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A CALL TO BEAUTY

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by
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ABSTRACT

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A Call to Beauty

This project is about the dynamic relationship between Beauty and preaching. God calls all creation to Godself through Beauty. The Gospel shines with Beauty. As occasions of preaching are meant to reflect, embody and call forth the Beauty of the Gospel in listeners, the preacher is called to give attention to Beauty in the text, congregation and self. Through a three year preaching endeavour with Beauty, this project explores how a preacher and a congregation were formed by intentional engagement with Beauty in ways that awakened them to God’s Presence, refreshed their hearing of the Gospel and called them to lives of active response. Along the journey with preaching and Beauty there evolved a clear path of spiritual and homiletical formation, and this ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ is intended for use by any preacher who desires to approach and encounter the preaching task shaped by the ways of Beauty.
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GRATITUDES

I do not preach alone. I preach with the many teachers and mentors who have helped in shaping me as a proclaimer. The people of First United Church are teachers par excellence. Their support was felt in prayer, encouraging words and little cards, audiovisual savvy, abundant enthusiasm for ideas previously untried, embrace of my time away and deep engagement with God’s unfolding theology and mission for the church. Thank you.

The gift of the Parish Project Group will forever nourish my heart and my preaching. We formed a beloved community together, in which Beauty, trust, deeply rooted joy and intellectual openness were nurtured. The Spirit smiled on us and we knew her Presence. To you, Francee, Jackie, Mary-Anne, Matthew, Peter and Steve - my deepest thanks and love.

In Chicago, it deepened my appreciation of God’s wisdom to have shared this journey with such excellent colleagues, who give of their talents and insights with both gracious humility or holy boldness. My thesis advisor, The Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque simply awes me. With poise and openness to events of grace, she speaks truth with love. I am grateful for her theological rigour, sensitivity to aesthetic nuance and prayerful attention to my work. Thank you.

This paper is dedicated to my husband Lloyd, whose enduring love is my reason to sing each day; he is man of great warmth, spiritual intelligence, integrity, humour and vision. He has taught me about dreaming big and persevering in the good things. You are my beloved.
BEAUTY CALLS

A Glimpse

It was the first week of Easter, 2007 and I was on pilgrimage in the canola covered hillside of Taizé, France. Daily I sat on the floor of the pew less sanctuary, knees drawn close to my chest surrounded by hundreds of young people singing prayers in the style of the Taizé. From places deep within we sang in our parent languages and in languages of ancestors. As the days passed enveloped by silence, scripture and song, amidst coloured light from simple stain glass windows and the clarity of monastically discerned teachings, I began to sense God coming to me with renewed freshness. I was being grasped by something wonderfully Holy and an internal shift toward that Presence was occurring. I was waking up from within. During one particular worship Brother Alois, Prior of the Taizé Community read lines of Scripture and then addressed the Holy Spirit; “Holy Spirit, your presence is mystery and life. You gift us with Gospel Beauty whenever a heart finds its way to trust you.” The Prior’s words called out to me and captured my imagination. From multiple sources I was experiencing God’s self revelation and it was as “Gospel Beauty” everywhere. Throughout the week gazing on the splendor of nations gathered and the loveliness of the countryside, the dance of flickering candles, listening to various interpretations of Scripture and being absorbed in congregational singing I wanted to explode with a chorus of ‘Yes!’ to the Beauty of God’s Presence making active my body, senses and theological imagination. I was delighting in Divine Beauty and glimpsing the Good News available to me with new insight.

1 In the style of Taizé - refers to the blend of meditative song, prayer and silence used by the ecumenical brotherhood in Taizé, France. The brothers open their home to thousands of pilgrims every year. www.taize.fr
2 Throughout this paper I have capitalized words that refer to Divinity and the attributes of Divinity. Presence, Beauty, Itself- This is intended to highlight the many ways the Divine shows itself throughout this work
3 The phrases Gospel Beauty and Beauty of the Gospel, will be used throughout this thesis. Gospel Beauty refers to an understanding of Beauty as an attribute of God and is inherent to Good News. There is an inextricable connection between Beauty and the Good News. As God is Beautiful, so too is the Good News of God Beautiful. Whether seen or unseen to us, Gospel Beauty is a given. The latter phrase, Beauty of the Gospel indicates the Beauty that we are able to perceive and know in the Good News.
4 Beauty that is sourced and grounded in God.
My proclaiming heart wanted to tell others of this, and so a theological possibility began to form. What if preaching Beauty was a gateway for the preacher and congregation to experience the Gospel afresh? How might a preaching project grounded in Beauty help others encounter God as Beautiful, to see their own lives as Beautiful and to be united as communities of faith bearing witness to Beauty in the world?

A year after the experience in Taizé, I became the lead minister of First United Church. During initial shared experiences of worship, ice cream socials, home visits and meetings of all kinds, I saw in the congregation an openness for going deeper with God, while also hearing in their stories of a limited awareness of God’s Gospel Presence moving in their lives. It was my sense that the need from the pulpit was for preaching that offered the congregation meaningful connection with a Gospel that engaged their intellect, imagination and lives. It was in that first year that Beauty called out and said, “Here. With these people. Preach with me!” Beauty preached, and Beauty revealed through preaching; could it awaken listeners to fresh engagement with the Gospel? Would it nudge them to experience ‘Gospel Beauty’ and their own lives as ‘Beauty of the Gospel’ embodied?  

Behold! The Congregation

First United Church is a suburban United Church of Canada congregation in the northern Alberta City of Fort Saskatchewan. An oil industry town of approximately 17,000 people, the vast sky is dotted with the twinkling lights of bitumen processing plants and refineries. City demographics show 21% of the population are dual income, English speaking “upper middle class families and couples.” Anecdotal evidence tells stories of third generation homesteaders

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5 Beauty of the Gospel indicates the Beauty the individual is able to perceive and know in the Good News. See endnote #3.
6 First United Church worked collaboratively with the provincial denomination offices to hire Environics Analytics to do socio-demographic studies of Alberta and its neighbourhoods including our city of Fort Saskatchewan. The data is available upon request from offices of the Alberta and Northwest Conference of the United Church of Canada. www.anwconf.com / cooffice@anwconf.com
of Ukrainian heritage, Filipino and Somalian immigrants, and a small town feel with resistance for getting too big.

In the congregation, there are seekers and old timers, young families who mute touchscreen phones before worship, skilled trades workers from local oil upgraders and many hungering for purpose and meaning in their lives. First United is in transition from being a pastoral sized church to becoming a program sized congregation of mission. Our updated vision statement reflects the Holy Spirit’s leading to be a “community where all can explore and grow on paths to becoming deeply committed Christians.” We are in exciting times of re-engaging and dreaming anew what it means to be contemporary people of Good News following in the ways of Christ. As Tom Troeger describes it we are a “church under reconstruction” eager to respond to the places of life giving energy.

Established 130 years ago, the congregation shares symptoms of change with other mainline denominations including a longing for a time of Christendom when church was part of the common social fabric and families consistently valued attending worship services and Sunday School. Several established members of the congregation grew up with a cultural rhythm and expectation of church participation and they continue to be ‘doers’ in congregational ministries. I call this group of people, Cohort A. Within this group there exists a living theology that understands doing actions at the heart of what it means to live as Gospel people. Members of this cohort name their faith as what keeps them going, yet many find it difficult to describe what about the Gospel “moves their heart.” They participate in Bible studies, prayer shawl ministries

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1 In her book, Raising the Roof: The Pastoral to Program Size Transition. Alice Mann describes the Alban Institute size categories according to active members and corresponding transition expectations. Pastoral size (50-150). Program size (150-300). http://www.sizetransitions.org/
3 Thomas Troeger, Preaching While the Church is Under Reconstruction (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).
4 A phrase found in the writings of Alejandro Garcia-Rivera describing the core of aesthetics. Here it naturally emerged out of conversations I had over tea in a UCW meeting in September 2010. Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, The Community of the Beautiful. A Theological Aesthetics (Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press,1999), 9.
and advocacy against child poverty, all the while telling me they wish they knew more about the faith. I wonder if they have lost or ever experienced a connection to the awe and Beauty of this faith they love and to which they respond. What could preaching do to nudge their hearts and minds in ways that might enable them to experience themselves and their lives as beautiful reflections of God’s Gospel?

Alongside Cohort A are those who express a living choice to be part of the church community either as newcomers, returnees or self-identified seekers on the journey.\textsuperscript{11} I call this group Cohort B. As this project gets underway, the church leadership team has identified this cohort as the “future of the church.”\textsuperscript{12} Cohort B longs for encounters with God and ways to connect their life experiences with the Gospel expressed in church community. They actively want to be more than a social group who gather on Sundays. They want to more fully experience the Gospel, and see their lives as part of its expression.\textsuperscript{13}

Though Cohorts A and B have differences I believe their members share a common growing edge and yearning for ways of encountering God and God’s Good News with experiential intimacy. They each seek to be oriented toward the Gospel, to live with deeper awareness of God’s Presence and to delight in response to a Gospel that shapes them in heart, mind and body.

As I preach for Cohorts A and B, I also preach for the “congregation that is not yet.” This is Cohort C, and they are composed of those whose ears have not yet heard, but for whom the Gospel is intended. There are indicators that the spiritual edges present in Cohorts A and B

\textsuperscript{11} This descriptor refers to church participants who have been around for a while, and who are finding themselves actively engaging for the first time or with renewed interest and commitment.

\textsuperscript{12} During my first church Board retreat, September 2008, the group articulated a hope for church growth in this area. During the second Board retreat and launch of this DMin project, September 2009, the Board named worship and preaching as part of the strategic plan to achieving the latter.

\textsuperscript{13} Decembers 2008-2011 there were congregational meetings. Questions at those meetings included: What are you looking for in a faith community? How does this church help you grow as a disciple? Ongoing questions for engagement are also used during community meals, Board meetings and small groups.
also exists in the wider community of Fort Saskatchewan and our province, Alberta. A sociographic study commissioned by the provincial office of our denomination shows the top two social values in the general population of Alberta include: ‘attraction to nature’ and ‘religiosity.’ The study shows that in the neighbourhood of First United Church, the top ten social values include religiosity, spiritual questing and meaning of life.\(^{14}\) As I examine this data I sense that in this congregation’s local and provincial neighbourhood there is a latent curiosity for spirituality grounded in things of mystery and Beauty. In addition I interpret the data to suggest that a hunger exists for contemporized ways of accessing and coming to see the Spirit at work and play in our lives. I believe the whole of First United congregation, Cohorts A and B along with Cohort C are ready to engage ways of refreshing their spiritual wellspring both individually and communally. Preaching Gospel Beauty has relevance for the faithful animation of God’s church and relevance to those who will “overhear the Gospel”\(^{15}\) through the congregation’s response to the preaching they experience. As secularization of the Canadian context continues to increase\(^{16}\) and denominational commitment decreases,\(^{17}\) it may be that preaching through a lens of Beauty can provide entry points into conversations and connections linked to an appreciative awareness of a Holy One.

This DMin. project is in response to the needs and possibilities for the people of First United Church with its functioning three cohorts. I believe that a long range preaching

\(^{14}\) See Endnote #6 Environics defines the following social values: Religiosity - “Placing a high value on affiliation with an organized religious faith, beliefs and rituals and the belief that religion provides values and education that are important to transmit to the next generation.” Spiritual Quest: “Questioning the meaning of life. Aspiring to a more spiritual, richer inner life with understanding and joy.” Meaning of Life: “Expresses a deep need to invest one’s life with meaning or goals, and to regularly reflect on this issue. An intensely spiritual life, introspection, social responsibility and family are supporting dimensions.”


\(^{17}\) Environics study slide #50, assessed the Cdn. general pop. of self identifying Christians, with approx. 14% indicating no church community, and in Alberta province that increases 23% where it matches Catholicism. The United Church percentage is at 21%.
engagement through the lens of Beauty, both inherent to the Gospel (Gospel Beauty) and experienced in the everyday living and in shared community practices (Beauty of the Gospel) can awaken this congregation and preacher to God’s radical Presence such that listeners hear the Gospel afresh, experience a shift of awareness toward God and respond to the call of Gospel Beauty in their lives. But first we must explore some foundational questions - What is Beauty? Why it is important for the preacher to engage Beauty?

THE PORTAL OF BEAUTY
What is Beauty?
We are beings who get to glimpse the eternal through momentary encounters with Beauty. An enveloping concept with experiential subjectivity, Beauty can come to us with personal clarity and yet be very difficult to speak of with precision. Indescribable at times, begging for description at others, we are taken hold of and transfigured by Beauty that reveals and draws us closer to an eternal God. Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart eloquently observes:

“There is from a strictly theoretical standpoint an infuriating imprecision (though one might prefer to say richness) in the language of beauty; the word “beauty” indicates nothing: neither exactly a quality, nor a property, not a function, not even really a subjective reaction to an object or occurrence, it offers no phenomenological purchase upon aesthetic experience. And yet, nothing else impresses itself upon our attention with at once so wonderful a power and so evocative an immediacy.” (emphasis mine)\(^1^8\)

Given that any definition of the Beautiful does not exhaust the notion of the Beautiful,\(^1^9\) I will explore aspects of what Beauty reveals itself to be; for Beauty is many things, and Beauty can also not be a ‘thing.’ The well known cliche that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ points to a subjectivity and diversity of experienced beauty; and though beauty is subjectively experienced based on perceived properties of things; it does not mean that our perceptions are


illusionary. Beauty is there before us, behind us, above and below us. Beauty has an
"overwhelming givenness," it comes to us, grasps us and presents itself to us in ways consistent
across experiences of many.

Beauty is an event of glimpsing the Infinite in the finite. Mystics and religious
philosophers have said, "Beauty is eternity here below." It is a moment of the Whole
expressing itself in a fragment of finite experience, in which something of a transcendent and
intimate God is disclosed to us as "embodied epiphany." Beauty is a link to the Divine, to what
shakes us and forms us. An event, it can happen in a second and heal us. It is a portal to God.
We all have a relationship with Beauty, consciously acknowledged or not "Beauty is often the
medium of grace that breaks through to the most disbelieving and hardened heart." It is the
presence of God’s Spirit that opens human hearts to the inconceivable, and when we understand
God coming to us as Beauty we attribute to Beauty the "adventure, mystery, infinity and
autonomy" of divine nature. Given the latter assertions, I understand there to be an inextricable
relationship between God and Beauty. For this project it is my assertion that God is the very
Source of Beauty. All we describe as beautiful is not God, but if as noted above the source of all
Beauty is found in God then to speak of Beauty is to speak of God.

Beauty is known in the moment of response. We stand in "the position of one already
addressed and able now only to reply." Beauty calls forth response and the invitation is to be
in partnership with Beauty, allowing its advent and event-like nature to guide us in Beauty

22 Simone Weil, Waiting for God (Perennial Classics, 2001), 110.
27 Ibid., 17
generating ways. Inherent in our humanity there is a need to know Beauty. An experience of
Beauty awakens the yearning for Beauty within ourselves, compelling us to take action in the
physical world and shift within interior spaces toward the Transcendent. Our responses to Beauty
shape our imagination, our ‘seeing’ of the world and our relationship with God. No one is
immune to Beauty. Regardless of background, burdens, limitations or expectations, when we
find ourselves with Beauty we are not as we were before. Beauty is never a stagnant
experience.\(^\text{28}\)

Beauty is the persuasive power of God’s truth and goodness. As Beauty is sourced in
God, it draws us toward God. Beauty puts us in contact with our attraction for “the Ultimate” but
it can also make us aware of our “fear of what transcends our present horizon.”\(^\text{29}\) An awareness
and experience of Beauty can make us lonely for what is not, and what cannot be.\(^\text{30}\) Experiences
of Beauty can draw out a sadness for the impermanent, glimpse-like nature of Beauty and for the
many individuals who do not know life with Beauty’s radiance.\(^\text{31}\) We acknowledge that Beauty
is forever intertwined with life’s complexities of darkness and ugliness and though not always
seen, Beauty is there - ever present, as the Spirit is present.

\textbf{God Reveals Godself As Beauty}

Speaking to a room of preachers I once heard a colleague declare: “If you get the
congregation to God, sit down!”\(^\text{32}\) A preacher uses theological, philosophical and experiential

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 20

\(^{29}\) Richard Viladesau, \textit{Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art} (New York: Oxford University
Press, 1999), 137.

\(^{30}\) During a pastoral visit for a grieving family, the daughter shared her understanding of heaven as place rich with
Beauty. She expressed her joy and trust in the full Beauty her mother was experiencing. She also shared her sadness
that the same Beauty cannot be for us here and now.

\(^{31}\) It was a PPG member who shared with the group an overwhelming loneliness experienced because of this opening
to Beauty.

\(^{32}\) This event occurred in a small group at the 2006 Festival of Homiletics in Chicago. A google search of the phrase
shows that it is also the given title of an interview with Thomas Troeger.

\url{http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/troeger.asp} (accessed November 29, 2011)
considerations to “get the congregation to God,” these are often grounded in transcendental assertions about the nature of God. The notions of truth, goodness and unity function as commonly accepted descriptors of God and are used as foundational entry points for preachers seeking to convey a Christian Gospel. For this project we join with others who name Beauty as another “superessential” attribute of God’s nature and we actively engage the possibility that the preacher can “get the congregation to God” through Beauty.

Thomas Aquinas was convinced that Beauty belonged in the realm of transcendentals, of those “passions or properties of being,” which form various aspects of Being and are one with Infinite Being. Thirteenth century theologian and philosopher Robert Grosseteste wrote extensively on the transcendentals, especially the Good and Beautiful. Grosseteste argued that the Good and Beautiful are concomitant conditions of all being. He believed that harmony of proportions was beauty. He also believed the same of God. God as perfect proportion and harmony, “simple with no dissonance.” God creates all in God’s likeness. The unity, truth, goodness and beauty of creation reflect the Creator as the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. So God is Beauty and Beauty is Godself.

More ancient thinkers argued for the same conclusion of Beauty’s unity in God. Plato understood the good, true, real and beautiful as being essentially reducible to the same thing - a unified One who he left unnamed but whom Augustine later identified as the One true living God of the Bible. Augustine suggested that the good, true, real and beautiful are indeed One because they are constitutive to a self revealing God. This comprehensive nature of God as unified

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33 “Transcendentals” - I appreciate the succinct operational definition given by Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13. “the intelligible aspects of being expressed by notions that go beyond the ‘categories’ used to designate particular beings of kinds of being, and that express what every being is, insofar as it exists.”


37 Ibid., p.125
suggests that God's Being and the transcendentals are convertible. The good, true and beautiful exists, and what exists is good, true and beautiful. Thomas Aquinas wrote that Beauty was the "radiance of all transcendentals united," and at the core of our human questing there exists a desire to express and experience a fullness of being; communion with God, who is One, goodness, truth and Beauty. Other theologians agreed with Aquinas and argued for Beauty as a distinctive transendental which "signifies the very unity of truth and goodness." I find the latter most compelling in its philosophical affirmation of God as the source of Beauty. God is not simply described as Beautiful, but Beauty originates out of God's own Self in the coming together of truth and goodness.

It may be unnecessary to assert theological thinkers to affirm God as both the source of Beauty and the One revealed in Beauty. Starting with the human experience, there is conclusive evidence of humanity's holy delight in response to Beauty. Gaze at a sunset, listen to the words of Scripture, witness an infant splashing in a baptismal pool and you might hear your own heart whisper, 'My God, you are Beautiful!' There seems to be no doubt, experiences of Beauty can "lead the human spirit to God and confirm people in their devotion." Personal experiences of Beauty testify to the crucial role aesthetic dimensions play in the communication of religious truths. If we lose connection with Beauty and disengage from the human capacity to know and love God through Beauty, we deem ourselves participants in a modern spiritual crisis where pretty is enough and the glory of God is not pursued. Further we accept the banal instead of a life transformed in ways of truth. We become as drifters in an ocean of God's self revelation unable to delight in the colours of a setting sun on the horizon. Indeed a "loss of commitment to Beauty

39 Ibid., p 21
40 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 128 "Beauty, as the state of perfection and perfect harmony of unity, truth, and goodness, constitutes a transcendental along with these three. This description holds good for what is perceptible by the senses and still more for what can be contemplated spiritually.
41 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 13.
42 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 104
may be the clearest sign we have that we have lost our way to God.”  

While the preaching event that is formed by attending to Beauty might be the place of hope where Beauty calls us back to itself and to God with fresh wonder.

How Does Beauty Call?

Beauty is the inconceivable made so intimate that it illuminates our hearts.”

To be in the presence of Beauty is not a neutral thing. Beauty has an inherent value because in its presence we encounter something of God. In Greek the word for ‘the beautiful’ is to kalon. It is related to the word kalein which includes the notion of ‘call.’ When we experience Beauty, we feel called. Moments of connection with the Beautiful awaken in us awareness of an invisible Presence. It calls us forth “from aloneness into the warmth and wonder of an eternal embrace.” Beauty comes to us, as it draws us to itself. As God calls to the heart of humanity, Beauty calls, addressing our yearning for itself. The meaning of kalon also carries the notion of ‘the good’ and is found in the opening doxology of Genesis where the writers note that God created and “God saw it was good (kalon)” (Genesis 1: 4,18,21,25,31). Building on the lexical relatedness of kalon to both good and beautiful we can propose a paraphrase that states, ‘and God saw it was (kalon) beautiful.’ The doxology shifts our witness from God beholding creation as exclusively good with understandings of creation as “acceptable, viable or useful” and nudges us to consider God’s naming of all creation as participants in a realm of Beauty, delight and awe. It is affirming to the preaching and listener to know of God blessing

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46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
50 http://sepd.biblos.com/genesis/1.htm (accessed December 1, 2011)
creation as Beautiful. Humanity is part of God’s creation. Humanity is Beautiful. You and I are Beautiful.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26a, 27, NRSV)

We reflect God’s image. We reflect God’s Beauty. The joy is ours to live in awareness and relationship with the One who sees us as beautiful. We are called and named by Beauty. God calls us beautiful. We are beautiful.

We carry within us an innate desire to live as those touched by Beauty and to be co-creating stewards of possibilities in Beauty. Our life stories are filled with Beauty, both seen and unseen. Written and spoken works of the late philosopher and poet John O’Donohue offer foundational considerations for approaching Beauty. He writes that:

“our joy in the Beautiful is as native to us as our breath, a lyrical act where we surrender but to awaken. We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful because it meets the needs of our soul.”

The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere - in landscape, music, art, clothes, architecture, gardening, companionship, love, religion, in ourselves and in God. Choosing to pursue and be awakened to Beauty can mediate for us a deepened awareness of God and grow a conviction to participate in God’s action in the world through the presence and functions of Beauty.

ATTENTION PREACHERS - BEAUTY MATTERS

Preaching as an Aesthetic Event

This project explores the dynamism of bringing preaching and Beauty into mutual conversation. It was developed on the premise that humanity has been created with a longing and

52 In conversation with Professor Jennifer Lord of Austin Seminary, July 2010, she offered helpful questions including: “What theologian, aesthete or philosopher will you work with for a working definition of beauty?” I found myself consistently returning to the works of Irish poet and wise-person, John O’Donohue. His Celtic imagination, lyrical language, and deeply lived relationship with Beauty offer me, my preaching and this project new ways of understanding Beauty as part the human spiritual quest.

joyful capacity to experience Beauty. The latter extends to preachers and the people for whom preachers preach. Despite the role Beauty plays within and around us, most preachers do not
give attention to Beauty as part of their preaching vocation. A reorientation is required for
preachers to see the value of being formed by Beauty as they form their sermons for listeners
who are themselves yearning for Beauty.

The theological disciplines of homiletics and Beauty are not often addressed together.
Tom Troeger, preacher and flutist, through his book, "Wonder Reborn" offers a contemporary
reflection on ways of bringing Beauty and preaching into a shared sphere. A primary
conversation partner for this project, Troeger engages the value and necessity of preachers to
occasionally preach on “culturally durable” works of art as hymns, music and poetry. He reflects
that preaching on art and beauty creates new trajectories for listeners to “loosen the rigid
imagination of the Church” and be led into a “liberating experience” of beholding God. For
Troeger, the “beauty of the gospel lies in the beauty of the God it reveals.”54

The preaching task is an unfolding event of an invisible God made visible. Ours is the
task of mediating the mystery that draws us toward life abundant and to the ‘seeing’ of mystery
made manifest all around us. It is reasonable to view the preacher and preaching event as an
expressive place for God’s Good News made visible. This was the gift of Christ’s Incarnation
and the core task upheld in human preaching: daring to voice “God’s human speech” toward a
world transformed.55

Preaching is an act that explores and proclaims God’s Beautiful Gospel. It is a particular
and intentional theological act between God, preacher and listeners that draws on the “sum total

55 Charles L. Bartow, God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
1997).
of human faculties.” As the ancient dictum states we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul, mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5), so the preacher makes use of a holistic toolbox including her voice, movement, conviction, intellect, passion and spirit. Listeners engage also as “whole persons involved in experiential encounters of body, emotion, intuition, mental processes and spirit.” Distinctive from other speech, the preaching event is a dynamic journey whereby the entirety of preacher and listener are called on in an experience of the living Word. This makes preaching an aesthetic event.

The term ‘aesthetics’ has a history of multiple uses, misuses and definitions. Beginning with first use by Alexander Baumgarten in 1735, the term had as its aim an elevation to the “level of a science” the “faculties of the mind, imagination and intuition.” Baumgarten also referred to aesthetics as “the art of thinking beautifully” and throughout the early 19th century beauty was understood to be the goal of aesthetics. For Balthasar, God’s Beauty was revealed in God’s glory, and since God’s glory is the “most divine aspect of God,” aesthetics or “thinking on Beauty” was considered the “only appropriate stance” for theology. For this project, the relationship of Beauty and aesthetics emerges from the work of both Friedrich Schiller and Alejandro Garcia-Rivera. The poet Schiller offered a broad understanding of ‘aesthetic’ as the “whole complex of our sensual and spiritual powers in the greatest possible harmony.” Beauty was understood to be the revealed through this “whole complex.” While Garcia-Rivera relates aesthetics to that “which moves the human heart” and “brings us closer to the mysterious experience of the truly beautiful.” Theological aesthetics recognizes in the experience of Beauty a religious dimension. It points to the origin of Beauty in the Divine and its reception by

58 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 33
59 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 7
the finite human heart. I believe that the preacher who preaches Beauty is engaged in the aesthetics of Schiller’s ‘whole complex’ and Garcia-Rivera’s intimacy of personal connection when the heart and spirit respond to Beauty. Preaching as an aesthetic event compels the preacher to attend to Beauty experienced in relation with God, congregation and self. This necessitates the preacher’s involvement in the work of discerning and experiencing that which ‘moves the heart’ for herself and the congregation. How does the preacher do this? This project evolves to offer the preacher a process of formation for this very task.

**Apologetic for Preaching Beauty**

We preach that to which we pay attention. As preachers we must orient ourselves toward Beauty. Let us consider three significant reasons for the preacher to consider Beauty as integral to sermon formation and the preaching event.

**The Good News is Beautiful**

Ordained preachers in the United Church of Canada are consecrated to the task of proclaiming the Good News of a God who is available, inviting, and engaged with the world. We preach a Trinitarian God who, through work of the Holy Spirit, redemption of the Christ and love of the Creator; involves us in a collectively created transformative vision. This is Good News (Gospel) and it is Beautiful. As God is Beauty, so too is God’s Gospel Beautiful. The radical self giving of God in Jesus Christ, the natural Beauty of creation, the delight in knowing God calls us ‘children’, contemporary and eschatological calls for a Kingdom of Shalom; all point to God’s desire to communicate Gospel Beauty.

Gospel Beauty is available for the preacher and listener to experience in events of proclamation. When the preacher breathes deeply of Gospel Beauty she is rewarded by finding Beauty available. Through experience, study and reflection when she engages with Beauty, receives it, explores it and responds by sharing it with others through a preaching event all are exposed to the gifts and insight Beauty brings. Proclaimers of Gospel Beauty grow in their
personal understandings of Beauty of the Gospel, and they preach with purpose so Gospel Beauty might address the listeners, awakening them to Beauty of the Gospel in the world and calling forth response.

Transfigured for An Eternal Vision

Experiences of Beauty change us. They draw us to look toward God's eschatological vision of renewal and transfiguration. Indeed, as God has made everything beautiful in its time and set a vision of eternity in the human heart (Eccl. 3:11), glimpsing Beauty deepens our awareness of an eternal vision for creation where God's fullness is known. We yearn for proclamation that praises the God of transformation who, according to Holy power that is at work within us (Ephesians 3:20), calls us to keep awake and participate in Kingdom ways of Gospel Beauty.

As Beauty is often disassociated from the One who is the source of Beauty, and instead linked to notions of glamour, external assessment or consumptive value; preachers aligned with Beauty must reclaim Beauty from its cultural sanitization and look toward an eternal vision of Beauty within and before us. In contexts of violence, ecological destruction, political and religious warfare, cultural pluralism and global hunger we are sustained by holding onto transfiguring moments of Beauty that we "glimpse sideways" in order to "endure great bleakness."61 Where the immensity of despair and ugliness strives to swallow hope, Beauty comes alongside with compelling gentleness and bold convictions of goodness and truth to move our hearts with countercultural visions of justice, peace, reconciliation, delight and compassion. The preaching event is thus transfigured by the preacher's personal encounter with this Kingdom call of Beauty as it paints both a picture of God's Gospel Beauty and offers an eternal promise to the listeners.

The Time of Pulpit Resistance Is Over

Beauty has been victim to historical resistance from the pulpit. Augustine confessed his desire for Beauty and its power to draw him toward the Holy, but he was concurrently wary of Beauty’s power to lure away from God.\textsuperscript{62} Barth shared a fear of Beauty detracting from the task of preaching warning that, “theology must not become occupied with its own beauty, nor with the beauty of its object” as it would be contrary to the role of the church.\textsuperscript{63} Troeger suggests that modern skepticism around the call to transformation through Beauty lurks in the contemporary pulpit due to a misalignment of “prettiness” with Beauty and the concern that such a “pretty” focused aesthetic will displace Christian ethics.\textsuperscript{64} In continuity with this lack of engagement with Beauty, most North American preachers are not trained to pay attention to Beauty. An operating myth perpetuates that paying attention to Beauty and preaching Gospel Beauty will mask the Good News. Remarkably, I have experienced the contrary and discovered that preaching through a lens of Beauty heightens accessibility to the Gospel for my listeners. Preaching Beauty reveals the unseen beyond mere prettiness. It engages listeners and preacher with the full range of aesthetic sensibilities; raising responsive conviction in areas of outreach, evangelism, leadership, artistic involvement and community development.

Movement toward preaching that gives attention to Beauty’s capacities is seen in the work of some influential homiletics. Again the conflicted Augustine, reflected for years on the role of Beauty in theological inquiry and moved by the sermons of Ambrose, known for their affirmation of God’s Beauty, Augustine famously addressed God as ‘primal’ Beauty:

“Late have I love You, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I love You! and behold, you are within me.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{62} Viladesau, \textit{Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art}, 106
\textsuperscript{63} Viladesau, \textit{Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art}, 28
Preachers like Barbara Brown Taylor and Fred Craddock have pointed to the importance of Beauty in the experiential formation of Christians and in appreciating an “aesthetic approach to life” evident in justice seeking Christians. Mystics like Simone Weil have articulated the importance of those who seek God to make choices which “turn to Beauty,” and deepen our contemplation of the Presence of God in the finitude of life’s fragments. This is the shape and character of Beauty. It is expression of the infinite in the finite. It is “Christ’s tender smile for us coming through matter” and lived experience.

Church historian Phyllis Tickle suggests that every 500 years Christianity “cleans out the attic” of ideas around authority, theology and presumed best practices. While current quests for connection with God increasingly move individuals away from religious institutions, they also propel many into forays of new conversation and curiosity for those things considered spiritual. I suspect the time has come for preaching and preachers to clean out the attic of resistance to Gospel Beauty and engage a lens of Beauty as an entry way into exploration and connection for listeners with Divine Presence and Gospel animation. Preachers must embrace the task of attending to Beauty that mediates the mystery and relevance of a Gospel that compels humanity to life fully in the finite with awareness of the infinite.

THE PROJECT AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE
What follows is a narrative of the journey the congregation and I took with Beauty. From a first year of preaching about Beauty - what it is, where it is, why it is - to a second year of exploring through preaching Gospel Beauty and the Beauty we experience in the Gospel life of Christ; to a third and final year of preaching Beauty revealed in the life of the text, the preacher

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66 Taylor, An Altar in the World. A Geography of Faith, 25-26. Taylor offers description of an occasion in her garden when she failed to turn aside to Beauty and she was gripped by the lost opportunity to stand before God.
67 Troeger, Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermon on Hymns, Music, and Poetry, (quoting Craddock, Fred B. As One without Authority: revised and with new sermons. (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2011), 16)
68 Weil, Waiting for God, 67.
69 Ibid., 68
and the congregation in the event of Holy Communion; the congregation and the preacher have been changed by Beauty. Along the way I have explored questions and discoveries that emerged from the preaching events, in lectio divina small groups (chapel), Parish Project Group (PPG), a congregational ‘Beauty Box’ project, and congregational surveys. The anticipated outcome of this project was a “heightened awareness” of Beauty in the life of the congregants, and while this did occur, the surprise outcome may be found in the development of a holistic hermeneutical pathway for preachers who desire to attend to Beauty with their preaching. The developed “Beauty Hermeneutic” facilitates a seeing by preachers of the presence of Beauty in the text, the congregation and themselves, such that their preaching is more fully formed in relationship with Beauty and better able to draw listeners into an awareness of God’s Beauty in the Gospel and energize them to take action in response.

This journey of preaching Gospel Beauty has been an exercise in the spiritual of a congregation as they encountered Beauty; as well as the spiritual and homiletical formation of the preacher. Based on my experience I believe those who make themselves available to a practice of Beauty gazing will find themselves deepened in awareness of God’s Beautiful Presence. The preacher who applies such intentionality to Scripture, congregation and self will notice Beauty revealing itself with fresh avenues of proclamation and connection with God, self and congregation. The congregation that experiences preaching events of Gospel Beauty will be drawn to Eucharistic moments as gifts of God’s Beauty that prompt wonder, delight and call forth response.

A JOURNEY WITH BEAUTY - Year 1

Setting A Path of Beauty

Given that Beauty was such a broad and unfamiliar concept for my congregation, the first year goal was to explore various operating understandings of Beauty held by church members and myself as preacher. Would preaching Beauty open the congregation to Beauty as a part of
their spiritual imagination and awareness? Would this kind of preaching foster a capacity for the apprehension of Beauty around them? During the first year of the project I asked foundational questions regarding the what, where and why of Beauty. The event forum for these questions were sermons about Beauty. The aim of this experience was to challenge and inspire the congregation to notice the reality of Beauty around them and its availability to them in their personal faith experiences and everyday living. The objectives of the three sermons preached in the initial year were to:

i. open awareness to the natural diversity of God’s Beauty
ii. attend to Beauty in the everyday
iii. draw close to God in the Beauty of Scripture

Beauty as an aesthetic event calls forth from listeners more than an intellectual response. In response to the charge of the project’s first sermon, to take notice of Beauty in the midst of life, one member of the Parish Project Group felt nudged to create a “Beauty Box” for the congregation.\(^7\) She used an old suitcase and decorated it with sensory and emotive items. Brightly coloured feathers, mirrored glass, beads and words like dream, hope, love, kindness were glued onto the suitcase exterior. The artist was deliberate in keeping the “old smell” of the suitcase because it had a particular “beauty of time” for her. The congregation was asked to put items into the ‘Beauty Box’ that reflected their understanding of Beauty in the world and in their lives. The collection of items began in response to the first sermon preached about Beauty’s diverse presence in God’s multifaceted world. Contents included family photos, a deflated soccer ball, an acorn, our church hymnal, handwritten notes describing special moments in life, pictures of congregational memories and a homemade Christmas ornament. No one included writings explicitly about faith or words of Scripture. The “Beauty Box” data revealed the congregation to have a “classic” understanding of Beauty including beauty found in nature, relationships, art and

\(^7\) Appendix D.
their passions. I wondered if absorbed within these beautiful representations of Beauty was a connection with God’s Presence, God’s Gospel or God as Beauty? Grounded in an aesthetic approach to preaching, I decided to preach the second and third sermons about Beauty employing not only Mitchell’s “moves of consciousness” but also using the physical Beauty Box and a Bible in the sermons. The second sermon affirmed that God’s Beauty is available to us in the everyday, a glimpse of the infinite God in the finite. It stretched the listeners’ imaginations to consider that each Beauty Box selection was not only beautiful because of what it meant to the original owner of the item but for its “capacity to direct [them] toward God.”

Several PPG members commented that when as part of the sermon I held up the things from the Beauty Box and explained how the items pointed to God (in nature, in service to others, as passionate joy), it expanded their understanding of beauty and connected them to Beauty’s Presence all around. Also in this sermon the challenge was extended to consider other non-conventional aspects of our lives that could be considered Beautiful for their capacity to orient us toward God. I chose money as the focus item. For many, money has an associative ugliness. The PPG reported that when I placed coins in the Beauty Box their initial uneasiness gave way to “a resounding yes! as I preached the Beauty of buying ingredients to make a meal for someone who was hungry, buying wool to knit a blanket for the local shelter or establishing a not-for-profit agency to work with local farmers. We came to see God’s Beauty in something like money. It was the beginning of considering the transformative capacity of Beauty and the relationship God’s Beauty has with that which we consider ugly.

The third sermon opened with a call to focus on a Bible. As I held the Bible with pages open, I asked the church to simply “Behold!” and allow their honest relationship with God’s

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72 Mitchell, Celebration and Experience in Preaching, p 17.
73 This phrase is quoted from the sermon.
74 Source: notes from the PPG meeting after preaching sermon - Year 1, Sermon 2. November 13, 2009.
word to take form in their hearts and minds. “Could the word of God be Beautiful to you?” I asked. The preaching event was extremely sensory. Each listener was asked to hold a Bible, turn the pages, linger on particular verses and to read aloud two different versions of Psalm 23. We heard the Word, we beheld the Word, we touched the Word, we recalled memories with the Word, and we felt the love of God whose Spirit faithfully speaks to us through the Word. Prior to this sermon individual experiences of Beauty had been emphasized; now the Scriptures were lifted up as a communally shared way of experiencing Beauty.

I wanted the congregation to be motivated to look on everyday living and the Scripture with new eyes and ears hoping to experience its inherent Beauty as transformative in their lives. Given the diversity and steady stream of “Beauty Box” data collected over four months and a sensed “beauty buzz” throughout the congregation, the preaching successfully aroused the congregation to Beauty in their midst. It is noteworthy that after the third sermon, there was a correlative increase in Scriptural submissions offered in the Beauty Box. Images of soaring (Isaiah 40:31), Jesus’ nature as the Light of the World (John 9:5), and John 14 passages of peace and prepared rooms in heaven were among the most often included passages.

**A Congregation Moves with Beauty**

Over the first year, while the congregation responded well to the invitation to notice Beauty in their everyday living, along with the PPG they concurrently offered preliminary perceptions of Beauty and began to show a shift in that awareness. PPG members reflected in the first meeting that, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” - a reasonable beginning, but by the conclusion of the third sermon comments also included:

“I feel that this preaching and studying about Beauty makes me aware that God is active in the world.”

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75 A phrase offered by Jackie St. Goddard: Chair of the Board and PPG member during a Board meeting devotion invited us to “listen for the beauty buzzing throughout the church.” It was a meditation on thankfulness. We listened to the beauty buzzing in the “sound of the children playing, musicians practicing, study groups learning, our minister preaching, the UCW serving and this Board discerning.” Board meeting - March 2010.
“Beauty is Jesus saying, Come! Come to me”
“Beauty is not an easy subject. It means I have to be honest about my emotions and look inside myself for understanding.”

I began to hear the language of Beauty offered in opening prayers at Board meetings and noticed an increasing confidence in congregation members describing God as beautiful. Troeger’s contemporary writing on the “place of Beauty in preaching” suggests that no singular definition of Beauty is sufficient, but rather several “overtones” are necessary to paint Beauty’s dynamic nature. Emerging from the first year sermons and congregational engagement, particular and contextual overtones of Beauty were coming into focus for myself and the PPG.

Beauty is not the same as prettiness.
Beauty helps us to sense God’s Presence in the ordinary and extraordinary.
Beauty compels us to be honest.
Beauty is experiential and glimpsed in moments.
God is Beautiful.

The specificity, use and essential quality of these overtones for Beauty and Beauty preached would sharpen as the DMin project continued.

**A Preacher Moves With Beauty**

During the first year, I discovered that I could not preach about Beauty without myself deepening in attention to Beauty. Beauty was working on my heart not as a topic but as Presence. A relationship was beginning to form; as I attended to Beauty, Beauty was there attending to me, calling to me, shimmering, beckoning, challenging. I was being swept into a rigorous and simultaneously poetic romance with Beauty and thus, with my God. Beauty was available to me and expressing itself in little moments, in the people of my congregation, in relationships, in art and passion, in my own humanity. There is a difference between preaching about Beauty and preaching with Beauty; as one formed with Beauty. Indeed the topic of Beauty can be engaging

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76 During a monthly ‘Soup Sunday’ community lunch (February 2010) - table groups answered the question: What is your favourite image of God? Most frequent answers included - Light, laughter, “the female Papa character from The Shack” and Beauty.
for listeners, but what happens to the preaching event and its outcomes, when the preacher takes up residence with Beauty and allows herself to be theologically, spiritually, emotionally and intellectually formed by a relationship with Beauty? Would insights, connections and language emerge that drew listeners more fully into the Gospel and propel them into deeper Beauty of their Gospel shaped faith? This project was emerging as a congregational and preacher ‘process of formation’ as Beauty was preached not only as topic, but as it worked on the preacher and congregation.

**GOSPEL BEAUTY - Year 2**

**Gazing on Gospel Beauty**

Preaching is a constructive theological act between God, preacher and listeners. A preacher takes care in preparing the preaching event, investing time with Scripture, Spirit and congregational listening, and by fostering creative enthusiasm for God’s Good News.

In the first year project the congregation was awakened to Beauty as an attribute of God and its active presence in the everyday experiences of life. For the second year, I saw an opportunity to investigate how my preaching, formed and informed by an attention to Beauty could engage the congregation in fresh experiences of the Good News.

Seekers, newcomers and returnees were telling the leadership team about their interest in being part of a faith community where they could explore Christianity in contemporary ways. They named how much they enjoyed “leaving Church each Sunday with something new to consider and a fresh perspective.” During a particular Soup Sunday discussion, I heard several table groups express an interest in “better understanding the Bible and Jesus for their lives,” but while the desire was there they did not always know how to go about the task. The congregation was seeking a new hearing of the Gospel that shaped their lives for a time such as now. In the midst of a faith where Good News is central and congregation members expressed desire to “go

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71 Source: a participant in a lectio divina group in April 2010.
deeper" with Christianity; I suspected that sermon preparation that involved an attention to the Beauty inherent in the Gospel (Gospel Beauty) could lead to preaching events that offered new insights, connection with the Gospel and a renewed experience of God’s call within the listeners. For “our [the preacher’s] task is not just to say a word and to tell the truth, but to get the truth heard, to effect a new hearing of the word.” Beauty I believed had the capacity to “effect a new hearing” of the Gospel within the congregation.

My conviction was that an attention to Gospel Beauty; the Beauty inherent in God's Good News and the Beauty revealed as we respond to Gospel Beauty would facilitate the congregation in seeing their own lives as beautiful in God and experience a call to participate in a “trail of Beauty making in the world.” The aim for the second year had shifted from preaching about Beauty, to preaching that gazed upon the Gospel through the lens of Beauty. What practices would help the congregation and preacher “look” upon the Gospel, notice its inherent Beauty, its beautiful presence in their own lives and encourage them to respond? Would preaching shaped by such practices and attention result in preaching Beauty that radiated from the sermon and illuminated the listeners understanding and relationship with God?

**Lectio Divina**

The practice of sacred reading, *lectio divina* became the foundational practice for giving attention to Gospel Beauty. A bi-monthly lectio divina group of congregational members was established to bring the stories and faith narratives of participants into conversation with Gospel Beauty. Each gathering used an adapted process of *lectio divina*. Participants were invited to explore Scripture, share insights, stories and prayer. There was music and silence. We gave

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79 This is a common phrase heard in First United Church - I often use it in my sermons as an invitation - let’s go deeper with God, deeper into the context, beyond the lure of surface living."


81 Source: quoted from a DMin project sermon in November 2010, Year 2, sermon 2.

82 On the first Tuesday and third Wednesday of each month for 45 mins. A total of 26 participants September 2009 to present.

83 Appendix C. for process description
attention to our experiences of Beauty and ways that the Good News shaped our lives. One particularly memorable gathering we viewed a poster from the community of Taizé using it as the ‘text’ for our lectio divina reflection. We pondered on its Beauty. We saw God’s hand in the shadows and created backstories for the image revealing much about the participant’s own lived connections to God’s gift of Good News. These relationships and stories found illustrative presence in the sermons and contributed to my own gazing on Gospel Beauty. Along with the small groups I practiced a personal time of lectio divina which heightened the awareness of Beauty in my life and in the Scriptures and opened me to the Spirit’s teachings about the congregation. Other areas of congregational listening (where the congregation participants listened to one another and I to them) included Board Meetings, Healing Prayer Services and the Parish Project Group.

Sermons in the second year focused on three aspects of the Gospel story in the life of Jesus Christ; Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. My preaching aim was to offer an authentic, clear message exploring the questions - What Gospel Beauty do I/we experience in this aspect of Jesus’ life? I participated in several contexts of lectio divina engaging with Gospel Beauty, and for each sermon the PPG shared in a time of lectio divina individually and as a group. Gospel Beauty began to take shape as the conversations we shared, and as the insights within our sharing.

For sermon #1, Gospel Beauty of Incarnation shone as the capacity of the particular to give access to the Universal. The finite reality of Jesus gifts humanity with glimpses of a cosmic God. The incarnation moves us from an exclusively ego serving outlook on God’s ways toward an understanding of God that is always in relationship with others.

84 Appendix C for the adapted process of lectio divina.
In sermon #2, Gospel Beauty of the Crucifixion was explored homiletically in three ways: a tree of life that knows suffering and pain, a tree of death that embraces endings, and a tree of glory that invites us to create a “trail of Beauty” in the world. Approaching the Gospel of the cross through Beauty showed us that Beauty has room to hold the disturbing and difficult.\textsuperscript{85} We were able to experience Beauty’s reframing of the cross as beautiful resistance to the ugliness of fear and to hear Beauty’s call to resist the lure of crucifixion in the world and to opt instead for partnership with Beauty.

In sermon #3, Gospel Beauty of Resurrection radiated as a homiletic call to “rise up” in hope as God declares “what if?!” to all Creation. This sermon was one of a three-part series entitled: “Illuminate,” in which epiphany lectionary texts informed sermons created with congregational and preacher practices of \textit{lectio divina ‘looking’} at Gospel Beauty. Congregational surveys for the series indicate that listeners experienced Gospel Beauty in language that reflected God’s glory: brilliance, sparkle and the Light of Resurrection. Gospel Beauty was known also in the sermon’s central message of hope, the intimacy of personal storytelling, an image of the disadvantaged persons thanking God, in a call to be released of fears and the Divine gift of “What if?”\textsuperscript{86} Interestingly, comments indicated Gospel Beauty also shone through the inclusion of storytelling as I shared ways that Resurrection Beauty was known in my life and how I see it at work in the congregation. Congregants shared questions and action steps they were considering in response to the sermon. Several of these indicated a desire to draw closer to God.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} The topic of crucifixion leads to questions about the relationship between Beauty and the ugly. There is much to explore about this topic and some have started the conversation, especially see the work of Umberto Eco, \textit{On Ugliness}. Given the wealth of learning available in a focused preaching project on Beauty, I have chosen to focus the work of this dissertation on Beauty and not on concerns of Beauty’s relationship to ugliness or ugliness as a topic.
\textsuperscript{86} Appendix E., number 5.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
Given that the sermons in this series were shaped within a practice of attending to Beauty, by listening to stories of the congregation noticing their experiences of Gospel Beauty, exploration with Scripture (lectio divina) and personal reflection on the presence of Gospel Beauty in the preacher's life, the resulting storytelling used in the sermons was reflective and truthful to the Gospel Beauty already active in the lives of the congregation and the preacher. Congregational response to the preaching event, indicated that listeners felt affirmed by Gospel Beauty, challenged to take action and uplifted in their relationship with God. They were a people glimpsing on Gospel Beauty and it was having the affect of creating responses within them.

**A Congregation’s Response to Gospel Beauty**

During the second year the congregation experienced significant change in governance, worship and small group ministry development. The congregation, especially cohort B, was willing and active in trying practices that deepened their attunement to the Presence of God in their lives. I began to hear with regularity use of a new common language. Phrases like ‘living out our call,’ ‘being Lights in the community’ and ‘experimenting for the Gospel’ were spoken and integrated into the congregation’s way of being together and provide an indication of the Gospel being heard afresh. Additionally, new and increased participation in community meditation, contemplative small group initiatives, a community garden project and chapel services shaped by lectio divina, indicates the Gospel rooting itself afresh in the congregation. The congregation began taking steps of action in response to the Good News and the result was a renewed sense of commitment and involvement in the ministries of the church and in personal journeys of faith that has continued beyond year two.

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88 We adopted a new Board structure with new leadership, and transitioned from a forty-five year old Council model. Additional worship experiences were added with monthly Healing Services and Taizé, while our music ministry grow from one choir to five different kinds of music ensembles. In addition, three new adult ministries were added including a bi-monthly lay led “study and contemplation” initiative.

89 This descriptor refers to church participants who self-identify as part of the community and who are finding themselves actively engaging for the first time or with renewed interest and commitment. They include newcomers, returnees or self identified seekers on the journey.
The latter was remarkably evident in the profound conversations of the PPG. Consistently participants spoke of “seeing” everyday moments of their life and wider situations as touched by Beauty and it was deepening their mindfulness of God, Scripture, silence, delight, gratitude and lament for brokenness in the world that cried out for Beauty’s capacity to heal and bring hope. An anecdote will be helpful in describing the transfiguration occurring in PPG members.90

A Preacher’s Response to Gospel Beauty

I discovered in this second year of Beauty formation that my preaching was more “transparent” with the Good News. As the Beauty of the Gospel for each preaching event worked through the fullness of my heart, intellect and spirit I gained clarity about the Gospel message to be preached. Previously unseen insights into the text, my life and the life of the congregation were now being unmasked by Beauty’s Presence.

To make visible for the congregation something of Gospel Beauty, the preacher must do the necessary work of clarifying and distilling her own understanding of Gospel Beauty for each sermon event. I consistently asked myself - “How do I experience God’s Gospel Beauty in this text or topic?” It is insufficient to explore this question exclusively as an intellectual or academic exercise. Getting to the heart of the matter requires time dedicated to one’s interior life through practices of inwardness.91 This was the richness of lectio divina. The fruit of this heart work is a depth of honesty in preaching, and as such, is essential to homiletical artistry. It also encourages the preacher to pursue authenticity as part of the craft. As Beauty is one of the Platonic transcendentals forever intertwined with that which is real, good and true, when preachers dare to discern their truthful experience of Gospel Beauty they participate in an

90 Appendix G.
91 John O’Donohue spoke of a depletion of inwardness in the current society. He suggested our need for a “pedagogy of interiority” - ways of developing, exploring one’s inner self, as necessary for one to be open to the transformational power of Beauty. http://being.publicradio.org/programs/john_odonohue/transcript.shtml
embodied quest to answer how the Good News and Beauty are being revealed for the listeners and themselves.

As the practice of *lectio divina* was continued from year one and attention to Beauty was practiced daily, I noticed several consistencies about Beauty emerging for the PPG and myself. Many came about largely from the work of the first and second year sermons, and are noted in previous sections. The presence of these consistencies echoed of Troeger’s operating thesis that there is no singular definition of Beauty, but that we know Beauty through consistent ‘overtones.’۹۲ Along with Troeger’s list I was aware of additional ‘contours’۹۳ to Beauty’s character and in tandem with *lectio divina*, I was using these particular considerations to gain insight about the presence, role and capacity of Beauty in my life, Scripture and in the congregation. There was a functioning ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ at play in my relationship with Gospel Beauty and sermon formation process whereby *lectio divina* was being followed with a ‘testing’ for Beauty characteristics within the text, the congregation and myself. I have consolidated the complete list of *overtones* and *contours*۹۴ into eight characteristics of Beauty most consistently apparent when Beauty is revealed.

**Beauty**

1. gives access to the Universal through the particular.
2. provides a sense of wonder
3. acts as a place of interruption
4. awakens attention to Presence
5. offers resistance to those things that counter God’s ways.
6. beauty compels us to respond.
7. is the space in between - it reveals unseen realities.
8. is embodied - it reveals itself in varied form

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۹۳ Tom Troeger describes that when we listen for Beauty in our lives the result is a multiple of ‘overtones’ that give description of Beauty’s nature. In the spirit of appreciation for the aesthetic dimensions of Beauty, I suggest that we can also describe the ‘contours’ of Beauty as it is without a completed shape but we recognize it’s bends and curves, we reach out to touch it and know it in that encounter.
۹۴ Appendix A.
The project was leading me to create and share a ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ using the approach the PPG and I used to engage Beauty as it engaged and formed us. A ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ would offer preachers a way of attending to Gospel Beauty in the Scriptures, in the events of congregational life and for themselves. By this hermeneutic preachers would be invited to glimpse Beauty and be accompanied in a process of awareness and homiletical formation with Gospel Beauty.

A BEAUTY HERMENEUTIC - Year 3

As a preacher who attends to Gospel Beauty in my congregation, Scripture and self, my interior space has changed. I know a deeper gratitude for the mystery and intimacy, complexity and simplicity and the gentleness and boldness of God’s Presence. I sense that I walk more tenderly on the earth; attentive to the beautiful ways that God shows up in the meaning-making moments of death, economics, creation-care, my marriage, a conversation with a parishioner and my ongoing love affair with preaching. In my preaching vocation and prayer life; where heart and intellect converge I have settled into the deep goodness of pondering God. There I rejoice that the gift of “abstract conceptual thought about God can be deeply beautiful in its own way,” for I meet God there also.95

These personal changes have unlocked my heart and mind to see the contours of Beauty in the Scripture, congregation and myself. This openness results in sermons that convey conviction96 and clarity about Gospel Beauty, that touch hearts to draw closer to God and inspire listeners to serve God with their lives.

Given that few preachers consider the role Beauty plays in the self revelation of God’s Good News or in the proclamation of that Good News, how might preachers be supported in a

95 Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 14
96 One member of the PPG articulated his experience of the year 2 sermons in this way - “You, Rev. Danielle are so convinced of your message that others cannot help but edge closer to their own convictions, and possibly peel back at least one thin layer of doubt, a layer that separates them from any hope in rising and swimming in the tide of God’s hope and love.”
journey along a path of attending to Beauty? What approach and practices might help foster an internal shift in a preacher’s understanding and experience of Gospel Beauty such that it informs the shape and content of the preaching event?

This is the work of the ‘Beauty Hermeneutic.’ Through practiced use of three movements, the preacher is invited to attend to Gospel Beauty in Scripture, congregation and self.\textsuperscript{97} The Beauty Hermeneutic has three movements. \textit{A: Lectio Divina}:\textsuperscript{98} spending time with the Scriptures practicing a discipline of careful listening, speaking the text and allowing for an initial encounter. \textit{B: Gazing on Beauty}: using descriptors of what Beauty does and how it behaves as an event, the preacher takes notice of Beauty and identifies its presence in the text, preacher’s life and the life of the congregation. \textit{C: Resonance with Spirit}: this movement is about clarification of the event of ‘Beauty of the Gospel’ occurring for the preacher such that she can proclaim it with authenticity and conviction. It involves discernment by the preacher who allows the lens of Beauty to focus the Spirit’s leading for proclamation.

The ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ operates on an assumption that the preacher desires to be shaped by Beauty and share discoveries as part of proclaimed Gospel. The Beauty Hermeneutic is grounded by the claim that Beauty is available to individuals, within the Scriptures and constitutive of God’s church; and that this is true because God’s self revelation is Beautiful. Use of the Hermeneutic will reorient Preachers to be captivated by the possibilities for Gospel proclamation when they pay attention the call of Beauty in their lives.

\textbf{Modifying Troeger’s Preaching Experiment}

Troeger’s preaching project in \textit{Wonder Reborn} used “culturally durable” examples of music, hymns and poetry as art forms that uphold his determined ‘overtones’ of Beauty. He

\textsuperscript{97} Appendix B.
\textsuperscript{98} The PPG and I have used a modified \textit{lectio divina}, diverging slightly from the four movements as classically understood. Please see the Appendix C. for an example of our process.
preached on these art forms to show the congregation God’s ‘glory’ and Beauty within them.

Troeger writes:

“there is something in the heart, some deep resilience that springs irrepressibly out of us when through music and art we glimpse the transcendent, and we sense, however fleetingly, that life is transfigured by beauty.” 99

Troeger articulates a theological hunch grounding this project and an outcome evidenced by the congregation; that Beauty does indeed grasp and draw us into God’s Presence inviting us to respond.

In this third year, the congregation continues to nurture their outward responses to a Gospel Beauty awakening within as they respond to the call of Beauty through lectio divina small groups, Taizé worship, a community garden project and creative outreach projects; they are aware of the compelling nature of Beauty’s invitation to respond in partnership. From cohorts A, B and C, 100 new leaders have stepped up for one-time and ongoing ministries. Over the last eighteen months, the congregation has welcomed twenty-four new members by profession of faith, one hundred and eighteen visitors and our average Sunday morning worship has increased by thirty-seven people. Most significant has been the congregation’s decision to invest in what God is doing amongst them, and call a second full-time minister to focus on ministries with children, youth and families (largely made up of cohort B). This is a powerful witness of the congregation responding to a contemporary ‘hearing’ of the Gospel. 101 These indicators, along with member participation on two international service trips in the past year to Bogata, Colombia and Varadero, Cuba substantially identify a congregation who are practicing response to a refreshed encounter with the Gospel. They are animating the preached conviction that Gospel

100 Cohort C refers to “the congregation that is not yet.” It is comprised of those beyond the membership of the congregation, who have not yet heard, but for whom the Gospel is intended.
101 The congregation is risking and trusting in what they hear God calling them to do. The budget for 2011 increased by 23% in anticipation of an additional salary and program support.
Beauty changes and stretches us beyond ourselves to participation with others in ways that contribute to the Gospel being known.

Considering these contextual results are correlative with this DMin preaching project and its corresponding process of formation, Troeger's task of preaching Beauty exclusively on identified 'works of music and art' seems a much too static use of Beauty. It suggests that Beauty is exclusively external and contained by a 'thing', when this project deeply reflects Beauty as a dynamic of encountering, experiencing, and responding - it is event.

Given that this preaching project has consistently explored the 'event' quality of Beauty - a happening of God's Gospel Beauty, and that these preaching moments, have themselves been events of Beauty shared and revealed in community; I wanted to test a modification to Troeger's homiletical direction and shift the preaching 'texts' from art and music to the communally created and experienced event of Holy Communion. We must not only speak about Beauty, but be engaged in the doing of it. Theology and preaching must somehow be mystagogical, not merely speaking about abstract concepts, but it must encourage people to experience that which is expressed in such concepts.¹⁰² This is the place of Holy Communion, where the church is called to participate in the fullness of God's Beauty and Presence through bread, cup, prayer, blessing, and a re-telling of God's ongoing story with all of creation. It is a moment of kairos when Gospel Beauty comes to us and simultaneously we are participants with Beauty - participating in its creation and responding to its call. For the culmination of this three year project, I wanted to explore the impact on the preaching event, preacher and congregation when:

i. The preacher uses the 'Beauty Hermeneutic' to give attention to Gospel Beauty in preaching events
ii. The congregation is involved in a Eucharistic event after participating in a preaching event shaped by the latter (i).

¹⁰² Viladesau, Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art, 13.
By this process, will listeners be nudged into a new experience with the Gospel? What experiences of Gospel Beauty will grasp them? What experience of Beauty of the Gospel will they create together?

**Integration: Formation, Preaching and Table**

During the third and final year, project related sermons focused on worship as experienced through Holy Communion. Sermons were based on Eucharist-like passages, shaped with use of the ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ and culminated with a Table liturgy, giving opportunity for the faith community to create and participate in a moment of Gospel Beauty. The PPG\textsuperscript{103} and I used the ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ to gain insight into the text (*first movement*), reflect on the expressions of Gospel Beauty using identified characteristics of Beauty (*second movement*) and discern what proclaimed Beauty was being called forth (*third movement*).

The first text was Matthew’s version of feeding the multitudes (Matt 14:13-21) and during the second movement - *gazing on Beauty*, we applied the characteristics of Beauty to the text as a lens to better notice Gospel Beauty in action. Recall the eight characteristics.\textsuperscript{104}

The PPG and I asked ourselves, what did we come to know about God’s Gospel Beauty in this text? In light of the Beauty characteristics, what possibilities and insights were opening for us? For this sermon the characteristic of resistance\textsuperscript{105} shone most brightly of Gospel Beauty. We saw how the disciples resisted their anxieties about the daunting task and countered the state of mind that suggested they had ‘nothing’ to offer, when indeed they had ‘something’ of bread and fish, which in the hands of God could bless many. As we continued using the hermeneutic and engaged the third movement - *resonance with Spirit*, the PPG’s initial discernment and comments were helpful. However it was my work as the preacher to continue using this third movement.

\textsuperscript{103} The PPG membership was the same for years 2 and 3. They were able to further build on the previous year of formation and jump right into the new layers of the process.

\textsuperscript{104} Eight characteristics of Beauty, page 34 and Appendix A.

\textsuperscript{105} From ‘A Beauty Hermeneutic’, Appendix B. Beauty offers resistance to those things that counter God’s ways.
movement throughout the week of preparation, study, prayer and living. The exegetical work, discernment and resulting preaching event revealed the Gospel as the Beautiful shift we make toward God when we offer our ‘somethings’ to Christ.

Use of the Beauty Hermeneutic was comfortable for both myself and the PPG members. We had been using the hermeneutic movements for a year prior, and through an organic process of discovery had integrated this way of formation as a spiritual practice interpreting our own life experiences and being on the lookout for Beauty. One participant was not able to experience this particular sermon in church due to his attendance at a folk concert in the park that Sunday morning. Though he was not in worship that morning, he chose to use the process of examining the concert experience using the Beauty Hermeneutic. He opened his day by reading the Matthew 14 Scripture, and shared that the “music rising and swirling, filling everyone with wonder and a sense of connection to others was like being in a beautiful experience of Holy Communion.”

As one person described it, we had become Beauty Detectors; where we could not see beauty before, it now sparkled for us to enjoy.\textsuperscript{106} As we sat with the texts in \textit{lectio divina}, applied the eight Beauty descriptors to our own lives, the Scripture and the congregation, and as we wrestled with Spirit for the Beauty of the Gospel intended for each particular preached Word - our attention to Beauty consistently moved us into more creative, life giving, deeper experiences of faith.

From congregational sermon responses the preaching event on Matthew 14, proclaimed Gospel Beauty that was ‘heard’ and ‘seen.’\textsuperscript{107} By inviting each person to bring their “something” to the Table for God’s blessing in community, the congregation was offered a framing of Beauty’s call as the sermon moved us toward the Communion Table; a place of

\textsuperscript{106} Source: notes from Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque in response to viewing and experiencing this sermon, September 2011
\textsuperscript{107} Appendix F.
beautiful resistance and beautiful encounter with God. There were baskets of bread, several containers of juice, the surprise of fish fillets and community practicing the Beauty of sacrament. Congregants commented on the “real” nature of the experience, how they ceased to be “onlookers” at Communion becoming true participants and of “coming to the table mindful of the awesome things God can do through us.”\textsuperscript{108} The Gospel was heard and experienced afresh. An informative comment about the preaching event came from a PPG member; “You didn’t tell us what was beautiful in the story. You didn’t have to. We could see Beauty. It was there perfuming the entire worship service and sermon.”\textsuperscript{109}

As preachers we do not have to preach about Beauty to communicate Gospel Beauty or help people touch their own experience of Beauty of the Gospel. The preaching must, however, be developed within a disciplined attention to Beauty such that the preacher is aware of Beauty’s movement sourcing and sustaining the sermon. The overtones sing and contours bend as three movements of the Beauty Hermeneutic work together drawing the preacher to Beauty and forming the preacher in practices that open their imaginations, the sermon and the congregation to God’s Gospel Beauty.

A month later, shaped by use of the Beauty Hermeneutic, it was time to approach the Table again.\textsuperscript{110} I chose Jesus’ post resurrection breakfast meal, (John 21:1-14). Out on the water disciples heard the call to throw their net to the right side of the boat, and Beauty’s contoured action as “a place of interruption” showed itself. Jarred out of their grief and habituated actions the sermon highlighted Gospel Beauty as the moment the disciples were stopped by Jesus voice calling out them, and they participated in the invitation he extended. The Good News of holy

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} One PPG member shared this experience with the group. The group reflected that it was not only the sermon shining with Beauty, but that they were all different (transformed) to better see Beauty because of this journey with Beauty and sermon development. As I watched and listened to the PPG members reflect to one another the Beauty they saw in each other it was Gospel in action.

\textsuperscript{110} It is a current practice of First United Church to participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion once a month.
interruption led to a campfire and lakeshore encounter with God. Congregants left their pews to approach three constructed campfires in the sanctuary where they received the blessed bread, blessed juice and participated in the sacrament. A common experience, Gospel Beauty was palpable as we shared the Meal and sang - *Jesus, You Have Come to the Lakeshore*, simultaneously creating and responding to Gospel Beauty in our midst.

Like the sermon based on Matthew 14, the Beauty Hermeneutic was intentionally used in the development of this sermon. The first movement of *lectio divina* happened individually, with the PPG, and in one chapel service. In those circles I listened as participants connected with the disciples’ grief and the weariness that comes with feelings of distance from God - far out there on the water. They also indicated an initial seeing of Beauty in the intimacy of Jesus calling out to the disciples, “Come!” The PPG engaged the second hermeneutical movement, systematically considering each descriptor of Beauty. *Was there expression of these descriptors in the Scripture? Was there Beauty of the Gospel shining through, or connected to these descriptors?*

The PPG had united enthusiasm for descriptors three and four: Beauty acting as a place of interruption and awakening attention to Presence. This enthusiasm seems an affirmation and extension of our shared experience of Beauty in preaching, individual living and in the PPG community. Throughout years two and three I observed PPG members delighting in the surprise of encountering Beauty. In conversation after worship, around the small group table, in the cultivation of friendships amongst themselves there was observable glee at the insights received and surprise at the occasions when Beauty inverted understanding, offered a new way and drew them closer to God. Along with them I savoured the moments that made our hearts sigh with the phrase - ‘Ah, there it is!’

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112 Appendix B.
Our exploration continued using indicators three and four and their functioning in the Scripture, personal experience and the congregation. It was a rich conversation and with all this exploration at hand the group continued with the third hermeneutical movement. The PPG focused their conversation on clarifying how Gospel Beauty was most deeply yearning to be expressed for a time such as this. Given their particular subjectivities and the breadth of conversation facilitated with the Beauty Hermeneutic, they shared personal understandings about the event of Gospel Beauty they heard calling out to be proclaimed. For the PPG on that particular day, Beauty of the Gospel was showing itself largely as,

i. God’s persistent calling out to Creation despite our lack of attention.
ii. The joy that occurs in the event of realizing and responding to God’s steadfast call.

Outcomes of the Beauty Hermeneutic process became integral to the resulting preaching event, and by the time the sermon and worship occurred I was able to offer a well integrated, authentic Gospel message that communicated ‘contagious conviction’\textsuperscript{113} resulting from the personal and homiletical work with Beauty through the Beauty Hermeneutic.

As further extension of the Beauty Hermeneutic application, I used it as an intentional process in the creation of sermons for a four-part sermon series on the story of Jacob. Once again central questions included - “What do I experience as Good News in this text?”, “How are any of the eight Beauty characteristics present and what insights do they give to the functioning or capacity of Gospel Beauty in the text, congregation or myself?” The sermons had different structures and images and different facets of Gospel Beauty were highlighted for each. Using the three movements of the Beauty Hermeneutic, Beauty of the Gospel was assessed for each sermon and became the focus Good News proclamation.

\textsuperscript{113} Frank Thomas, \textit{They Like to Never Quit Praising God. The Role of Celebration in Preaching} (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 91.
BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

The preaching event is inextricably tied to the entirety of the worship experience. From the words of welcome to the benediction, it is all part of the Word proclaimed and revealed. I have discovered that Beauty, the aesthetics of sight, sound, smell and touch as well as the mysterious intimacy and indescribability of the Spirit - is meant to be engaged by those gathered from the beginning to end - and beyond. Within my congregation there is a noticeable shift in the community toward worshipful engagement when I give attention to God’s Beauty being communicated in the layers of liturgy and when the intentionality is explained. The use of silence after the sermon is an example of the latter. Throughout this project the sermon was followed by a time of community silence. Five to seven minutes of silence with an invitation to “open themselves to Holy Spirit who continues the conversation of Truth, Beauty and Goodness within and amongst them.” Congregants visibly ‘settle in’ for this time of connection, and on numerous occasions several share that this practice of paying attention to God’s voice has become central to their practice of living as people of God’s Light.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that throughout the three years of this preaching project the use of ‘picture-painting’ language, congruence of language and body and clarity were all inextricably tied to the radiance of Beauty from the preacher and preaching event. Preachers facilitate the ‘hearing’ of the Gospel through our gestures, silences, spaces, facial expressions, hands, stance and even our smiles and frowns. These examples of externalization by the preacher must be reflective of practiced interior attention and growth. Preaching a full aesthetic, the preacher does well to also call on the listener’s capacity of imagination and internal experience as a part of the preaching event. Invitations to “close your eyes,” “imagine yourself”
and “breathe deeply”\textsuperscript{114} can facilitate the listener’s internal experience of the sermon and encourage openness as they gaze on God through the portal of Beauty.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This project has been a transformative journey with Beauty. Learning, change and response have occurred in members of the PPG, the congregation, my preaching and within myself. My ultimate goal was to preach as one formed and informed by an attention to Beauty such that listeners would experience a heightened awareness of God, become alert to God’s Beauty in the Gospel and in their lives and respond to Beauty’s call through transformed engagement. I believe this goal is being animated in the congregation of First United Church and I have witnessed my preaching vocation develop as a place of leadership where the Gospel shines with Beauty, teaching the congregation about the Gospel and inspiring them to participate in God’s action throughout their community and the world.

This preaching project has brought people together in the church around art projects for the worship space, outreach ministries where members ‘go out’ and not only expect others to ‘come in.’\textsuperscript{115} The congregation has attracted and welcomed new people as members of Cohort C\textsuperscript{116} have made the transition to become active participants in the church community.\textsuperscript{117} The latter has resulted in Cohort B growing in numbers, and as shown in this paper, their spiritual growth and engagement with the Gospel.

\textsuperscript{114} These phrases are often used in prayers throughout worship, those that open or conclude the sermon or as part of the sermon.

\textsuperscript{115} Over the span of this project, First United Church people have created three new partnerships with the local Boys and Girls Club, Habitat for Humanity, and a “Grow a Row” community garden project. In all these ministries our members talk about “being people of the Light.”

\textsuperscript{116} Cohort C refers to “the congregation that is not yet.” It is comprised of those beyond the membership of the congregation beyond the ‘walls’ of the church.

\textsuperscript{117} The congregation’s Annual General Report indicates in excess of 200 visitors for both Years 2 and 3. Between Years 2 and 3 there was a 21% increase in the number of new comers who had become self-identified participants and financial supporters of First United Church ministries.
There has also been a shift for members of Cohort A who have joined in the enthusiasm and energy for spiritual engagement. In more quiet ways of action members of Cohort A have led the way in renewing the church library with books on devotion practices. They also advocated for investment in a collection of aesthetically beautiful children’s’ books. This cohort engages conversations about faith during congregational meals and some have agreed to mentor the next class of youth confirmants. There is renewed involvement and commitment by the church as all groups of membership step up and invest in new ministry personnel and release their creativity for new and existing ministries. Together they inspire one another, spreading the seeds of Beauty and sprinkling the trail of their lives with Beauty’s gifts. For the people of First United Church Beauty is leadership, discipleship, creativity, love in action, a banner of solidarity for churches in Bogata and Varadero, smiles of children, the buzzing of a trombone player and the worship we create together for God as God blesses us with Beauty in return.

My relationship with the congregation has deepened and strengthened over the course of this project. To be with us in Sunday worship is to take part in a conversation with participants who trust one another, love one another and encourage one another to “let the Beauty shine!” The congregation is walking in step me as their preaching pastor. Through the project of preaching Gospel Beauty we have explored a theological framework and mutually experienced renewed conviction for and by the Good News. What could have been deemed a ‘soft’ topic with its dense theoretical and philosophical character has become a cornerstone to the life of First United Church. We walk together in Beauty.

The power of formation with Beauty can be explored in other ministry settings, faith communities, areas of the Church and by other preachers. The Beauty Hermeneutic provides a pathway for preachers to begin noticing Beauty in the text, the community of listeners and within

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118 This phrase has become part of an often used benediction.
119 See Appendix E for suggestions of application beyond this project for other preachers and contexts.
themselves. The Beauty Hermeneutic shows itself to be accessible to preachers and members of the community. It has potential for use in small group ministries, bible study groups, and in the academic formation of preachers and homiletics. It has been shown that individual and congregational investment in relationship with Beauty and preaching that engages a lens of Beauty can influence and encourage listeners to animate the Gospel in their lives. Why couldn’t this take place across pulpits in the United Church of Canada and beyond?

Beauty is calling. Go forth and preach!
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“In You Get the Congregation to God, Sit Down!”
Appendix A

Overtones and Contours of Beauty

Any singular definition for Beauty does not capture the entirety of Beauty. Seeking a singular definition for Beauty is incongruent with the available multiple experiences of Beauty. As such, Tom Troeger describes that when we listen for Beauty in our lives, the result is a multitude of ‘overtones’ that give description of Beauty’s nature. In the spirit of appreciation for the aesthetic dimensions of Beauty, I suggest that we can also describe the ‘contours’ of Beauty as Beauty is without a completed shape but we recognize its bends and curves, we reach out to touch it and know it in that encounter.

Below are the discoveries and observations of the ‘Overtones* and Contours of Beauty’ determined through this three year project. This is a compiled list from Tom Troeger * and my own findings.

Beauty can be a vessel of God’s creativity*
Beauty has a gift like, gracious quality*
Beauty is culturally durable*
Beauty has room for what is disturbing and difficult*
Beauty is judged to fill certain standards of value*
Beauty helps us to see honestly what is there*
Beauty is best understood as a dialogue between our concepts and experience*
Beauty compels us to respond.
Beauty is in the everyday
Beauty can be a form of resistance to ugly
Beauty holds the capacity for transfiguring and transforming
Beauty is experiential - it is experienced.
Beauty can be veiled
Beauty gives access to the universal
Beauty can grasp one from without and be awakened from within
Beauty is glimpsed, because life is fragmented

At the conclusion of this project, I asked the PPG to rank the top five most essential qualities of Beauty for them. They included:
“beauty can grasp one from without and be awakened from within”,
“beauty holds the capacity for transfiguring and transforming”,
“beauty compels us to respond,
“beauty gives access to the universal”
“beauty can be a form of resistance to ugly”
Appendix B

A Beauty Hermeneutic

This ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ is a way of formation for the preacher who seeks to practice attending to Gospel Beauty in Scripture, listeners (congregation) and self. This practice of three movements guides the preacher in gaining insight about the presence, role and capacity of Beauty in the preacher’s life, Scripture and congregation. It accompanies them in a process of awareness and homiletical formation with Gospel Beauty.

First Movement
(Lectio Divina)

Second Movement
(Gazing on Beauty)

Third Movement
(Resonance with Spirit)

First Movement: Lectio Divina
Second Movement: Gazing on Beauty
Third Movement: Resonance with Spirit

It is encouraged that the preacher approach use of the movements in a sequential manner. However, these are not ‘steps’ to be completed before another movement is engaged. The movements mutually inform one another, and any of the movements can be returned to at any point in the process of sermon formation. The places of overlap in the graphic are meant to indicate this visually. Indeed it is hoped for that the preacher will truly incorporate the ‘Beauty Hermeneutic’ as a living practice in several areas and moments of their daily living.

The first movement of this Beauty Hermeneutic involves taking time with the Scripture. For this project ‘lectio divina’ was the preferred way of initial relating to the text that engages the emotional, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of the preacher. This movement can also be shared in small groups. It is a prayerful occasion of openness to Gospel Beauty. Central questions for this movement include: How do you experience Beauty in this passage? How does the Gospel reflect Beauty in this passage? The process is described in Appendix C.

The second movement involves ‘gazing on Beauty’. Using the following descriptors and indicators of Gospel Beauty the preacher explores the text and congregation for ways that Gospel Beauty might be apparent and revealing itself for consideration and proclamation. These
descriptors help to take notice of Beauty, identify it as such and provides direction for exegesis and study. These particular contours emerged from the master list of 'overtones and contours' provided in Appendix A.

What could it mean for my reading of the text, myself and the congregation that Beauty:

1. gives access to the Universal through the particular.
   - beauty is glimpsed.
   - fragments of the Whole
   - reminds us of our interconnectedness.

2. provides a sense of wonder
   - beauty has a gift like, gracious quality.
   - beauty can be a vessel of God’s creativity
   - beauty is in the everyday

3. acts as a place of interruption
   - beauty helps us to see honestly what is there
   - beauty disrupts our assumptions, expectations, ‘surface living’ and draws us into deeper awareness.
   - beauty offers us the joy of surprise

4. awakens attention to Presence
   - beauty holds the capacity for transfiguring and transforming

5. offers resistance to those things that counter God’s ways.
   - beauty can be a form of resistance to ugly
   - beauty has room for what is disturbing and difficult

6. beauty compels us to respond.
   - beauty is experiential - is it experienced
   - Beauty calls
   - beauty can grasp one from without and be awakened from within

7. is the space in between - it reveals unseen realities.
   - beauty can be veiled

8. is embodied - it reveals itself in varied form:
   - beauty is experiential. it is revealed and we encounter
   - beauty takes many forms - physical, emotional, intellectual and relational.
   - can be known in language - it is in metaphor, paradox, 'wordplay', the poetry

The presence of any of these indicators informs the direction of exegetical work.

The third movement involves 'Resonance with Spirit'. In this movement the preacher explores the intersecting places of heart, mind and spirit - a full aesthetic assessment of ways that Beauty has revealed itself and how this resonates with the Spirit of truth. This movement is about
discernment of what the preacher is being called to preach. What event of Gospel Beauty is occurring for them that they feel conviction to proclaim? This is the movement in which the preacher clarifies the ‘event experience’ of Beauty for this particular sermon in light of the preacher’s authentic response to the call of Gospel Beauty for this text, the listeners, at this moment.

Much of this third movement is grounded in the following:
1. The preacher is called to speak discerned truth congruent to their own understandings of the Gospel - “authenticity”

2. The writings of Gerhard Nebel - a German Protestant theologian, he suggested that within Beauty there is found the God of grace eventualising. The nature of God is an event occurring within the happening of Beauty. In this movement, the preacher notices how God through Beauty of the Gospel is happening presently.  

3. It also hinges on my understanding that preaching informed by an attention to Beauty can open the preacher to refreshed conviction and experience of Beauty of the Gospel. When this conviction penetrates the sermon, the possibility of “contagious conviction” becomes a vehicle that can move the listener in their own experience with Gospel and Beauty.

120 Aidan Nichols, The Word has been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics. (Scotland: T&T Clark Limited, 1998), 10
121 Frank Thomas, They Like to Never Quit Praising God. The Role of Celebration in Preaching (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 91
Appendix C

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or "holy reading," and represents a traditional Catholic practice of prayer and scriptural reading intended to promote communion with God and to increase in the knowledge of God’s Word. It is a way of praying with Scripture that calls one to study, ponder, listen and, finally, pray and even sing and rejoice from God’s Word, within the soul.122

Classically, lectio divina is comprised of four movement: Lectio, Oratio, Meditatio and Contemplatio. The movements nudge the reader along in a relationship with the Scripture that involves sequentially the reading of the text, thinking or pondering on God’s presence within, participation in prayer that changes the heart and finally restful delight in God.

The Beauty Hermeneutic suggests the use of a lectio divina process as stage one of the hermeneutical practice. For this project the PPG and preacher used a slightly modified process from the classic four movements.

Below are two samples of modified lectio divina processes used:

Lectio Divina - A: Used for the sermon on the Beauty of Jesus’ Incarnation. Fall 2010

Would you please be attentive to the Scripture for this upcoming sermon and engage in some holy listening with Scripture.

To do that, here’s a modified practice of ‘lectio divina’ - holy reading.

1. Find a quiet, comfortable place for your time with Scripture

2. Read the chosen passage once through, and simply hear the text with your inner voice.

3. Read the passage again - aloud. Allow the words to impress on you.
   Notice the the sound of the words and phrases.
   Pay attention to which words/ phrases 'shimmer' for you.
   What catches your attention or piques your curiosity?

4. Read the passage a third time. Sit quietly for a few moments.
   Now ask yourself -
   How do I experience the Good News in this passage?
   What do I experience as Beauty in this reading?
   What do I experience or come to know about Jesus.

5. Read the passage a fourth time. Then simply write - as a flow of consciousness for five minutes. Don't hinder yourself. Simply write whatever and however the thoughts come to you. Noting connections to scripture, the gospel, your life story, questions etc.

6. Close in silence and prayer. You may find yourself desirous of singing, crying, smiling. Prayer with your body is part of this experience.

Lectio Divina - B: Used for the sermon on the Beauty of Jesus' Resurrection. Spring 2011

I invited the chapel group and PPG to read the Scripture four times.

First reading, simply listen.
Second reading, notice the word or phrase that shimmers.
Third reading, what Beauty does the text reveal, if any?
Fourth reading, what response does the text call forth?
Appendix D

Beauty Box

This photograph of the Box exterior, shows:
use of mirrored glass (beauty reflected in all we see, including ourselves).
words of "friend, laugh, together, dream and hope".
use of colour and texture
APPENDIX E

BEAUTY BEYOND -
Applications beyond this project

It is my hope that a practice of Beauty attention in development and execution of the preaching event will serve a diverse community of preachers in varied contexts. Below are some considerations for how preachers and congregations might move beyond this preaching project to application in their own contexts.

A Comment on Trust
This preaching project with Beauty resulted in correlative outcomes of increased congregational engagement, individual and communal spirituality practices attending to Beauty and active response of the community to Beauty in their midst.

It is noteworthy that these outcomes were made possible by a deep trust between the preacher and the congregation. Given the conceptual and countercultural nature of the topic of Beauty in ecclesial practice the preacher must establish a relational environment that holds trust, a sense of care, spiritual safety and honesty. Any successful adaptation and application of the Beauty Hermeneutic and resulting preaching is contingent on trust between the congregation and preacher. As the project shows, because Beauty moves our hearts and can affect the totality of ourselves it is paramount that trust be actively present with those involved in the preaching event for the Gospel to be experienced through this lens of Beauty.

A Beauty Hermeneutic for a Preacher’s Regular Practice
A potential use of the Beauty Hermeneutic is in the regular spiritual and homiletical practices of a preacher. This Beauty Hermeneutic can develop skills of attending to Beauty in the Scripture, congregation, world and self. It is a way for a discerning preacher to clarify their personal and authentic experience of the Good News and move into deeper relationship with the God of Beauty.

I am drawn to the model of small group exploration with the Beauty Hermeneutic. Similar to the work of the PPG, small groups of preachers would come together to help one another notice Beauty in the spheres of congregation, Scripture, world and self. Grounded in the hermeneutic participants in such a group demonstrate openness and active seeking of Gospel Beauty and exploration of Beauty of the Gospel. Small groups also function as communities for constructive feedback on preaching events and case studies for congregational work. For example:

What insights and outcomes are generated if the Beauty Hermeneutic is applied to areas of Board spirituality, children’s ministry, adult discipleship, social justice outreach and community partnership?

As communities called to respond to the Gospel - looking through a lens of Beauty using the Beauty Hermeneutic offers a reframing of Gospel for the community and therefore can generate new responses.
Preaching Beauty - A Tool to Support Congregational Engagement

As demonstrated in this project, the Beauty Hermeneutic is a resource of increased congregational engagement with the Gospel.

1. Small Group Study - an alternative way of approaching Bible Study with participants who yearn for connection with mystery, reality and the collisions between them that give evidence to Beauty. This is at the heart of the eight contours in the Beauty Hermeneutic.

2. Leadership Development - the contemporary church is investing in new models of leadership development and building capacity for leadership in all areas of the church. The Beauty Hermeneutic is a tool of formation for those:
   - who want to explore and reframe the Gospel through the characteristics of Beauty
   - who desire to ground their leadership in a spiritual practice that involves Scripture, Spirit and reflection on context, self and others

3. Congregational Assessment and Possibility Generation.
   This idea is developed above as part of a preacher’s small group experience.
   The Beauty Hermeneutic can function as a way of assessing, evaluating and dreaming about areas of ministry. Apply to the area of “welcoming newcomers” and discoveries about honouring the questions of newcomers might rise above a culture of silence and acclimation to established church culture. Apply to the area of “diversity in families” and the beauty of resilience within single parent households might show itself as an opportunity of ministry response. So much is possible.
APPENDIX F
Congregational Sermon Responses: Year 2, Sermon 3

Each Sunday of the “Illuminate” series the congregation was invited to complete a congregational sermon response sheet. The five questions asked were: 1. Did you hear the Good News proclaimed? How? 2. What feelings do you have after experiencing the sermon? 3. Did you experience Beauty in the sermon? 4. How did you experience Beauty in the sermon? Were there any words, images, ideas that you consider beautiful? 5. After experiencing the sermon what questions do you have?

(Verbatim Data from Congregational Sermon Response Cards: Year 2, Sermon 3)

Dear Congregation,

It is a joy to worship with you today! Together we praise God, pray together and explore the Word of God through preaching and sacrament.

For the past 18 months, as part of my ongoing learning I have been studying in a doctoral programme with a focus in preaching. During this time, a small group of volunteers have been studying and reflecting with me in preparation and response to specific sermons. It has been a wonderful experience.

This morning the service will unfold as usual, but during the time of silence I invite you to answer the questions in response to the sermon experience. Please place your responses in the offering plate. Your participation will greatly support me in my studies, and I am grateful.

With gratitude,
Rev. Danielle

Congregational Sermon Responses
January 16, 2011

In response to the sermon experience:

1. Did you experience God’s Good News proclaimed? How?
   -God is the emphasis on Hope
   -The Divine “what if”
   -Hope/possibility through the miracle of resurrection
   -the resurrection being proclaimed and spoken of
   -Jesus’ story “divine what if? of transformation
   -dare to touch - to be a new creation
   -sharing your personal story was powerful and something I could then “see”
   -by tying together the Gospel story with concerns relevant to our lives today - the message of possibility that exists in God is the best example of the Good News.
   -the feeling of hope for myself and my family through Jesus Christ
   -that there is hope.
-inspired hope
- hope - all things are possible in God.
- gratitude - for not having thought of things this way before.
- a new way of understanding and appreciating the gift of resurrection.

2. What feelings do you have after experiencing the sermon?
- feeling of contentment
- excitement
- hopefulness
- joy
- positive - hopeful
- wanting to let go of that which keeps me from really “rising up”
- refreshed
- how do I allow the power of the resurrection to work in my life?
- openness of mind and spirit
- it’s okay to want to use your heart and not just your head.
- joy about what may be, the possibilities
- peace
- peace and faith
- to have hope that each one of us who changes or grows are reflecting back the resurrection.
- positive thought - hope
- hope, that more people can see the healing.
- hopefulness, thankfulness

3. Did you experience Beauty in the sermon?
   -(Lots of Yes comments)
- the way the “then-now-future” were connected in a wonderful way.
- fuller life through resurrection life.
- How do I define Beauty? attractive, interesting, spiritually engaging, inspirational

4. How did you experience Beauty in the sermon? Were there any words, images, ideas that you consider to be beautiful?
- story telling especially.
- stories from your own life and experience are an effective way to inspire.
- what if!
- the idea of the resurrection of Jesus. How he healed and helped so many through his resurrection. That we all have it in us to change and be healed.
- the image of the disadvantaged people thanking God for their transformation was very powerful for me.
- letting go of fear.
- the image of sunrise service.
- light to the poor and homeless
- idea of “what if” is beautiful one, the beauty at the heart of the possibility of resurrection.
- resurrection light - cool image.
-Hopefulness of the light - sparkle.
-Fear/pride stops new possibilities.
-“real messiah” - what am I waiting for?
-let go of what has been in order to stop the bleeding.
-what if God could?, what if God would?, what if God did?
-the picture painted by the two gospel stories and picture of Christ’s compassion.
-beauty in transformation
-image of the easter morning service in New Haven.
-light images at the beginning were captivating
-hope images
-the challenge to dare to trust - you can do it!

5. After experiencing the sermon what questions do you have?
-Resurrection (two way arrow) to Birth of Jesus
-If God can and does make something like resurrection possible, what else is possible?
-what am I unable or afraid to risk and arise?
-how do I not allow the resurrection power to work in my life?
-what do I do day to day that blocks the holy spirit?

Observations

Broad observations indicate that the congregation has an expansive understanding of the Good News. It includes the proclamation of justice, hope, love and light. However from the clear central message of this sermon the dominant declaration of Good News was experienced as hope. Positive feelings were expressed as a result of the sermon they included refreshment, hope, contentment, peace, openness and joy. Answers for question three included a variety of images (word pictures) and turns of phrase (play with language). It went beyond the central message of hope as the inherent Beauty of Resurrection Good News and included storytelling, the idea of “What if?”, image of the disadvantaged persons thanking God, release of fear, “hopeful sparkle”, “What if God could? What if God would? What if God did?, idea of transformation, pride can stop new possibilities and the challenge to dare trusting.
Appendix G

This is the Order of Service for Year 3, Sermon 1.

United Church of Canada Hymnals: VU - Voices United and MV - More Voices

First United Church
August 7, 2011
Eighth after Pentecost
Worship Leadership: Rev. Danielle James
Music Coordinator: Camille Ream
Executive Administrative Assistant: Jennifer Abram

Gathering in God's Presence

Prelude

Welcome
Sharing Shalom
   The peace of Christ be with you. And also with you.

Singing our Peace and Joy "Halle, Halle, Halle" VU 958

Called to Worship

Biblical Greeting
   The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.
   And also with you.

Call to Worship
   It is amazing that when we call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding;
   God's wisdom is there to teach us.
   If we look for God determined and open;
   God shows up as the Presence that was also there.
   If we struggle with choices, live seeking justice and work for a healed world;
   God's radical Spirit is the One that sustains us through it all.
   Come let us worship in Spirit and in truth.

We are Open to God "Spirit, Open My Hearts" MV 79
Light of God with Us — candle lighting

Prayer of Approach and Seeking Hearts

We sing of God's Presence "Worship the Lord" VU 401

Gratitudes and Concerns & Invitations to Ministry

The Church Gives Generously
Presentation of Gifts for Mission

   Faithful God, faithful steward, faithful follower of Christ.
   Here's my hand I'll do my part, and respond with all my heart.
   Faithful God, faithful steward, faithful follower of Christ.
   For the gifts that I receive I will respond.

Assurance of God's Grace
God's Word for our Lives

Psalm 107

The Gospel: Matthew 14:13-21
This is the Gospel of Christ.
Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.
The Word Proclaimed – “Bring Your Something to God”

Responding to the Spirit!

Feast of Holy Communion
Presentation for Gifts for Table “We Gather Here” MV 469

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving
The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Life up your hearts.
We lift them up to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We Praise Jesus, Remember and Pray
God who uses fish and bread to change the world....

Declaring the Mystery
...and so, we proclaim our faith as we come to your Table:
Christ lived, blessing us with every breath;
Christ died defeating the power of sin;
Christ rose by the power of Love.
Christ will come again for all who wait on the Lord.

Holy Spirit’s Blessing
Fraction - This is the Body of Our Lord. This is the Bread of Blessing for all.
Pouring - This is the Cup of Salvation. This is the Cup of Blessing for all.

Sharing Holy Communion

Eat This Bread
VU 466
Eat this bread, drink this cup;
come to me and never be hungry.
Eat this bread, drink this cup;
trust in me and you will not thirst.

You are invited to share this meal by coming to the front.
An usher will guide you forward.

59
A Gluten-free option is available at each Communion station. If you are unable to come forward please indicate to an usher.

Prayer after the Meal
Parting Hymn  “We Shall Go Out With Hope of Resurrection”  VU 586

Commissioning
In the power of the Holy Spirit we now go into the world to fulfill our calling as the people of God, the Body of Christ.

Benediction

Peace Blessing  VU 974

Amen! Amen! Hallelujah, amen!

x2
Appendix II

Following is the sermon - “Bring Your Something to God,” along with some background work that I used for all the sermons in this project. This structure reflects some of my current sermon writing practices.

Sermon: Pentecost 7A, with Holy Communion
First United Church
August 7, 2011
The Rev. Danielle Ayana James

Title: Bring your Something to God.

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

Prayer: Source of Abundance, thank you for already nourishing us in this worship. We have already been fed by your goodness and Spirit. Here, in this place, we overflow with your Presence and realize that there is always plenty for us to share with others. So we marvel God that even with all of this you desire to give us dessert. A sweet word that takes us to a place of delight and challenge where your grace we savour even more. We are listening. We are open to you.

NRSV - Feeding the Five Thousand
13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ 16 Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ 17 They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ 18 And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Beauty Hermeneutic
Beauty is a form of resistance to the ugliness (things that counter God of the world). The world may offer us messages of nothingness - not enough - keep what is your own - hoard and ‘look out for yourself’ - but Beauty shines in the active resistance to these messages as the disciples experience an active shift from perceived ‘nothingness’ of their meal to the awesome ‘something’ that God will do with all that we offer.
Focus Scripture: ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.

Behavioral Purpose: (in accordance with the Frank Thomas method of sermon preparation and structure.) I want listeners to move from the experience of ‘nothing’ to noticing the ‘something’ that they have. Such that they desire to offer their ‘something’ at the Table and receive the miracle of being nourished in community.

Free Association

(I’m struck by the intimacy of the food sharing - was the bread tossed and the fish also? I don’t imagine it this way. We don’t flippantly give to God and God reciprocally gives with care to us. I see any perceived distance between God and humanity closed in.

The Beauty of a disciple or young child bringing his mother’s baking and his father’s days work of fishing to the table to be shared with others.

Have you been offered something? In the communion meal? We hold the basket for one another. We hold the cup and we offer. All gifts are God’s. God with the intimacy of torn bread draws close and says - take, eat, this is me sharing with you.

Somalia - famine. 10s of thousands have died from malnutrition. The food is being blocked by rebel groups who are attempting to intercept the food route - for control. selfishness,

nothing to something to everything
the local food bank - edmonton 15,000 hampers go out each week.
generosity at this table is great enough.
Sermon:

Bring your Something to God.

Situation:
As Christian people we make some pretty amazing claims. We hold onto some amazing beliefs. We believe that Jesus is the Incarnation of God. God walking with us. In the created form of human beings. How amazing, is that?

But you know...sometimes I wonder. I wonder about Jesus. In a similar way to the way I wonder about a friend, who was exceptional in their giving to the world and for others. A friend was giving so much to a cause - to a way of life. I wonder about coming alongside Jesus and asking - “How’s it going Jesus? How are you?”

That’s a very human thing to do? - to inquire about someone else. We find it cultures around the world. Common ways of greeting one another. How are you?, I’m well. How are you. We learn it in elementary language classes - Comment allez-vous? Cava, et toi?

Yes, they are common ways of speaking that we flit through as pleasantries, keeping us politely at a distance from one another. But then there are those moments (we’re having one of those days....) when it goes beyond pleasantries... when we wonder..do they really want to know? Do they want to know if I’m getting enough sleep or eating well to keep up with the demands, about my summer plans and the last movie I saw?

I could be really honest with them...

What if I told them about my heart? And what’s going on in my spirit. Do I truly want to tell them? I could give the vague yet commonly accepted non-sequitur to talk about anything but what’s really going on. - it’s okay, or I’m well.

When the truth is that for many of us... when we take the time to reflect on the intimacy of another asking how are you?..what’s going on? There’s often a discovery to be found. An emotion to touch.

If we take an inventory of the variety, diversity and difference of all that’s feeding into our lives...the response might truly be;

“There’s much going on. Not that we’re necessarily excessively busy, but there are layers to our living - individually, communally.

Somalia is in devastation, Syria citizens are shooting one another, the Euro is trying to deter an absolute collapse, debt ceilings have to be raised...
Your neighbour has a new dog that won’t stop barking, there’s a friend in hospital, our children are going off to post high school adventures, beginning new jobs and leaving others after decades of service. there are wedding anniversaries, and the growing need for quiet in ones life...
And we haven’t even begun to name the interior layers of our beings.
The spiritual and emotional sources of our actions....
How we feel about our capacity to act in any of those areas, in the areas of our lives.

**Situation 1a**
Sometimes I wonder what it was like for Jesus.
Imagine asking of Jesus this question on this day in Matthew’s account.
How’s it going Jesus? How are you?
(his response: “**well it’s complicated!”**)

And he might begin to tell us about (list the items)...Death of John the Baptist, the healing miracles and the quality of energy that it takes from him and gives to him, the challenges from the powers that rule - Pharisees and others who want to ensnare him and restrict the placement of God’s power to only where they command.
He might also tell us that “I’m joyful for the commitment of the disciples who have been commissioned to teach and heal and are friends on the way. They are grieving also and still with me, sticking it out... committed to the vision."

*He might describe being tired.* “I’m in good relationship with my God...seeing the creator’s presence in so much...everything really. Truth, Goodness, Beauty...they mingle in the dance of dragonflies, and in the synchronicity of schools of sardines in the Galilee when I cross the lake. The joy on faces of children, lepers, the voiceless and oppressed when they begin to feel within themselves the radical breaking in of a Divine message of hope and freedom in God.”

And as his friend - we marvel...
How does Jesus just keep offering it all to God?
So lovely. Human, Divine, Beautiful

And this is where we enter today’s Scripture story. Today with the thousands - we ask Jesus...and how are you TODAY?

*(I describe the day - tell the story)*
Jesus has had a day of healing, teaching
the disciples are with him...they are grieving John’s death
Jesus wants to / need to retreat - be alone.
the people follow him. They go where he is.

The people express needs.
Jesus has compassion. teaches, heals.

Days end.

at this point, along with the disciples and Jesus we want to give a collective exhale.
But there’s something more. A call to keep offering.
All are hungry. Send them away so that they may buy food.
A moment to choose...

Now things get interesting....
Don’t dismiss them. You give them something to eat.

**Complication**
Don’t dismiss them! You feed them!

Immediately the disciples’ minds turn to logistics. It can’t happen
They look to resources - food, energy, enthusiasm - it can’t happen.

“We having nothing..only five loaves and two fish.”

With all that’s going on...this is a reasonable response isn’t it?
They only had 5 loaves and 2 fish... - one could say that it was nothing compared to the problem...

We hear the phrase in multiple and varied forms....
in some twist of this phrase we hear it all around us...
The powers that be, and our own mouths are quick to say that there is nothing....
You have nothing..
There’s nothing else to give, because what you have you’ve got for you!
Oh the voices are strong. The media seemingly indestructible. The messages pervasive with infiltrative prowess.
We might see ourselves wrapped in the myth of scarcity - and if we don’t hold on to what we have then we will have nothing!

*You’re nothing* until you have this particular brand - *(list a brand or two)*
the beast of consumerism puts the question deep into our yearnings for identity

and connection - do you really have anything if you don’t have this brand item or a home in this or that neighbourhood?
The powers and principalities attack our sense of worth. Our esteem.
-tell us that the problems are too big for us to impact change.
-train us to look at the scarcity - “come now items are running out”

“limited edition”, limited time,

So we begin to incorporate the messages into ourselves,
allowing them to become a part of our self understanding.
- I don’t have anything to wear.
- For some it goes deeper - they believe the lie - “I am nobody.”

So hard to offer what you have..if you really think it’s nothing much.

“I ONLY have...”
So it’s really an act that is counter cultural.
In line with the church, as an act of resistance,
when the disciples move from seeing their supper as ‘nothing’ to ‘something’ they can and do offer to God.
Offering what you have to God. Even our perceived “nothings”

Resolution
The miracle of this story is about offering. It begins with the honest look at what they (the disciples) have to offer. And with the beautiful act of resisting the message of nothingness and seeing what they had as something to give to God.

From the beginning: Jesus has been offering himself.
Out of his abundance and out of his emptiness.
Out of his richness of connection with God he gave...
Today in the story when he has little energy, his cousin is dead, he’s possibly feeling depleted...
Only an open heart and hands. Jesus ‘nothing’ is full of compassion.

We’re invited to abandon the false notion that we have nothing to bring...and see our ‘nothings’ and somethings. To bring our joy, and our sorrow. Bring our questions and our confidence, bring our sadness and what we think is not valued and offer it to God.
We say: Take my wisdom, my love, my prayer, - take my need of wisdom, my attempts at loving and even take my inability to pray. I bring it before you. To the Table of grace, acceptance and mercy. It’s all here available to you God.

And Jesus has shows us likewise: Take my life. Take all of me.

Take what you have and give it to Jesus. Hands action.

We’ve heard the stories of little offered to God’s ways and it became a blessing to others...
-the compassion of a stranger who opened her retreat home to women looking to get off the streets, and a house of healing and restitution was birthed.
-the boys of Sudan, who walk thousands of kilometers..depleted they could rightly say I have nothing...but they say that their something was hope, and now many of teaching, serving, modeling about the depth of God’s mercy and celebrating it.
-the people of this community who have journey with and through cancer, and when someone comes across they path with the same journey. They make the choice to offer - time, companionship, empathy as a volunteer at the cross, a shoulder to cry on, a person to go with to medical appointments or someone to reclaim past joys with.

Celebration
During a lakeside meal of strangers, through an offering of bread and fish,
a unity comes over them.
An event of Beauty happens. A beautiful experience unfolds. Where God’s whole immense and infinite love is made known in the intimacy of shared bread and fish.
In that sliver of life, over 2000 years ago the Divine God shows up across any perceived distance as we simply offer and open ourselves to God.

Whatever it is that we have to offer...

God will take it and transform it. Bless it. Change it’s form (break it) and give it to us, the community so that it might be used to bless us and others.

Even if it’s just a hunger for God
Bring your something -
   Bring your emptiness - God can fill
   Bring your loaves of bread - your contribution for the food bank and it will be given to those who can share it with those who are hungry.
   Bring your love of the Lord - you’ve just go to tell someone and share with someone in action and gentle speech.

Bring what you think is nothing - it’s a something....

Bring it to the table.
   You say: I have nothing -
      I’m depleted (bring your exhaustion)
      I’m lonely (bring your need to belong)
      I’m so thankful for what God is doing (bring your hands ready to serve..heart ready to praise...)
      I’m in a situation where I’m questioning so many things - (bring the questions) -
      I have nothing - you have something.

Bring it to the Table.
So may it be...

Move to the Communion Table....
Appendix I

Congregational Sermon Responses: Year 3, Sermon 1

These are the responses gathered during worship, after Holy Communion. Two questions were asked. The working, punctuation and emphases are all as found on the papers. Note that no members of the PPG completed response forms. There were a total of 16 response sheets out of 94 people in worship - 17% return rate.

1. What was the core message of today’s sermon?
   Everyone has something to offer to God. You may think you don’t but we all do. It could be something as small as a smile, a truly heartfelt “how are you.” Now matter how small...it means something.
   My “nothing” is something. What am I going to do with it?
   We all have something to give to God, to others, even if I have little or no money or material possessions. We can offer ourselves, our experiences, our compassion and ability to Love.
   We all have something to give.
   “I have nothing”, Something - even if insignificant - you have to give.
   History repeats itself and I am not alone.
   Jesus sharing to the masses of people
   Everyone has something to give.
   God’s power can take our “little bits” and benefit a multitude
   That everyone has something to bring to God’s world to help enrich the lives of 1 or many.
   It doesn’t matter what we or others think of these gifts as with God they become great.
   Synergy of sharing
   Give, give, give
   We all have “a something” to bring to God. Whatever that something is - God can use it!
   Realizing what we all have to give. In serving, we too are served. Yes, even me. God fed the multitudes, used a small boy to slay the Giant, used someone who could not speak well to lead others, what could He do with me.
   Everyone has something to offer.
   We all have something to give and when offered, honestly to God - He will find a way to use everything to his glory.

2. Describe your experience of today’s Holy Communion.
   Centering. I have missed a few services lately and it brings you back to what should be important...what is important.
   I was fed in such a spiritual way.
   Today’s “table offering” felt real, where as the traditional communion offering I know is symbolic. I felt I was one of the many (5000+) that the Lord and his disciples served. Thank you for making it “real”.
   Very unique, a first for us. So fitting with the Bible reading.
   Very different. Well done!
   It was different but I liked it.
I felt it was very emotional. Vibration.
I am one of the 5000 plus people that Jesus cares for.
belief that if there is enough, there will be.
no more fish. regular old communion please.
The invitation with the 5 loaves, and the fist and the cup was compelling. The restating that
God can do much with small “somethings”
Coming to the table mindful of what awesome things God can do through us.
Different but enjoyed it.
Excellent! It felt like it was a community feast to which all were truly invited as
participants not just “on-lookers”
Appendix J

Story of Beauty Encounter from a PPG Member.
Used with permission.

Story of Beauty at a Burial Ground

On the occasion of the death of a family member, Peter attended the 'celebration of life service'.
I reached out with an email of encouragement and asked two questions:
1. How did Spirit visit with you this week?
2. Did Beauty give you comfort in unexpected ways?
Below is the transcript content of his email response.

May 17, 2011

Hello Danielle, I was going to leave this til the morning, but your questions are too poignant to leave be. With all you manage on a daily basis, your short note to me is in itself beauty.

Did Beauty give you comfort in unexpected ways?

Yes, I suppose Beauty is with us if we look for her. I heard her this week at a burial ground. She was the wind spirit floating from a lone penny whistle above the comforting words of a minister conducting her first burial service. She was in the sunshine, and freshly cut lilacs. She was in the tanned roofer high above us hammering away at nails oblivious to the reason we'd all gathered that morning. I saw her in the courage and strength of motherless children. I tasted her tears; I smelled her grieving embrace. [My wife] lost one of her closest friends; her brother's wife. The service was rich with song, testament and love. The struggle will continue, but there is Grace at every turn.

How did Spirit visit with you this week? The Spirit filled us with peace. She came effortlessly and held me up through the day, allowing me to comfort others and to perform roles that were both foreign and difficult. It was as if she removed me from my skin, and then took over for others. It's curious that I didn't spend much time reading, praying, or reflecting on any spiritual writings or texts during the past week, and yet, my own grieving seems to have been completely borne by someone other than me? It's like I took a week off of my 'God work', and he just carried on. I guess that's beautiful, would you think?

Recognizing Beauty and Spirit is difficult when one lives between the sheets of demon lovers and gospel truth. A wholesome friend, constant in her love of Jesus, makes that challenge worth endeavouring. Keep preaching with Beauty at your side. We are listening All the best with your upcoming studies, Danielle; you'll do real well.

lots of love, returned.

~ peter