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Beautiful trees. Can you imagine a world without them? We may take trees for granted, but without them, our air would be unsuitable for breathing. Imagine having to wear more than just a cloth mask to protect against the coronavirus, but needing an oxygen mask just to breath. Trees process the carbon dioxide we exhale and create oxygen for us to breath, and without trees we would be gasping for breath. Trees also keep water circulating by drinking 100 gallons of water through their roots and releasing it into the air as oxygen and water vapor.

Did you know that trees live longer than any other organism on earth, with the oldest ones a few hundred years shy of 5000 years old?<sup>1</sup> Ever heard of a Ginkgo Tree? It goes back 200 million years and is considered the most ancient of trees.<sup>2</sup>

Trees also help create good study habits, for students who have more greenery outside their windows have higher test scores and graduation rates.<sup>3</sup> Even a patient in the hospital seems to suffer less pain if her window faces a tree.<sup>4</sup>

Although the prophet Ezekiel did not know of these benefits of trees, he still celebrated a beautiful tree in Lebanon that provided shelter for animals and was watered by a stream. As we read his poetic imagery, we can almost see the branches reaching toward the sky, with birds nesting and creatures scurrying around underneath. Imagine trying to wrap your arms around this tree, unable to connect your hands as your reach around the trunk.

It's such a beautiful scene, one in which we might find ourselves beguiled by beauty, a phrase used by the anonymous theologian from the late 5<sup>th</sup> century who called himself Dionysius. He used the phrase "beguiled by beauty" to describe God's love for humanity. God sees creation as beautiful and is beguiled by us. That's a word I'm not sure I've ever used: beguiled—have you? It means to delight or charm. We are so filled with beauty that God is delighted with us, for "Beauty...is a link between the human spirit and the divine goodness."<sup>5</sup>

As Wendy Farley says in her forthcoming book *Beguiled by Beauty*, "When we love Divine Goodness

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more deeply, we love the world more passionately. When we love and care for the world, we fall more deeply into divine reality.” In other words, she suggests that our love for God is connected to our love for the world—they go hand in hand.

Maybe you’ve experienced those times in your life—when you’re awed by the beauty of nature. While taking a walk, you come across a scene that overwhelms you, but when you try to tell someone about it later you can’t find the words to describe the experience. Or maybe you come upon an amazing sunset and try to capture it in a photo, only to be disappointed when you show your picture to someone and realize it doesn’t depict the fullness of your experience.

When one is beguiled by beauty and you feel a deeper connection to God, the experience may seem fleeting, momentary. We often wish those moments could last forever, so we tuck the experience into our memories, recalling it during difficult times, for we know that life is not always filled with these contemplative moments filled with

awe and beauty. More often than not, we experience the difficult part of living, when life may not feel beguiled by the beautiful.

The word *beguiled* has a flipside to its meaning, for it can also mean to deceive or deprive someone. As Farley reminds us in her book “Moral ugliness scars the luminosity of our sacred goodness...What is beautiful and sacred in us cannot be destroyed, however...it can be marred.”

Ezekiel recognized this similar tension of beauty and brokenness as he compared the nations of Assyria and Egypt to the wondrous tree, for right after describing the beauty of the towering cedar, the scene shifts as the tree comes crashing down, its branches strewn across the ground. The prophet suggested,

So now the LORD God proclaims:  
Consider the fate  
of those who tower high!  
When it allowed its branches to reach up  
among the clouds,  
it became arrogant. (31:10)

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The prophet's words prompted me to wonder if that's what's happening among us now. What tree do we see as beautiful that has begun to fall? What beauty has become marred and arrogant?

In a nation filled with the beauty of many colors and races, some have been neglected and even deprived. When George Floyd cried out that he could not breathe while pinned down with a knee on his neck, those in power around him ignored his cry. I imagine the prophet Ezekiel lamenting, "It's time your tree has fallen." And yet, we also know that many police officers do strive to keep order in our communities, helping our cities remain beautiful places.

We have seen the beauty of crowds gathering all around the world proclaiming support for those who are oppressed, but when others hijack peaceful protests to serve their own violent urges, they have marred the beauty of creation.

When our nation argues over our President's use of the Bible and whether or not tear gas was used to clear the crowds for his walk to a church burned by

vandalism, we have marred our holy scriptures as we turn them into a political football to toss around.

In the midst of our being isolated due to the coronavirus, we now also face the chaos of those who bring violence to our streets. The world is still beautiful, but God's creation has been marred, and we may wonder how to respond. Farley suggests in her book that through our connection to God, we are called to respond with compassion. She wrote:

A contemplative way of life is motivated by a devotion to the welfare of others... We may feel discouraging pain as we observe the hate speech, acts of violence, the calculated indifference of our times, the horrifying hostility to truthfulness...The difficulty and crisis of the world is overwhelming.

She suggests that through the deep watering of our faith, through contemplation of God's beauty in the world, that we can learn to respond with compassion for everyone. Listen to her invitation to us:

Set your heart on radical compassion—a living desire that the suffering of others be alleviated, no matter who they are. Radical compassion

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does not impose conditions that say some are worthy of compassion and others are not. It does not limit compassion to certain groups of people.

So, what does this radical compassion look like? It invites us to offer prayer for all those who have been mistreated by those in power...while at the same time giving thanks for those who strive to maintain order in our communities.

Radical compassion invites us to recognize the beauty in those who go to the streets in protest... while also praying that a sense of calmness guides their footsteps.

Radical compassion invites us to challenge our leaders to recognize their arrogance and misuse of power...while we also see the beauty of our nation.

Radical compassion also invites us to listen to those who have been oppressed for many generations. You and I may not know how to end the evil of racism that mars the beauty of God's creation, but we can listen to those who experience it daily. We can offer our support, and together, we can strive to topple the tree of oppression, and in its place, we can plant beautiful trees around which everyone can gather and find wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.rmtrr.org/oldlist.htm](http://www.rmtrr.org/oldlist.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/blogs/facts-about-trees>

<sup>3</sup> [www.conservation.org/blog/3-things-you-didnt-know-trees-did-for-you?](http://www.conservation.org/blog/3-things-you-didnt-know-trees-did-for-you?)

<sup>4</sup> [www.elephantjournal.com/2014/05/12-surprising-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-trees/](http://www.elephantjournal.com/2014/05/12-surprising-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-trees/)

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<sup>5</sup> All following quotations from Wendy Farley, *Beguiled by Beauty*, in an excerpt, [www.worshipdesignstudio.com/beauty](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/beauty)