



CONTENTS

- 01 | On Beauty and Art **8**
- 02 | On Beauty and Identity **28**
- 03 | On Beauty and Generosity **50**
- 04 | On Beauty and Vulnerability **70**
- 05 | On Beauty and Mystery **96**
- 06 | On Beauty and Justice **118**
- 07 | On Beauty and Changing the World **136**



INTRODUCTION

What is beauty? For most, beauty describes a store’s cosmetics section or a passing compliment. It is often associated with words like *attractive*, *pretty*, or *handsome*. It is an ideal we aspire to, and a pleasure we occasionally enjoy.

We all have experienced beauty in these ways. Still, these common categories hardly ever engage the incredible depth, significance, and possibilities of beauty. As we encounter and discover God, we are inevitably led to further unpack our sense of beauty. The scriptures are full of stories, revelations, and teachings that can only be described as—*beautiful*.

This sacred connection between beauty and God is especially relevant for our world today. As a society, we often describe God as *true* and *good*. We use *beauty* less often—and we struggle to articulate the intuitive relationship between it and the things of God: calling, spirituality, mission, and more. This book serves as a starting point to bridge the gap.

The word *beautiful* reveals itself most notably in Mark 14:1-11, *The Story of the Woman with*

the Alabaster Jar. Amid the hostility of the onlookers, Jesus says: “Leave her alone, why are you bothering her? She has done a *beautiful* thing to me.” The word he uses for *beauty*, in the original Greek, is *kalos*. The depth of *kalos* escapes us. It can be defined as moral goodness or aesthetic beauty, and in this case, *beautiful* as an outward sign of an inward goodness.

What compels Jesus to single out this act as *kalos*? What does the woman’s act mean? Why are onlookers filled with disgust? In this book, we explore the woman’s act and its quality of beauty. We delve into the larger questions and themes in this story: art, identity, generosity, vulnerability, mystery, justice, and changing the world. And we meditate on the vast importance of beauty in our spiritual practice, creative work, and collective future.

Through this exploration, we hope to cultivate a deeper understanding of beauty and its implications for our lives. May it lead us more fully into the presence of God. Amen.



THE STORY OF THE WOMAN WITH THE ALABASTER JAR

¹ Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.

² “But not during the festival,” they said, “or the people may riot.” ³ While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. ⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume?” ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly. ⁶ “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” ⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” ¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. ¹¹ They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

– Mark 14:1-11 NIV

01

On Beauty
and Art



What makes art beautiful? Creatives, philosophers, and mystics have always sought to explore and answer this question. Beauty is universally felt—and yet perpetually escapes our paradigms. When artists follow Jesus, this question takes on new dimensions.

The exploration of beauty in art has long been embedded within our spiritual history. Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* or Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, for example, depicted divine and higher ideals—they continue to be hailed as beautiful today. But grandiose Renaissance-era paintings and baroque, embellished cathedrals are no longer our norm. As times have shifted, artistic “beauty” is not so rigidly defined. In the creative spirit, modern art provides chambers for rediscovery and redefinition. As a culture and as creatives, we are tasked with forging fresh frameworks to answer the question of beauty today.

Though this is a lofty, multilayered conversation, the scriptures provide deep meaning to ground it. In Mark 14, the story of the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar serves as a point of departure for our collective understanding of beauty and art.

FEEDING OUR SOULS

Humans are more than physical creatures; we are *soul* beings. Just as our body experiences hunger and requires feeding, play, and rest, our souls need similar nourishment and care as well. Without it, we do not inhabit the totality of human experience. We instead become detached, disembodied, and divided. Without soul care, our physical lives and reality appear stale and purposeless. But with it, our souls guide us and our communities into the new life that Jesus often spoke of.

We do not find much “soul food” in our industrialized world today. Our culture is utilitarian-forward and fast-paced, bent on accumulating capital and producing goods. This is not necessarily wrong, but we should remember that the soul was never designed to thrive in such a context. We cannot reduce the soul to a means of production or a fuel tank to shuttle our bodies between to-do items. Rather, the soul is a world within us—brimming with meaning, life, and reason for even moving in the first place. And art, in its many purposes, has a vital role in *feeding* our souls.

In this story, the unnamed woman creates *performance* art. She moves her body into an unlikely space, using alabaster and spike-nard as articles of anointing. The act is a multi-sensory artistic experience: the clatter of alabaster fragments falling on the floor, the penetrating smell of perfume, and the glimmering droplets

of oil coating his skin and hair. And though profoundly sensory, her art is also soulful. It reaches beyond the physical, and touches deeper realities.

When the woman breaks the jar on Jesus’ head, she is doing more than anointing him: she, quite literally, shatters the utility and value of the jar. The jar can no longer be used as a dowry. The jar can no longer be sold for money or a noble cause. The woman renders it *useless*, subverting the physical worlds of reason and function.

This is the role of the artist. We are called to create and use things in the physical world to move people beyond the physical. We are invited to feed souls. Pencils are merely graphite—a crystalline form of carbon. Canvases are nothing but strands of cotton, plainly woven together. Singing is the result of vibrating ligaments in our larynx. We artists deal with utterly physical things. And yet, it is our sacred duty to translate these physical materials into symbol, meaning, and nourishment for the human soul.

It follows, of course, that artists must be first to embody soulful living before creatively calling others to do so. We are to be thoroughly and reflectively immersed in our inner lives as well, feeding our souls with regular prayer, contemplation, and play. As we do, we receive nutrients for the creative journey. We can paint, sing, and perform beyond the physical, because we ourselves have traveled there. And in doing so, we create art that is beautiful.



FUTURE-MAKING

The burdens of everyday living give us little time or space to be people of optimism. Individually, we are weighed down by obligations, toils, and limitations. Collectively, communities are broken, steeped in poverty and inequality. The world of *Shalom*—what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls a “communal flourishing of peace and justice”¹—feels far away.

Amidst these realities, it is the artist’s role to remind us that beauty is still all around us. That *Shalom* is indeed a future worth fighting for—but also a *present* worth accessing. The artist helps us see beyond our bleak realities into what is still possible. We give the world slivers of hope. We lead them, along with ourselves, into the optimism we cannot yet see.

When we engage in art-making, we are involved in future-making. We are showing people a new way of living. This divine privilege is what gives art the opportunity to create beauty.

Art Leads

No matter the piece or practice we prefer, we are always leading people toward something with our art. We must regularly ask ourselves: what are we leading them toward? What future are





we making? We might hope it involves giving, thriving, and flourishing—rather than despair and dispassion. Our chosen aesthetic need not be overly cheerful or bright, but we ought to make in a way that ultimately orients our world toward restoration. Through our art, we show the possibility of what could be. Through our art, we stand on the frontlines of making and calling forth *Shalom*.

“Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” – Mark 14:9 NIV

In this story, the woman leads us into a more beautiful future. Her performance bursts with generosity, vulnerability, and courage. Jesus acknowledges her art, making a statement of the future that is intended for us, today. He understands and elevates her art as precious. It will reverberate into the lives of future generations. As artists today, we stand in the legacy and example of this unnamed woman. She is our predecessor. And we follow her work, making things that will echo the good news of beauty for generations to come.

Encountering Resistance

Not everyone will be ready to enter our imaginative futures. Humans are habitual creatures, resistant to change. We obsess over structures, routines, and patterns. These are not bad things. In many ways, they help us function and sustain through a changing world. However, beautiful futures cannot be realized or inhabited when we are fixed in the status quo.



When we encounter the woman's performance art with the alabaster jar, we have the gift of perspective. We grasp its significance. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection have already happened. We know how the story ends. But, for those in the room that day, there is no such perspective. They are stuck in their old, isolated ways of seeing the world. Can we blame them?

Jesus sees beyond our current paradigms, and he invites us to do the same. He sees that the woman is preparing him for his future-death. He sees this moment's significance in a global future that the others in the room cannot comprehend. And he sees beauty.

Future-making is a difficult task. As we strive towards beauty-making, we will inevitably unsettle individuals, cultures, and systems. In these moments, we must remember God's promise.

"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." – Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV

Wherever we find ourselves, God has personally gone ahead of us. Jesus is the ultimate future-maker. We can never outpace him. As we co-create the future, we partner with the Holy Spirit to reimagine, re-work, and restore the world through our art.

BEAUTY CONNECTS

Beautiful art connects. Rather than ripping apart, beauty bends everything toward inclusivity and reconciliation. When we encounter beautiful art, we become *connected*: to ourselves, to humanity, and to the divine.

Connecting to Self

The woman with the alabaster jar is deeply connected to herself. In her art-making, she immerses herself holistically into her creative practice. Her body detaches itself from gender norms, the petty rebuke of the crowd, and the alleged waste of her materials. She instead looks inward, silently connected with Jesus. Her performance is best described as bold. Her inner contentment, resolve, and love propel her to create in an unfiltered way.

Art can open our hearts and souls to our truest selves. Artist Agnes Martin says, “But with regard to the inner life of each of us it may be of great significance... If we can know our response, see in ourselves what we have received from a work, that is the way to the understanding of truth and all beauty.”²



Art-making is hardly ever a logical, linear process. It is full of twists and turns, setbacks and small-wins—it is a process predicated on exploration and discovery. And if we are patient, committed, and passionate about the process, we will surely discover moments of beauty. And we will come to more intimately know and befriend ourselves.

The experience of knowing and connecting with oneself unequivocally requires stillness and silence. Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, writes, “Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born.”³

Our world is replete with noise. As artists, we are attuned—in small and large ways—to the opinions of others. Yet, as followers of Jesus, we begin our art-making detached from the noise—and connected to ourselves. In silence and solitude, we begin to hear and feed our souls. And our creative practice begins in the original creative practice: our own making in the image of God.

Connecting to Humanity

We live in a fractured, hurt, and divided society. Groups mobilize against groups. Communities stand against communities. In this highly polarized world, the artist is invited to make work that connects humanity together.

Artists are inherent bridge-builders. We are purveyors of mutuality, relationship, and interdependence. It is typical for artists to live on the frayed edges of various groups, cultures, and communities,

familiar with the fate of never fitting in. And as we live on these margins, we artists face a unique choice.

We can choose bitterness and resentment, creating work that reflects our own dissension and the gaping ruptures of our world. Or, we can view our edge-lives as a gift, using our talents and abilities to make work that becomes a bridge for the various edges we occupy. We can mend differences and, ultimately, heal wounds.

In this story, the woman bridges communities together. Through her art, she—a woman, lowly regarded in her society—is connected with a male Jew and rabbi, Jesus. She also connects with future generations, as Jesus declares her significance. And in an unlikely way, she is connected to the judgmental, disgusted on-lookers. Of course, their reaction is marked by disdain. But her performance calls to them, across the divide that they cannot see past. It beckons them to see beauty. It urges them to deeper love, generosity, and mystery. And while they do not receive or reciprocate her gift, it nonetheless connects her to them as an unlikely teacher. We are similarly invited to make art that connects rather than divides, that is in the service of others, that shows the beauty in all of humanity.

Connecting to God

As humans, we receive art through our physical senses. We see, hear, smell, taste, and touch art. And yet, we almost always perceive art to be far more than merely a physical experience. Art has the power to penetrate our souls, to break down our guarded hearts, and to give us new perspective.



In this story, the woman literally interacts with the divine. Through the humble physicality of the jar, the potent perfume, the suffusing oil—the divine is revealed. Through this anointing, the woman acknowledges Jesus as *Messiah*, the King of the Jews. She joins in the legacy of Samuel anointing Saul and David as kings, offering a spiritual and political revealing of the Savior.

This same “revealing of the divine” is offered to all of us who make. Of the many ills rising from our disembodied, disconnected reality, our distance from God is the worst. We are quick to feel this distance. Our physical senses experience simple glimpses and moments—fragments of a divine God and world that we long for.

It is the role of the artist to piece these fragments together, and discover the God who is in everything. We need not be explicit or obvious in our depictions of God—but we do bear a responsibility to demonstrate that the divine is in “everyday,” “everywhere” things. As we feed souls, create futures, and make connections through our art, we ultimately give people eyes and ears to perceive the God who is all around us. This is a holy work. Amen.