out to the barn to milk the cows. I vividly remember his work clothes, especially the old leather apron hanging on a hook close to the milking stalls. It had several pockets where he carried tools and stuff he used to fix things and an occasional piece of hard candy, studded with pieces of hay and tractor oil and god-knows what else.

 The apron itself was not a particular thing of beauty. After all, it was made from a dead cow. But what made it beautiful to me was what it represented – security, discipline, care giving, community, and the sacredness of small things. So it is with anything. What makes something or someone beautiful is the way it or they make you feel. What emotions does the object – or the person – trigger? Do they inspire delight or fright? Do those feelings raise you up or tear you down?

​In many ways we allow ourselves to be convinced and manipulated into seeing beauty in pretty narrow ways -- ways that ultimately are soul-killing. In a society with so much relative bounty, our spirits are starved for love, and connection, and acceptance, and belonging. And, that starvation leads to atrophy in our heart muscle... the less we feel love, the less we are able to love.

​There are consequences to our constricted view of beauty. For example, I have been reading about the Incel Rebellion. Incels are members of an online subculture who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, a state they describe as inceldom. Self-identified incels are largely white and are almost exclusively male heterosexuals. Discussions in incel forums are often characterized by resentment, misanthropy, self-pity, self-loathing, narcissism, misogyny, racism, a sense of entitlement to sex, and the endorsement of violence against sexually active people. The Southern Poverty Law Center described the subculture as "part of the online male supremacist ecosystem" that is included in their list of hate groups. At least four mass murders, resulting in 45 deaths, have been committed in North America by men who have either self-identified as incels or who had mentioned incel-related names and writings in their private writings or Internet postings. Incel communities have been criticized by the

media and researchers for being misogynistic, encouraging violence, spreading extremist views, and radicalizing their members.

I worry about these young men and their apparent isolation and alienation. Were they bullied and/or shunned because of their physical appearance and/or social awkwardness? Did any of them hear Mr. Rogers – or anyone else -- tell them “I like you just the way you are.”? Did no one advise them to look beyond physical beauty to the beauty of someone’s character? Did no one tell them how to make real-life friends?

​Rev. Casey Tygrett believes that friendships are good for your soul; that our spiritual health is deeply connected to the quality of our friendships. There is something truly beautiful about a close friend. I was passing through Panera the other day and saw two men in their 80’s having breakfast. They were leaning in, listening to each other intently. The newspaper was folded in between them and they had a bemused look on both of their faces, as though they were sharing a long-running joke fueled by whatever it was in the newspaper.

​Research shows that we are struggling to make friendships these days. We have so many virtual friends and so many commitments of time that many of us spend our days overstimulated. This causes us to seek out lonely spaces more often than public spaces. We have become very good at amassing online ‘friends’, but study after study shows how lonely we are. I’m sure the incel community gives young men a sense of belonging, but for how long? Under what conditions? How many of our Facebook ‘friends’ have seen us in our most vulnerable moments?

​It’s hard to see beauty from behind a wall of invincibility. At some point we need to risk being ourselves and encouraging others to be themselves. At some point we need the fleshiness other people. In short, we need friends. When we feel loved and accepted by people who’ve known us –warts and all -- we are more able to be fully who we are. We are more able to love. When we love, we make it more possible for others to love, and to love themselves. And within that love, that mirror to all that is, there is beauty... deep... relentless... ever- present beauty. We cannot love without also seeing beauty, and feeling beautiful.

​If we are to change a culture that isn’t very good at helping us to see ourselves or others as beautiful, we might start by exercising our heart muscle. In order to see ourselves as inseparably immersed in love and beauty, one with all that is, we can begin by practicing love. Tell the people around you that they are loveable. Tell them they are beautiful. Often. Unceasingly. Even if you can’t quite feel it or see it -- at least not yet -- practice affirmations of love and beauty.

You may never see a bedbug – or a smelly old apron or a red canvas – and find it beautiful. But the fact that someone you love sees the beauty in the object did slows up the ‘ick’ response. You may never see a person unlike yourself as anything other than someone to be feared and avoided. But you can be sure than someone has valued that person for something that may be mysterious to you. You have to spend some time looking for beauty with no guarantee that you and someone else will share the same sensitivities. Don’t let someone or something define beauty for you.; only love can show us beauty. But keep looking. You’ll honor the object of someone else’s beauty and may even learn to see it yourself.

​Love begets love, and beauty begets beauty. Choose love. Choose to see beauty. Choose love and beauty again and again. For ever and ever. May it be so. Amen.