

Edwards for us: The holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness

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The Puritans were earnest folk. They had little patience with those who had no depth, no deep conviction, no profound concern with what God was doing in their lives. They wanted everyone to become a believer, of course—to assent to the reality of God and God’s providence, justice and compassion, and thus find a confidence for living in this precarious world. Those in drift could not do that; they were like a bug on a leaf in a river during a storm. They had no sense of where they were or where they were going.

Jonathan Edwards was, to put it mildly, religiously serious, and he was so from an early age. He is so interesting for contemporary theologians because he developed a balance of brilliant intellectual honesty, fidelity to the biblical traditions, and an openness to new insight brought by personal experience.

He reports that it was some verses in Paul’s Letters to Timothy that helped him sort his faith out. Paul writes about how as a young man he himself had been something of a holy terror, but when he received God’s mercy he learned of the “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.” He was so grateful that he could write: “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.” That text, Edwards said, changed his life.

Three themes are embedded in this story about Edwards’s development that are pertinent to the work he did the rest of his life and to a serious faith. Those themes are free will, love and glory.

When we are drifting through life, or being cynical, the question arises: Can we simply will to change our ways? When we feel far from God, can we just decide to reestablish a relationship? Of course, in daily life, we often have real choices—whether I should go out with this person, whether I should accept this job, whether I should use what money I have this way or that. But do we have the will to

alter the basic course of our lives?

Many people, when they look back on the choices they have made, see that many “free” decisions were in fact in the cards before the decisions were made. Often we just have to sort out what is really going on in life. And that is the issue: How deeply embedded in the conditions of our lives is the freedom of our wills?

We need to honor and protect our political freedoms, and hold people morally and in some cases legally accountable for their decisions; but we ought not overestimate the will’s powers. The will needs guidance and support from the mind and the heart, and, even more, from a power beyond ourselves. AA knows this, as do all the effective self-help groups. It is not all self-help! All the great religions also point to a power beyond our own will. And the believer comes to know that support and power can come to us, by God’s grace.

Edwards knew how complicated this simple fact can be. One of his most famous works is *The Freedom of the Will*, in which he argues that the will is truly free when it is in accord with what God intends for us; otherwise it loses itself in drift or cynical arrogance. This approach puts the issue in a theological framework. Many today fear profound religious commitment as loss of autonomy, and others fear that it breeds terror. But that is not what Edwards thought profound religion is about. True religion, he thought, energizes the will. And he thought true religion always involves love and beauty.

No one is against love, I take it. But there is a good bit of confusion about what the Puritans thought about love. Essentially, love is the inner power that draws persons together and bonds them to each other and to the right and the good. It shows up in many forms. It appears in acts of charity when we give to those in need. It draws us to particular persons whom we recognize as a gift to us from God. Most important, it takes shape when we discern the love of God for us and respond in love of God. In all these forms, love gives shape to the moral life, in that we become bound into appropriate covenants of mutual obligation and fidelity under God. True love penetrates the heart and reorients the will.

It is sometimes said that the Puritans were prudish about sexual love and had a repressive view of sexuality. This is simply not so. Some people, reacting against the prudery of the Victorian era and the moralistic legalism into which some churches had devolved, blamed the Puritans, and tried to liberate sexuality from all religious constraint. It is as if they set aside a zone of life and said, “No religious ethics

allowed here.” Some have tried this in other areas also. Well, they have been successful in many respects, but the liberation has gone in unanticipated directions. It has brought us record numbers of divorces, absentee dads, troubled kids and the scourge of AIDS. Do we really want to liberate ourselves from all religious constraints?

Puritans had a dim view of extramarital relations, but that was because they had a very high view of sexuality in marriage. Love, like the will, needs boundaries and channels; it needs a trusting and trustworthy context. The scholar Edmund Leites has studied hundreds of Puritan sermons about love and sex (there are many), and he has documented how much they preached about the duties to desire and how they saw the marriage bed as the “other altar of love.” (The communion altar, of course, is the first.) But they also knew that love, if it is to be sacred, needs a deep set of moral rudders. It needs to be modeled on the way God loves us. For nurturing awareness of the love of God, a vibrant community of faith is needed. For nurturing the love between persons, a faithful marriage is the context.

If and when love becomes unfocused or distorted, it takes moral and spiritual renewal to correct its course. It may sometimes even need legal limits. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, a feminist Christian scholar, has reported that, according to court records, one of the major causes of being put in the stocks in the Puritan era was violence toward one’s family or otherwise irresponsible behavior with regard to one’s family.

The Puritans believed that a marriage needs constant grace and repeated renewal. Without it, both religion and sex can become like the human will without God: they can fall into the powerlessness of drift or become hardened into cynicism. They can show up as half-way commitments, or be locked into purely opportunistic behaviors. Could it be that a little dose of Puritanism could be a corrective to the licentiousness of our times? Not too much, but a little? Is this area of life not a holy passion, in which the radiance of God’s purposes and design of life can shine through? Edwards thought so, and he thought it was a beautiful thing.

This brings us to our last point—beauty. The text from Timothy that touched Edwards refers to the “honor and glory” of God, and these terms are related to beauty. It is interesting that the Hebrew of the Bible has no single word for “beauty.” The word *kabôd* is often translated as “glory” or “radiance.” Our hymns have used “splendor,” but the word can also mean “weighty,” in the sense of something being

really important, and thus being worthy of “honor.” And the Greek of the New Testament uses *kalos*, which also means “comely,” “charming” or “attractive.” Edwards knew his biblical languages, and thought that God’s way of relating to the world and to our lives involved an aesthetic as well as a willing and a loving aspect.

Edwards believed that everyone could, at some level, understand this. We might say today that this is why, in one sense or another, everyone is “spiritual” even if not all are “religious.” The natural person can recognize the glory of nature in spite of natural disasters, pests and disease; the splendor of the cultivated arts, especially music, in spite of art’s occasional pomp and pretense; and the radiance of virtuous persons in spite of the flaws we can find in the best of them. He could see these beautiful qualities in the Indians. These qualities are magnificent, and are to be honored wherever they occur in God’s world.

Edwards lived in an agricultural era, and he knew that nature had to be tended to manifest its best. Humans had to be stewards of creation—and that meant cultivating its possibilities to make its potential splendor manifest. Nothing so captures Edwards’s message as his sense of the beauty of God. It is the beauty of God, he said, “that will melt and humble the hearts of men . . . draw them to God, and effectually change them.” Moreover:

A sight of the awesome greatness of God may overpower our strength and be more than we can endure; but if the moral beauty of God be hid, the enmity of the heart will remain in its full strength, no love can be enkindled, [our will] will not be effectual . . . but will remain inflexible; whereas the first glimpse of the moral and spiritual glory of God shining into the heart produces all these affects, as it were with omnipotent power, which nothing can withstand.

Edwards knew the holiness of beauty, and the beauty of holiness. If you do not already know this, you may want to find out more about Edwards. It could even be that you will be grasped by what he saw. You could change your will, your loves, your sense of God. You could find the source, the norm, the power that allows our promises to be fulfilled and our covenants to be complete.

This article is adapted from a sermon Max L. Stackhouse gave at a conference in Massachusetts marking the tricentennial of Jonathan Edwards's birth. The conference was sponsored by the Berkshire Institute for Theology and the Arts and was hosted by the Stockbridge Congregational Church, where Edwards was once

pastor.