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ST675 Engaging Beauty
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An Iconography of Broken Bodies

Veni Creator

Come, Holy Spirit,
bending or not bending the grasses,
appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards or when snow
covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.
I am only a man: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in church
lifts its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,
not me—after all I have some decency—
and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you.

- Czeslaw Milosz, 1961

I have long appreciated Milosz's confession that "I am only a man: I need visible signs." I have cried those words in desperate prayers when the pain of the world is, as the old Anglican prayer says, "more than our humanity can bear." As a visual artist, I too need visible signs, and I too "tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction." My studies through the Engaging Beauty course have given me a new and rich vocabulary of such visible signs, new ways of perceiving the beauty of God as a visceral reality rather than an intellectualized abstraction. The timing of the course could not have been better, as my life has felt assaulted with grief in the weeks that have passed. In the midst of this grief, I have sought refuge in the beauty of God, particularly in its visible signs which, as Milosz says, "must be human." In the broken bodies of the humans I love most I have caught glimpses of a beauty that is larger and more

enduring than the pain. The Orthodox understanding of icons, learned through this course, has provided a helpful framework for contemplating how broken bodies could possibly serve as icons of glory.

Orthodoxy contends that icons not only communicate but transform, bringing the Christian into a mystical encounter with the spiritual beauty to which the icon attests. And because this beauty is God himself, it differs greatly from worldly conceptions of beauty that limit its scope to only what is visually pleasing. Orthodox theologian Richard Viladesau quotes Karl Barth in describing this difference: “God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful” (123). Embracing this divine beauty is a means of personal transformation, one that Viladesau calls a “converted sense of beauty” (124). In this converted sense, one comes to see beauty as inherently cruciform, encompassing even the self-denial, suffering, and death of Jesus in fulfillment of God’s loving desire to restore all things. And thus, as one’s sense of beauty is converted, and as one seeks to behold, internalize, and imitate the divine beauty, one “can see the beauty in loving what appears lost, sinful, unlovable, ugly” (Viladesau 125).

Icons portray this converted sense of beauty in the imperfection of their imagery. Iconographers do not aim for factual representations of the seen world; in fact, the figures they portray may “look wooden and flat,” repelling the viewer with their disfigured proportions and reversed perspective. The beauty of icons “does not always meet human standards. Rather, it is a transfigured beauty, a beauty that demands our death and resurrection before we can appreciate it fully. An icon draws us into God’s

beauty, and God's beauty is the beauty of creation as well as re-creation" (Burgess 161).

The beauty of icons, then, is one of hiddenness and revelation. Like the wardrobe in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, icons beckon us toward an unseen realm more beautiful than that which is seen, more real than that which we can touch, crammed with "pleasures forevermore" which are the "beautiful inheritance" of all the king's worshippers (Psalm 16:11, 6). In this unseen realm to which the icon opens, God reigns "in the beauty of holiness" and we are invited to "bow before the beauty of God" (Psalm 96:9, KJV and The Message, respectively). But this beauty is hidden in the ordinary stuff of paint and wood, of misshapen figures and skewed perspectives and ambiguous light sources. It is revealed not by looking upon, but by looking through, just as Narnia is revealed only as a child plays her way through the wardrobe in a game of hide and seek.

A friend who is an Orthodox priest once told me how his children love to arrive early at church with him on Sundays. As he unlocks the doors and prepares the sanctuary, his children run around the empty building, kissing various icons and skipping through sacred spaces with the same sort of playful abandon that marked Lucy's first stumbling into Narnia. It is a holy hide-and-seek, as those who seek a glimpse of God's kingdom "become like children" to find it hidden and revealed just beyond the icon in their midst (Matthew 18:3). They are like Jesus, who asks incredulously, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). The children are at home in their Father's house, skipping among images that point to the beauty of God, their kisses displaying a childlike

affection for God's kingdom. They demonstrate what reformed theologian John Burgess writes: "an icon becomes beautiful as worshippers interact with it" (162).

Orthodox poet Scott Cairns illustrates this hide-and-seek in his *Idiot Psalms*, using playful language to describe the beauty of restoration hidden even in frailty and suffering. His "Idiot Psalm 9" contemplates a slow transition from winter to spring. "Brief thaw turned ragged March extending, . . . into yet another ragged April / Brief shoots of new green trampled underfoot / by sleet, and lo, accumulating weather, moot, / sore-clipped—spring flowers tattered with the cold." Spring's affirmations of life—"new green," "spring flowers"—are "trampled" and "tattered" by an unrelenting winter. The natural world thus mirrors the liturgical world of the same months, during which Christians observe the frozen penitence of Lent and await the permanent thaw of the resurrection. Cairns concludes his poem with the hosanna cry of Palm Sunday: "*Lord, we say, have mercy on us, by which / each idiot more nearly means to plead / O Silent One Unspeaking, save me.*" The poet responds to the silent cold with a longing for spring, evidencing faith in the ultimate triumph of beauty and life.

Hidden within the brokenness of the world lies the kingdom of God. Hidden in the cold death of winter is the green life of spring. If this beautiful reality is hidden within the created world, as Cairns' poem suggests, then is it also hidden within humans themselves, within the pinnacle of God's created order? Cairns' "Idiot Psalm 7" seems to answer yes. He describes an unceasing accumulation of the "fraught perplexities" of ordinary human life: "The aging Labrador's stiff leg won't / let her climb the stair. Our neighbor's late / C-section has brought fresh heartbreak home. / I swear the very air smells of tar or creosote, maybe / tire rubber burning." These images of

death and degradation lead the psalmist to plead finally, “A little help!” Though the images of the psalm are not beautiful in any conventional sense, they evoke a fervent cry to God, and as such, point to a faith in the beauty beyond their pain. In this way, they demonstrate Viladesau’s “converted sense of beauty” in which even painful images of loss are gateways to a hope of restoration. And thus, these broken places—trampled flowers, decaying bodies, frustrated pregnancies—are a sort of iconography, a beauty of hiddenness and revelation, drawing us toward a transfigured realm just beyond what appears plain, ugly, wounded, and weak.

But how can this be? Surely God does not look at the “fresh heartbreak” of a late caesarean and call it beautiful. Surely he does not watch as our bodies age and decay, our memories fade, our children suffer, our marriages crumble, and proclaim as good what is so obviously broken and bad in the world. What are we to make of the universal experience of the brokenness of human bodies? How might they serve as icons to a transfigured reality that could possibly be called beautiful?

Theologian Jonathan Edwards’ writings on beauty provide clarity. Though in no sense an Orthodox Christian, Edwards nonetheless viewed the world through a remarkably iconographic lens. He was deeply attuned to the beauty of the natural world and of the God who created it for his pleasure. For Edwards, all of the world was an icon of the incomparable beauty of God, in which humans function as “the consciousness of creation,” the only beings able to worship and reflect and create (Lane 41). To humans alone God gives the tremendous privilege of not only beholding and enjoying, but also actively enlarging, God’s beauty in the world. This act of

enlargement is the aim of the Christian life, one of relentless magnification of the splendor of God.

Humans are the consciousness of creation, yes. But part of that consciousness is a consciousness that all is not as it should be. The world which God made, the world which humans behold, the world whose ordinary stuff becomes crafted into icons, is visibly busted and bent. Any honest consciousness of creation must include a consciousness of its pain. Just as humans alone are granted the unique role of enlarging God's beauty through creative acts, they alone also uniquely articulate the agony of pain through liturgies of loss, through creative expressions of lament. What does Edwards have to say about this aspect of humanity as the consciousness of creation? Could human suffering—like human praise and industry and creativity and relationships—somehow expand the reach of God's beauty in the world? Could even the brokenness of the human body serve as an icon to a transfigured reality?

The answer for Edwards is a resounding yes. Any apparent discord between the beauty of God and the pain of the world is resolved in the cross of Jesus. Belden Lane summarizes Edwards' conviction:

He knew that God's most astonishing beauty lies hidden in the earth's suffering, because the anguish of nature points to the agony of the cross. . . . Obviously it is a long stretch, by any reach of the imagination, to discern beauty in the midst of pain. But once again it is the 'new sense' imparted by God's spirit that makes this discernment possible. The new capacity for perceiving God's beauty makes one simultaneously more sensitive to deformity, more attentive to the distorting of God's mirrored loveliness. It breeds a resistance to the disfiguring of the world's beauty as well as an identification with that which is most disfigured. Beauty requires this, for it is the nature of God's beauty never to be static. God continually reaches out to beautify, to embrace in love, to reclaim what is lost. In the strange beauty of the cross, we perceive the extent to which God goes in assuming the full brokenness of creation. Here we grasp most dramatically God's disposition to communicate with reckless longing. Edwards found Christ's highest beauty in 'the greatest degree of his humiliation.' 'Never [more

than at the cross] was his divine glory and majesty covered with so thick and dark a veil . . . yet never was his divine glory so manifested by any act of his, as in that act of yielding himself up to these sufferings.” (Lane 39-40)

For Edwards, then, even pain has its place within the beauty of God. Even the humiliation of Jesus and the suffering of the earth are encompassed within a larger beauty. This larger beauty is one of hiddenness and revelation, in which “so thick and dark a veil” hides a glorious revelation of self-giving love.

According to Edwards, inherent in this sort of beauty is “reckless longing.” Hiddenness evokes longing for the beauty beyond the pain. This same longing is evident in Cairns’ cries of “a little help!” and “save me” in his Idiot Psalms. It is evident in Lucy’s yearning to return to Narnia, and in any child’s game of hide and seek, in which the hiddenness of beloved playmates intensifies the delight of their pursuit. In “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis describes this longing as “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not yet heard, news from a country we have never yet visited” (Lewis 287). He goes on to describe a “longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside. . . . We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it” (Lewis 291).

The hiddenness of beauty within a world of pain stirs the ache of longing in those who allow their gaze to behold what is broken as an icon of a transfigured reality. In viewing the pain of human existence and allowing oneself to be moved by it one acts as Edwards’ “consciousness of creation.” One consents to ontological beauty of God and declares with sorrow and anger and yearning that this world is not as it was meant

to be, that its pain is a “distort[ion] of God’s mirrored loveliness” (Lane 40). Such a gaze is foolish, voyeuristic, even cruel apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. But in Jesus, we see hiddenness and revelation at their fullest and most beautiful: the glory of resurrection hidden in the agony of the cross, the renewal of all things hidden in the groaning of creation.

And thus even what is broken can serve an iconographic function for those who possess what Viladesau calls a “converted sense of beauty,” what Edwards refers to as a “new sense.” For those with eyes to see, for those willing to seek the kingdom as a child, there is beauty hidden even in the deep pain of the world. We who believe the gospel worship a resurrected Jesus whose glorified body is eternally pierced by holes and marked by scars. We feast on a body broken and drink from a cup of shed blood in the eucharist. As we do, we express to Jesus the hungry longing of Maurice Sendak’s *Wild Things*: “Please don’t go—we’ll eat you up—we love you so.” To worship the resurrected Jesus through icons of pain and suffering is hunger and thirst for a transfigured reality.

By the same token, the broken bodies of people we love can serve as icons of another realm, stirring our longings for resurrection and affirming our sense that the pain of this world is not the end of the story. I have encountered an unusual number of such icons since taking the *Engaging Beauty* intensive last month. Each of them has fanned my longing for a God of redemption. The experiences from our class—where my fellow classmate-pilgrims and I wept and sang and yearned together for “a better country” (Hebrews 11:6)—have become places of refuge, safe havens in which the beauty of God feels slightly nearer.

One of these experiences happened during the class itself. On my fifteenth wedding anniversary, I found myself sitting in a seminary classroom hundreds of miles from my husband and children. While I watched snow fall outside my classroom windows and discussed the beauty of God, my husband was back home, tending to our children who were racked with fevers and vomiting uncontrollably. He had barely slept, his days and nights consumed with seemingly endless repetitions of holding back sweaty hair and drying tears and washing sheets. Our anniversary, like our marriage on most days, was devoid of all sentimentality, stripped to its most essential elements: a God who calls us beloved, children who challenge us to self-giving love, shared liturgies of laundry and dishes and wounding and forgiving. As Dr. K read Song of Songs over the class, I thought of my husband's body, exhausted as he tended to our children's pain and enabled my studies. This marriage has been a like an icon, a flawed image of the transfigured reality of an unfailingly faithful Christ and His beloved bride, of a body willingly broken for me and taken into my own.

On that same anniversary, my sister was diagnosed with a rapidly spreading breast cancer. Over the weeks that followed, we learned more details of her diagnosis and the many ways it would painfully disrupt her capacity to mother her three young children. Her first round of chemotherapy was scheduled for Ash Wednesday, a fitting liturgical coincidence for an event which had so awakened our family to the reality of our frailty.

That Ash Wednesday, I knelt in an almost empty church and cried for my sister who was settling in for treatment on the other side of the continent. I received the ashes on a sweaty forehead, received the words "from dust were you made, and to

dust you shall return” with sorrow. Then I left the church quickly in order to take my son, John, to what I thought would be a routine doctor’s visit. But this routine visit quickly turned into hours of labs and worried conversations, ending in our pediatrician’s recommendation that we go directly to the emergency room. There, I was told that my son had Type 1 Diabetes, and that his severely elevated blood sugar meant his body was approaching a dangerous, toxic state called diabetic ketoacidosis. I learned that his immune system had staged an attack on his pancreas, destroying the insulin that kept him healthy, and that his asthma medications, while keeping his airways open, had likely aided the assault on his pancreas.

It was a diagnosis that carried lifelong implications. Every day, for the rest of John’s life, he would have to check his blood sugar multiple times a day and inject himself with the insulin that his body had forgotten how to make. Eating would require vigilance, calculating the carbohydrate content of every bite of food, scheduling meals and snacks to coincide with insulin. Every school he would ever attend, every team he would ever play on, every girl he would eventually date, would need to know the symptoms of diabetic emergency and how to rescue him from a seizure. The diagnosis was devastating.

Late that night, after what felt like constant needle pricks and blood draws and a flood of resistant tears, my son finally collapsed in my arms in his hospital bed and began to take the deep breaths that signaled his body was yielding to sleep. I stroked his hair and spoke in the hushed tones usually reserved for calming nightmares. I reassured him that he could rest in my arms just as he was, and reminded him gently that in a few hours, another nurse would come to draw blood again, and that very soon

I would learn how to draw his blood as well, and that this new rhythm of piercing his body would continue even after we were released from the hospital.

“Until when?” he asked, sleepily.

For a moment, I couldn't speak. The answer, of course, was forever. Long after my son would grow up and leave my care, he would still be piercing his skin with needles every day, drawing blood and injecting insulin to stay alive.

Finally, my words pushed through the grief, and I whispered, “Always, John.” In that moment, it seemed as though my words signed a cross of ashes over his life, and I spoke the reality of brokenness and mortality to a six year old child who had never had reason to contemplate it before. I saw his face fall in comprehension. *From dust you were made, John—your body is frail and imperfect and has forgotten what it was made to do, and your life will always be hemmed in by its weaknesses and limits. And to dust you shall return, John—you have probably never considered that your life has an “always” until this moment, that your days will stretch through boyhood into manhood into old age, that your life will continue far beyond the safety of your family all the way to your moment of death. And yes, sweet boy, someday you will die.*

He sobbed like he had never sobbed in his life, huge and shaking and soaking through my sweater, the realization not only of illness but of frailty and death, of the human condition. And I sobbed with him, because there is no pain for like the pain of one's children's, a pain that God the Father well knows.

And yet even the broken body of my son drew me toward the beauty of God, beckoned me like an icon, like a wardrobe, toward a realm where all my longings for wholeness would be satisfied. That ugly hospital room and our tear-soaked clothes and

the sweaty streak of ash still stubbornly stuck on my forehead evoked a deeper longing for resurrection than anything in my life to that point. I yearned for my boy's broken body to be resurrected in brilliance, every finger prick a point of light, just as Jesus' resurrected body bore the evidence of his piercing. I felt more acutely the sorrow of a suffering world, of a disfigurement of the beauty God had intended, and a deep longing for "everything sad to come untrue," as my son's children's bible describes the coming redemption.

My husband's faithful sacrifice and my son's broken body are icons to me of a world unseen, hiding within their weakness and mortality the hope of glory, just as Ash Wednesday's ashes hide within them the triumphant palms of Palm Sunday. Beyond my immediate family, the whole world is packed with other icons of brokenness. By their imperfections, these icons fuel a holy hunger, a sacred hide-and-seek for a hidden perfection which longs to be found and consumed. "At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. . . . But the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*" (Lewis 291). Until we do, these broken bodies beckon me to keep knocking at the door.

Works Cited

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All bible verses from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.