

A Good Life

James 3:13-18

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational Church

23 September 2018

Note: Part of our *Inspire* series in collaboration with the Joslyn Art Museum.

This sermon inspired by *The Weeders* by Jules Breton.

This is one of my favourite paintings at the Joslyn Art Museum—*The Weeders* by Jules Breton. The museum information on the painting describes it this way:

Scattered across the plain and silhouetted against the sun setting on the horizon, several women on their knees pull weeds from the soil. A single standing figure pauses from her task to look out upon the serene beauty of the evening. By capturing the delicate mauves and roses of the twilight sky and the simplicity of these stooped figures hugging the earth, Breton transforms the activity of common field labor into a scene of poetic reverie.

As I said, this is one of my favourite paintings in our local art museum, and you will learn a few more of my favourites during this autumn's worship series we are calling "Inspire." What inspires you? Particularly, what inspires you to be good?

During this series we will explore how the enjoyment of art can be a spiritual exercise drawing us closer to God and other theological themes the art might suggest.

I've long wanted to do a series like this. Back when I was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Oklahoma, I visited Paris and stayed with my friend Scott Stearman who is an American Baptist pastor who was then serving an American congregation in Paris. Rough gig. Now he is the American Baptist representative to the United Nations.

In one of our many delightful conversations that week staying with Scott and his wife Cecilia, Scott told me that one of his favourite things to do in a sermon was to reference an artwork at the Louvre. His congregants were regularly in the museum, as visiting family and friends always wanted to go there. Or they would visit the museum on a Sunday afternoon after he mentioned a painting.

I thought this sounded marvelous, and I squirreled the idea away. Somehow in my decades of preaching I've never done it though.

Shortly after Michael and I moved here we met Jack Becker, the current director of the Joslyn and his husband Lester. Jack and Lester moved here around the same time we did. And though we don't hang out often, we do get together now and then. Jack and I had many times discussed this idea of a collaboration between art museum and church on a sermon series.

So, this year, I finally decided to do it. And the next six weeks you'll see the fruit of that idea.

Jules Breton grew up in an agriculturally rich region of Northern France. His “early close ties to the land and the peasantry were to be the principal inspiration for his devotion to rural customs throughout his career,” as one commentator described.

The most famous of his works is *The Gleaners*, which is similar to this one, and represents peasant women gleaning the grain left over from the harvest, an activity with deep biblical allusions and rooted in an ancient concept of justice—that the farmer should leave some of the harvest for the poor and needy.

His painting *The Song of the Lark* provided the title for Willa Cather’s novel and is often the cover of printed editions.

And then there is this great work, painted in 1861, which we are lucky to have here in Omaha. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York owns a smaller copy.

Breton’s images resonant with the agricultural life that is the foundation of Nebraska society and culture.

Breton idealized and romanticized his subjects and their rural, agricultural life, drawing upon classical traditions of painting. The Italian Renaissance artist Raphael was one of his influences. But his paintings were also inspired by a political and social ideal and were intended to comment upon issues of his day. He supported the liberal cause in the Revolution of 1848, creating paintings that showed the hunger and the misery of the peasant class.

He became one of the most widely known and acclaimed artists of his time.

Jules Breton wrote,

I have always had a passion for the Beautiful. I have always believed that the aim of art was to realize the expression of the Beautiful. I believe in the Beautiful—I feel it, I see it! If the man in me is often a pessimist, the artist, on the contrary, is pre-eminently an optimist.

Of course the Good, the Beautiful, and the True have been linked together since the philosophy of Plato. And in this work of Breton’s we get not only the beautiful image of a beautiful scene, but a depiction of a good life. So, can art inspire us to goodness?

Iris Murdoch, the British novelist and philosopher thought so. In one of her great essays, “The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts,” she wrote a line that has deeply influenced my own thinking, “The enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue.”

How can enjoying art make us a better person?

Anil Gomes, analyzing Murdoch’s thesis explains it this way, “Art, like prayer, draws us away from the self towards an appreciation of that which is good. In this way, great art makes one a better person.”

Murdoch believed art was “a place in which the nature of morality could be *seen*.” With emphasis upon that last word. We can actually see, perceive goodness in great art.

She believes that when we truly enjoy a piece of art, we surrender ourselves to its authority. We see things we would not have otherwise seen. We even learn to see in new ways and from new perspectives. We acknowledge something outside of ourselves that draws us outside of our selfish instincts. Enjoyment of art is the opposite of being selfish.

And so the person who enjoys art is inspired to humility.

Today's epistle lesson is about sowing seeds of peace and harvesting righteousness by living a good life, one lived in gentleness and wisdom and without bitterness, envy, selfishness, and dishonesty. The kind of life that God desires for all of God's beloved children.

This description so closely fits Iris Murdoch's depiction of the humble person who she says is "the kind of [person] who is most likely of all to become good."

And a painting such as this one seems intentionally designed for precisely this purpose—to evoke in our minds a classic and romantic image of a good, humble life so that we might live more justly and beautifully.

Art can do that. It can calm our anxieties and inspire our humility by picturing for us the good life.

And, so, enjoying art can be a spiritual practice, like prayer. Join with us this autumn as we engage together in this spiritual practice. How will we be inspired?