

Ordinary beauty: Everyday blessings

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Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense.”

This reflection by Pastor John Ames, found in Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, suggests that Protestants should consider beauty just as essential to Christian life and understanding as those other medieval transcendentals, truth and goodness. Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has written powerfully on the significance of theological aesthetics, but for Protestants beauty remains a marginal category.

That is our loss, especially as we suffer from enough moral judgmentalism from both the right and the left to last several lifetimes. What might it mean to live as if God’s reactions were aesthetic rather than morally judgmental? How might this shape our own reactions?

John Ames gives us several clues. One of those clues is the significance of having eyes to see the beauty of God and God’s world. In his younger days Ames preached a Pentecost sermon and said that “the gray ember of Creation” occasionally turns to radiance before receding back into itself. Later in his life Ames reflects on that sermon: “The Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?”

Ames’s invocation of the moral virtue of courage reminds us that the aesthetic and the moral are not separate spheres. Having the courage to see involves the cultivation of imagination and skill, the capacity to see more deeply than we otherwise might see. What might that look like? We see a gorgeous example in Ames’s description of a young couple strolling along a street in his little town:

The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it.

Attention to God's presence in the world, a gift for seeing water as blessing before it is used for anything else—this is the grace of God in the beauty of daily life.

In addition, Ames appreciates being rooted in a particular place. He neither romanticizes nor demonizes his town of Gilead, but he has given it his sustained attention.

Of course, beauty is as capable of theological vacuousness as truth or goodness. A faithful appreciation of beauty requires theological attention and description, the kind that Ames offers. It requires reflection on the christological shaping of beauty, a reflection that challenges both diverse cultural standards of beauty and Madison Avenue's manipulation of those standards.

Such appreciation enables Ames to reflect wisely on the persistent sins of his godson Jack and on the brokenness Jack leaves in his wake. Ames writes, "Transgression. That is legalism. There is never just one transgression. There is a wound in the flesh of human life that scars when it heals and often enough seems never to heal at all."

Yet Ames has devoted his life to bearing witness to the redeeming, healing love of God in Christ, and so he continues to struggle to love Jack. And he does this by looking through the lens of grace. Indeed, Ames tells his son that he has written his extended reflection on ministry in part to help his son appreciate Jack: "You might wonder about my pastoral discretion, writing this all out. Well . . . he is a man about whom you may never hear one good word, and I just don't know another way to let you see the beauty there is in him."

In a poignant scene toward the end of the book, Jack prepares to leave town again, abandoning his sister and his dying father. Ames places his hand on Jack's brow and blesses him with the benediction from Numbers. Ames then notes, "Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter."

Ames believes in extravagant beauty. It is the beauty of God, of God's grace, of God's presence, of God's healing and redeeming love. He sees beauty in the ordinary blessings of life, and it leads him to take the risk of blessing a prodigal.

I recently gave a lecture on John Ames and the beauty of ministry. Afterward a young person asked a question. What would it look like, he wondered, if we were to reflect on congregational life in the context of a theological aesthetic shaped by God's beauty revealed in Christ? How might that affect how we think about attracting people to the gospel, and the shaping of Christian ministry? A beautiful question indeed.