

THAT ONE THING
Sermon, March 6, 2022
The First Sunday in Lent
Texts: Exodus 31:1-13, Psalm 27 (Luke 4:1-13)

Fourteen years, six months and eight days ago (*August 26, 2007*), I used this same scripture and sermon title as we commemorated the retirement of Nancy Carlson Merritt as our organist and music director of fifteen-plus years (*the sermon itself has been updated, redrafted and hopefully improved*). As most, if not all, of you know, Nancy departed this life this past Monday at the age of 95. Rest in peace, dear Nancy.

"One thing have I asked of the Lord," the psalmist David wrote, *"this only do I seek."* What is "that one thing" YOU would ask of the Lord? It's a difficult question to answer, not because we can't come up with anything, but because most of us can't get the list down to just ONE thing. Oh, in times of crisis we can certainly ask for one thing ... peace in the Ukraine comes immediately to mind for many of us right now, for example ... but in the non-crisis course of our everyday lives we desire many "things"; we've many good hopes, many good desires, for ourselves, our families, our communities, our friends, our loved ones. How can we narrow it down to just ONE thing?

"One thing have I asked of the Lord," says David, *"This only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple."* Now, that sounds like three things ... (1) dwell in the house of the Lord, (2) gaze upon His beauty, a (3) inquire in His temple ... but David says it is one thing. Ok, David, maybe you're being Trinitarian. But yes, the three really are one.

To dwell in the house of the Lord all his days ... Now, I don't think David means he wants to spend all his days sitting in church. No, he wants, at all times and in all things, to be "at home" with God, to live and dwell constantly in His presence, to live each and every moment of his life with God as His divine audience, ALL THE TIME. He wants to be part of God's "house", God's family ... and as he lives life accordingly, he wants to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and *inquire* in His temple. What is gazing on God's beauty all about, or inquiring in His temple? I'm glad you asked; I'm getting to that. To seek to dwell in the presence of God is to simultaneously (a) seek His pleasure (*for living consciously in His presence means you should want to do what is good and pleasing to Him*) (b) seek His beauty, and (c) seek His reality, His truth. In every service of worship, we seek how to inspire all of us to do THAT ONE THING: dwelling, living in the presence of God, gazing upon and contemplating His beauty, and inquiring ... seeking real answers.

First, Goodness. Seeking to dwell in God's presence means to seek Goodness, because **God IS good** (ALL THE TIME. And all the time, GOD IS GOOD). And we should seek to be and do good ALL THE TIME, as well, as dwell in His good presence ALL THE TIME. It's those times we don't live in God's good presence, when we try to avoid His goodness, that we fall into the things that are not good. In God we find the ultimate measure of what is good, He is the foundation of all that is good; He is the essence of genuine good. He is concerned with the good, He reveals what is good, and He desires us to *be* good for our *own* good AND He is pleased and honored by our attempts to be good and to foster and encourage and promote goodness. Every worship service should include a proclamation, affirmation, recognition and even an exaltation of what is genuinely GOOD, right, wholesome, holy.

Second, Truth. *"To inquire in His temple."* Seeking to dwell in God's presence means to sincerely inquire, to seek and discover and live by what is truly true. God Incarnate in Jesus Christ made the unequivocal claim, *"I am the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life."* Not only is God the Source of all truth, He *is* the Truth. He is reality itself. Each Lenten season when the lectionary directs us to Jesus' wilderness temptation, I always like to note the context for this wilderness trial: Jesus had JUST been baptized by John. God's audible voice had spoken clearly from heaven saying, "THIS IS MY SON" for all to hear. With this voice still ringing in Jesus' ears, along comes the devil saying, *"IF you are the Son of God ..."* I can imagine Jesus responding, *"Waddaya mean, 'IF?' God just SAID I'm His Son. I don't need to turn stones into bread or any other magical tricks to prove that! God said it, I believe it, that settles it."* The original sin ... as in the origin of all sin ... is, at root, questioning or calling into doubt what the God of Truth has CLEARLY SAID. When we honestly inquire, seeking real answers, we are seeking Truth; and whether we realize it or not, we are seeking the One Who is the Truth. God is Truth ... He is concerned with what is true, He reveals truth to us, He desires us to be truth-full people, and His ways are true ... not just true "for us", but they are true, period! Every worship service should include a proclamation, affirmation, recognition and even an exaltation of what is genuinely true, God's Truth.

Third, Beauty. Seeking to dwell in God's presence involves "gazing upon His beauty" ... which involves the beauty of His created order and the beauty inherent in God's character. Something of the essence of God Himself can be experienced through the expression and appreciation of beauty. God is the Creator of beauty, the Source of all beauty, the Standard of all beauty ... and God is **honored** by beauty. The expression and celebration and appreciation of Beauty in worship is equally as important as the preaching and teaching of Truth and Goodness. Some of you may remember why I chose such an obscure passage from Exodus for our Old Testament reading. Exodus 31 contains a little-known fact: The very first person whom Scripture mentions as being filled with the Holy

Spirit is filled for the purpose of *artistic expression*. Bezalel is filled with the Holy Spirit for the express purpose of creative, artistic expression, i.e., for the purpose of bringing *beauty* to the center of worship ... for God is honored by beauty; worship involves "gazing upon God's beauty" and worship is enhanced by the appreciation of beauty.

We may not have here a grand tabernacle like Bezalel designed or a grand cathedral like those you'd see in the great cities of the Western world, but we do have here a sanctuary that is bright, clean, well-maintained ... a model of the plain beauty of our New England Puritan heritage. The architecture of this beautiful sanctuary is designed for worship. This is not a gym. We don't shove aside the pews and use this as a multipurpose room. It's a *sanctuary*. Here in the simple beauty of this sanctuary, we gather to worship God ... and not only do we worship, but here we celebrate beautiful moments: we pledge our lives and love to each other in marriage, we welcome new family arrivals in baptism, we commission people to offices of ministry, we confirm our young people for their life's journey in the Christian faith, we say our sad, yet hope-filled, farewells to our dearly departed loved ones ... here in this sacred place of elegant beauty designed and maintained to engage us in worship of the Source of all beauty

What is beauty? How is beauty realized and/or appreciated? We all have a sense of it, but beauty is hard to define; but I'll try. The essence of beauty is when complex, dissimilar, diverse elements are orchestrated or brought together in harmonious relationship and proportionality and symmetry and balance, be they the arrangement of notes on a scale, the contrast and shades of colors on a canvas, the delicately balanced hues and colors of a prize-winning rose. The more complex the elements, the more factors being brought into relationship, the more complex the relationships that are being brought into symmetry and harmony, the more beautiful things are. Edgar Allen Poe wrote, "*Dissonance, discord, chaos ... these things are naturally displeasing to the soul. Harmony pleases, not just the ear, but the soul.*" Every time we behold order, proportionality, harmony, relationship, symmetry or symphony in this world, every time we behold beauty, we feel it in the depth of our being and we behold something of the nature of the Source of Beauty, the Creator Who fits things together perfectly. Of all the fine arts, music is probably the best vehicle for expressing the essence of beauty ... orchestrating, bringing together, all sorts of complex, disparate, dissimilar, diverse elements in concert and relationship and proportionality and harmony.

The most diverse, complex, beautiful thing in the universe *is* the universe ... the complexity of the parts and elements that make up all of reality surpasses the limits of our intelligence and defies our imagination. Is there ultimate disorder, disharmony in the universe? Absolutely not. Where did all that order, harmony, symmetry, proportionality and beauty come from? It comes from the divine Source of all Beauty ... and Truth and Goodness. In the opening verses of the Bible, in the beginning, the world was without form and void. It was without shape or symmetry; it was empty. It was dark, there was no light, no color, no form; in a word, there was no beauty ... until the Spirit of God brooded upon the waters. He came upon the formless void and where there was darkness and disorder, color and brilliance and structure and order exploded into being. The Spirit of God brought order and beauty to the formless confusion of the primeval world.

Now, that grand and beautiful work of art was defaced, that order was broken, when human sin brought the ugliness of disorder, confusion, darkness back into Creation ... and sin continues to bring the ugliness of disorder, confusion, darkness into our lives. However, through the grace of Jesus Christ, the same Holy Spirit who created beauty in the beginning is also in the business of art restoration! God the Holy Spirit did not stop His beautifying work in Creation. As we, like David, seek THAT ONE THING, the Holy Spirit broods within us and works to restore beauty and order and harmony to our lives. To bring harmony to our being, to give us integrity, so that our lives may have the ugliness and chaos and harshness of discord and sin removed. He seeks to make us beautiful. As we consciously seek THAT ONE THING, to consistently and constantly dwell in God's presence, inquiring and learning and practicing what is True, learning and practicing and promoting what is Good, the Spirit fashions our hearts and souls into works of beauty fashioned in the image of the One Who is truly and completely BEAUTIFUL. With David, seek THAT ONE THING: Dwell in His presence, allowing God to make something beautiful of your life.

Now, I invite you all to please stand:

Fourteen years, six months and eight days ago, August 26, 2007, we gave thanks to God for His beautiful servant, Nancy Merritt, as she retired from the organ console of this church. All of us who knew Mrs. Merritt knew she was one who consistently sought THAT ONE THING in her life and ministry. And in so doing, she brought beauty into our lives and to the life and worship of the Greenwood Community Church, Presbyterian Church for over fifteen years. She brought beauty not only through her uplifting, inspiring, faithful and dedicated ministry of music, but she also brought beauty through her gracious manner, her gentle spirit, her humble estimation of her remarkable abilities, and her unflagging dedication to the Lord she served so faithfully throughout the years. I said then, and repeat now: *"If I may presume to speak on behalf of all who have been part of this congregation these past fifteen years as well as the pastors who served during that time, I would like to say 'Thank you' to Nancy for a job well done, for a life well lived, and for so faithfully reflecting the beauty of God in our midst through her love and faithful service all these years as she consistently sought THAT ONE THING."*

Let us pray. *Receive, O Lord, our sister Nancy. May the angels surround her, may all the saints welcome her in peace. Receive we pray a sheep of your fold, a lamb of your flock, a child of Yours whom You have redeemed. Receive her into the arms of Thy mercy, receive her into the blessed rest of everlasting peace; receive her, we pray, into the glorious company of the Church Triumphant. Amen.*