

“Eight Wonders of Life: Moral Beauty”
Galatians 5:22-23

As we begin this sermon series about awe, we are invited to consider the work of scientist Dacher Keltner in his book *Awe: The Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*. Through his gathering of thousands of stories from twenty-six countries, Keltner was able to answer this question: “What most commonly led people around the world to feel awe?” His answer came in eight “wonders of life.” Dacher defines awe this way: “Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world...Awe transforms our relation to the world...Everyday awe, then, can be a pathway for avoiding chronic inflammation and the diseases of the twenty-first century such inflammation is associated with, including depression, chronic anxiety, heart disease, autoimmune problems, and despair.”

I was actually surprised that the number one wonder of life was not our connection to God or to nature. It was “Moral Beauty.” Keltner writes: “Around the world, we are most likely to feel awe when moved by moral beauty, the first wonder of life in our taxonomy...It is tempting to think that greater wealth enables us to find more awe, in the fancy home, for example, or exclusive resort, or high-end consumer goods. In fact, the opposite appears to be true...In our daily diary studies in different countries, it was other people who were most likely to bring our participants everyday awe –actions of strangers, roommates, teachers, colleagues at work, people in the news, characters on podcasts, and our neighbors and family members.” This is about the inner beauty which reflects the image of God in each of us.

Consider this story from the streets of San Diego, California. This is the story of a veterinarian who helps the pets of the unhoused: <https://youtu.be/T4xDeyw3M0g>. What you see here not only inspires us but also leads us to give of ourselves. The consumer culture around us often tells us that getting things from others is the path to happiness and awe. But in reality, it is when we give of ourselves to help others is what leads us to a deeper sense of joy. The proof is that what makes us feel awe the most are the kind and courageous acts of others.

The path of Jesus is about learning to see the value of this amazing wonder of life: Moral beauty. When the Apostle Paul talked about the spiritual life, he believed that life in the way of Jesus Christ often flowered into acts of moral beauty. He called them the fruit of the Spirit. Let’s listen to the list from Galatians 5:22-23

“²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

The Church in Galatia was tempted to follow certain rules because a group of teachers came and told them that they needed to strictly follow the Law of Moses. Galatia was a Roman province in the highlands of central Anatolia (modern day Turkey -show map). The so-called agitators were telling the Galatian believers that they needed to be circumcised and eat kosher food. It was not enough for them to just follow Jesus. They

needed to become culturally and religiously Jewish in order to be protected from the wrath of the Roman Empire. The Jews had an exemption from the emperor for not participating in the worship celebrations of the imperial cult. The Jewish communities were a recognized entity for Rome and who participated in the imperial cult by having honorable inscriptions of the emperor in their synagogues and by participating in festivals, but they did not have to worship the emperor or participate in the imperial cult. The followers of Jesus who were Gentiles were not included in that special protection. So following the rules of the Jewish faith seemed to make sense from a practical point of view. It gave them protection from the Roman Empire, and it helped them have a clear religious identity in society.

But Paul saw the danger of such rules as jeopardizing the freedom and joy of the Galatians. The whole point of faith was to liberate people from the yokes and fears of their day so that they could embrace the goodness of life. So if the Galatians put new conditions on people's religious life, Paul saw that as a temptation to believe that one's efforts and hustling could lead to freedom which could only come from grace and mercy. Only when we consent to and trust the goodness of God's in and around us, are we truly able to know the freedom of grace. Paul founded that church and taught them that they did not need to become Jewish in order to follow the way of Christ. They believed him and were excited about the values of the kingdom of God according to Jesus Christ, but when another group came and told them that they needed to convert to Judaism, they believed them. Why did they fall for that trap? How could they not have been excited to see their church grow? Why would they have wanted to stay with the rules and practices that restricted their growth and their ability to expand the mission of Jesus? Maybe a better question is why do we fall for the same kind of trap as well? The illusion of happiness through following predictable rules and staying in one's comfort zone seemed so real. If they could just know for sure what to believe and how to behave, then for sure they will find safety and happiness.

But awe and life in the Spirit are about a different way of being in the world. They are about cultivating the deeper stuff of life. They redefine what a good life looks and feels like. When our culture tells us that those who have the most toys win, the wisdom of faith and of our modern-day scientific research expose that cultural lie for what it is. If you listen deeply to your soul, you know that moral beauty/fruit of the Spirit is so essential to our happiness and joy. Whether you listen to the ancient words of the Apostle Paul about the fruit of the Spirit or the modern words of Keltner about awe and moral beauty, the invitation is the same: Cultivate that sense of moral beauty or the fruit of the Spirit. Pursue and practice daily moral beauty. Pay attention to all the people around you who let the fruit of the Spirit grow in and through them by loving and helping others. It is tempting to be consumed by our own needs or by the belief that admiring those in power or who have celebrity status will make us happier.

How might we cultivate this sense of moral beauty awe in ourselves, in our children, and in our communities?

I would like to end with these words of Gandalf from Lord of the Rings:

“Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. I’ve found it is the small things, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Simple acts of kindness and love.” Amen.