

Why Beauty Matters for Christians

Fall 2019 Opening Chapel

Gene C. Fant, Jr.¹

President

North Greenville University

Genesis 1:1-31

For the past week, I have seen several freshmen doing something that I often do: take photos of the lovely sunsets in Tigerville. Do we have incredible sunsets here or what?!

Last week I posted to my Instagram and my Facebook a shot of the mountains in the morning mist. I was walking my dog, the First Pup Fiona, and stopped dead in my tracks, not because she was stopping but because I was gobsmacked by the view of Paris Mountain and the intervening lesser peaks, which were wrapped in clouds. The photo is still up if you want to check it out.

Today I want to talk more than preach; in our chapels at NGU, sometimes we have evangelistic chapels challenging you to follow Christ; we have chapels that are expository from the passage identified by the speaker; and sometimes we have more academic chapels and since I'm the president, I get to pick what I want to do and today I felt led to start this first official chapel of the year with a bit more of an academic chapel message.

I am a frustrated artist. I took art all the way through high school. I was never very good but enjoyed it and particularly enjoyed the change of pace from my science classes. Art was different. It was a *different* use of my time, firing a *different* set of neurons in my brain. Even the time spent in art classes felt *different*, as if the clock operated differently in that room. I loved it.

As an adult, I still love art and not just art but THE arts: music, theater, creative writing, dance, film, and other media. This past birthday, my daughter gave me a sketchbook that I carry in my backpack on trips so I can pull it out and sketch. I was in Washington DC in July and had the incredible opportunity to sketch in the National Gallery of Art. I have been to jazz concerts in New Orleans. I have been to more ballet performances than I could have imagined as a young

¹ Gene C. Fant, Jr., Ph.D., is the eighth president of North Greenville University, serving since 2017. He is a widely published author and commentator, speaking frequently at churches, colleges, and in other settings. Some of the remarks in this address are updates of parts of his book, *The Liberal Arts: A Student's Guide* (Crossway 2012), a widely used textbook in honors and college orientation courses, addressing the philosophical and theological foundations of education at Christian institutions.

man. I go to plays several times a year. I watch films as regularly as I can. I read at least one book of poetry per quarter.

At North Greenville, we have fine arts requirements for our students. We have our appreciation courses that most students have the opportunity to take. We have cultural events requirements that almost everyone has to complete. It's part of the university's vibrancy, providing opportunities to be "cultured" but I want to talk about WHY we do this, and it's more than just the tradition that educated people are cultivated in the fine arts. I believe that it is a critical part of the Christian life and I want to challenge you to think about this a bit today.

Read Genesis 1:1-31

Why does art, or more specifically why does *beauty* matter for Christians? It matters because God set it up as one of the ways He reveals Himself to us through the created world.

In Genesis 1, we find that God creates the physical world out of nothing. On the first days of creation, God declares the physical world to be "good." When we consider the term "good," I think that we give it short shrift as to exactly how *good* this "good" actually is. Nowadays, when we say "good", we tend to mean morally good, but it is not merely good morally. Sometimes we will say that we "feel good," by which we mean that we feel "well," with good implying a sense of wholeness. Good here means something much more. It is pleasing, it is beautiful, *it is as God Himself intended it to be*. When we talk about the world in Genesis, it reflects God's authority over it as Creator: it reflects Him and informs us about him. It is ordered, it is intentional, and, yes, it is beautiful. Look at the description for the fruit in Genesis 2:9 it is "pleasing to the eye and pleasing to taste": it appeals to the senses positively.

The physical world was designed by God Himself to cause us to respond to it in a very particular way. Just as God responded to His creation by declaring that it is "good", we are to respond to it in the same way.

But let me go to that repeated word, "good," and return to the Hebrew. The word that is there is "tov", which is translated as "good" in most English translations here. But that is not really a translation that captures the fullness of the word. It is repeated again a few verses later, in 2:9, when we read that the trees that God created were "good for food"; in other words, they were pleasing, they were as God intended for food to be. But more than that, the word "tov" means "beautiful." It's good, it's pleasant, it's beautiful. Reconsider, then, God's creative action in Genesis 1. At each step, He shouts "Beautiful!" "Gorgeous!" "Wow!" "This matches perfectly My will!"

Beauty occurs at its purest when something is at its fullest correspondence with what God wills it to be. And that means that beauty—true beauty—is something that draws us closer to God.

God designed us to respond to the beauty that surrounds us because it reminds us of the God Who created us! We are hard-wired for beauty. This is, in part, because God beckons to us constantly through His created world.

When my family moved to South Florida, my son took an astronomy class and wanted to see a meteor shower. We headed west for a bit, to Lake Okeechobee, to watch the sunset and to wait for darkness to fall in an area that has almost no streetlights. We had never been there before, so we headed west on Indiantown until we ran into an observation area at Port Mayaca. We were unprepared for what we saw. The sunset was completely gorgeous. There was no wind so the water was completely still; it was the world's largest mirror. There were birds EVERYWHERE. The sunset was a marvel. None of us could speak. I became aware that simply watching this sunset was a prayer, the act of watching this was a devotional act of worship toward God. I was not worshipping the sun, I was worshipping the *Maker* of the sun. I was giving testimony to His love for us that when He created the mechanics of the universe, He was giving us a good thing not merely for the scientific processes of photosynthesis and planetary thermogenesis but for the beauty of the eyes!

Note, however, that Genesis does not stop with the creation of the physical world. It then turns to the creation of the first man, Adam, which is a manipulation of the created world to make something "of" it that is different in function "from" it. Note that God does not speak man into existence. Genesis 2 describes how He creates Adam from the dust of the earth. This is a divine Artist at work: He takes the physical world and crafts with loving care the body of the first man. The breath God places in the man is an intimate act. It is the original divine CPR.

When God creates Adam, He does not say that this is "good," as He did with the rest of creation. He says that this is "very good," intensifying the term and noting that we are set apart from the rest of creation. Humankind is "very beautiful"!

This is the description of an artist and the observer of that artist responding with enthusiastic, confident humility.

Genesis notes quite specifically that humankind alone bears the image of God, the *imago dei*, whatever that is exactly. This is where I want to go for my primary point today. Why does beauty, why does art matter for Christians? Because the ability to make and enjoy art is uniquely human, I think it reflects what God did in the creation of Adam in particular and humankind in general.

When God formed Adam, He took something material and crafted it into something special. When we create art, we are doing the same thing. No artist can create out of nothing. The painter uses paints, the sculptor uses rock or metal, the dramatist uses life itself, the poet uses words, and the musician uses sounds. Certainly other creatures can make sounds and can arrange physical objects, but humankind alone can do it in such a way as to communicate *meaning*.

When we create art, we are fulfilling part of the *creation mandate* that we have received. We are partaking in a *supernatural* act of transforming something into something new, of taking something to a new level *beyond the literal into the metaphorical*. When I watch television, I am literally watching electrons being activated by electrical impulses, but when I process *Better Call Saul* into my brain, I am moving beyond the literal, physical world into the metaphorical world of meaning. When I look at pigment on canvas, literally all I am doing is looking at smears on a surface, but when my mind translates it, I am moving into the metaphorical world of the gardens of Monet and finding peace and tranquility in the midst of my day. When I listen to the music of Handel, I am literally hearing the vibration of strings and vocal cords and air manipulations through pipes but my mind translates it into a worship experience that demands that *I rise to my feet out of respect for the majesty of the Lord of the Universe!*

You may have heard about elephants that have been given paintbrushes and have used them to paint on a canvas. These paintings have been auctioned. But these are not paintings with intent. They have no meaning. You can't go to the elephant and say, "Paint me a sunset over Palm Beach!" The elephant has no meaning to impart. It's not trying to articulate the angst of what it's like to be an elephant in a zoo.

Perhaps you have heard, as well, that a room full of monkeys with typewriters and infinite time could type out a Shakespearean play at some point just because of the statistical probability of typing out the right combination of letters. In fact, a group in England got a government grant to see what would happen in a short period of time. The result was that the monkeys destroyed the computers and peed and pooped all over the place.² Even if they would have typed out something like Shakespeare, as Benjamin Wicker and Jonathan Witt have pointed out, the right combination of letters achieved randomly is not, *per se*, Shakespeare because they have no intentionality: they have no meaning. A sequence of letters in a particular order saying "To be or not to be" is meaningless if it is random. It has no more meaning than a non-sensical ordering of letters. The meaning is only there *if the meaning is there*, which means that *intent* is what qualifies something as being made rather than just randomly falling together. Art, then, *defies the second law of thermodynamics* that all things, left alone, will seek a lower form of energy. In art, we not only take something to a higher level of material being, we also take it to a higher level of meaning!

This is why we find ourselves weeping over a beautiful scene in a movie, or laughing at a sitcom, or staring at a painting speechlessly, we are participating in meaning. We are participating in *being human* in a way that transcends our world because God created us to be different, to be human!

This is also why the clock sometimes works differently when we have an encounter with beauty. It's as if time stands still. The ancients terms this an ecstatic experience and I think there's something to it. The word "ecstasy" means, literally, "to stand outside," metaphorically to leave one's body and stand outside of time and physicality. It's used in the New Testament,

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3013959.stm> ; accessed July 5, 2016.

in fact, in passages such as Luke 5:26 and Acts 3:10, when the miraculous occurs and people feel like they have had a glimpse of God's perfect will of redeeming the physical world. In Act 3:10, in fact, the miracle occurs at the "Beautiful Gate" of the temple! Beauty allows us to confront and combat the relentless physical timeline that sometime seduces us into believing that the moment is all there is. Beauty transcends the moment and reminds us that there is more than mere physicality.

I was watching some interviews with the lunar astronauts this summer as a part of the celebration of the 1969 moon landing and one of the most common phrases used by the astronauts is "IT WAS BEAUTIFUL!" Not scientific, not astronomical, but rather an aesthetic response: "IT WAS BEAUTIFUL!"

Now, the Church has always had a difficult time dealing with art. This is because of its corruption by the pagans. We can understand this by the light of Romans 1:25-26, which warns us about worshipping the created rather than the Creator. We see this all around us, not only through idol worship (which still exists, by the way) but even in how museums and fine arts halls are designed to look like churches and cathedrals that replace so-called irrelevant churches. This is why even recently a so-called chaplain at a secular university asked why we couldn't just get rid of religion and replace it with art, and get rid of clergy and replace them with artists.

But art is not the territory of the godless! Rightly understood, it's the rightful arena for exploring our relationships with God, with the created world, and with one another! Art is rooted in the beauty of God!

Think about this for a moment. Imagine a beautiful piano with a pianist preparing to play a concert with a terrific concerto. The pianist has spent years preparing for her craft. The event has been well-advertised and the concert space is amazing, sort of like this chapel. The pianist comes out to applause and sits on the bench. With a hush in the room, she begins to play, *pianissimo* at first, then *forte*. But suddenly you realize that something is wrong: a string on the piano is just slightly out of tune. 87 keys are correct, but one is off and it's one that is used just frequently enough to be noticed but not to be dominant. As the piece continues, though, the mistuned note becomes more noticeable. The flawed note is out of tune and as the concerto progresses, it becomes almost all that we hear; in the end, it mars everything and has ruined the evening.

God created the world to be **in tune, in balance**. Sin came into the world and threw it off balance. When we are confronted with this imbalance, we long for something to restore to us the balance that God designed. It's not just obsessive compulsive behavior, it's an inner spiritual design that cries out, Will someone please restore the balance that has been lost?! And when someone does, we are confronted with peace. This is the Gospel according to art: sometimes art confronts us with the need for restoration of balance and sometimes it provides

us with a picture of that restoration.³ A concerto in tune stirs us and lifts up our hearts, souls, and minds!

One more point: our culture sometimes teaches us that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Certainly there is some room for beauty being somewhat subjective, but at its root, this is an untrue statement. Beauty is rooted in the nature and character of God! Just as truth is not in the eye of the evaluator alone, art is not in the eye of the beholder alone. It is rooted in the *beauty* of God!

When I was a child, I loved when movies started that had the lion's head on them, where it would roar majestically. I think it meant that the Three Stooges were coming on! That studio was MGM and the lion's head was surrounded by a ribbon of film that was inscribed with these words: "*Ars Gratia Artis*" which means Art for the Sake of Art, or, "We make movies for the beauty of the movies, not for the audiences or the critics; we are true to ourselves and our artistic vision."

Art, however, is not to be conducted merely for the sake of art, but it is an act that is *rooted in God's love for us* and should be conducted and enjoyed in the context of *glory to God!* This is why Bach signed all of his musical compositions with the letters "S. D.G.", "*Sola Deo Gloria*," "Glory be to God alone." By enjoying art, we are enjoying God! We are, as John Piper once put it, Christian hedonists who have been designed to glorify God and enjoy Him, and His loving works, forever.

I want to challenge you to invite more art into your lives. Our campus is filled with art. Have you seen the stained glass in Craft-Hemphill? The sculptures on the lawn? The mural on the side of Donnan? The sunsets on the west side of campus! Go visit the art museum in downtown Greenville. It's FREE. Guys, that's a date that's both cheap AND spiritual. Go to concerts in the various spaces. To the plays. To poetry readings.

Further, I want to challenge you to invite more beauty into your lives. Sit on a swing and watch the change in the sky's colors at dawn or at dusk. Watch the herons or the egrets feed in the pond near the residence halls. Watch the leaves turning colors as they spread down the mountainsides near campus. Smell the plants that give off incredible perfumes. God has planted a veritable museum of delights all around you as a loving gift to you and to me. Enjoy God by enjoying His beauty.

³ See my book *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative* (B & H Academic 2010); in this, I have several chapters that are on aesthetics and the overall restoration principle that seems to undergird so much of the created world.

For further consideration:

- Gene C. Fant, Jr. *The Liberal Arts: A Student's Guide* (Crossway 2012). Includes a chapter on the arts that expands portions of this presentation.
- Makoto Fujimura. *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life* (IVP 2017).

You can search the terms “theological aesthetics,” “Christian aesthetics,” or “beauty as an argument for Christianity” for a wide-ranging discussion of thoughts and expert scholars.