

The Art of Living: Spiritual Meditations on *Theo of Golden*

Session 3

October 20, 2026

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"Asher, thank you for letting me come by. I see now that you do more than portraits."

Asher shrugged. "I try. Portraits have definitely been my bread and butter over the years, and I'm always honored when somebody asks me to do one for them. I love the challenge of drawing faces. Plus, I have a wife and daughter and a mortgage and all that, and portraits pay the bills. But I like to always have something I'm working on for the sheer pleasure of being creative. That one," Asher pointed to the river scene on the easel, "is my present diversion. Ones like that usually don't sell, but they pay me in other ways. They help keep me in love with what I do."

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Asher looked at the old man. "Theo, I get the impression you've thought about this before. What do you think makes for good art?"

Theo rested his chin on his right thumb and placed a bent index finger over his bottom lip.

"Yes, I *have* thought about it. In fact, I've thought about it a great deal. And I've asked others about it. But I don't know if I have an answer either. Other than this. It might not make a lot of sense, but for anything to be good, truly good, there must be love in it. I'm not even sure I know fully what that means, but the older I get, the more I believe it. There must be love for the gift itself, love for the subject being depicted or the story being told, and love for the audience. Whether the art is sculpture, farming, teaching lawmaking, medicine, music, or raising a child, if love is not in it – at the very heart of it – it might be skillful, marketable, or popular but I doubt it is truly good. Nothing is what it's supposed to be if love is not at the core."

- Michael Leunig, *A Common Prayer* "'Love one another and you will be happy.' It's as simple and as difficult as that. There is no other way. Amen."

- Chapter 26, pp. 152-157

On the following Sunday, a crisp, cloudless morning, Theo ate a small breakfast, stopped by the Chalice for a newspaper and a coffee, and then walked to St. James for the eleven o'clock gathering. A sign at the rear doorway asked for silence upon entry. As if to reinforce that request, a psalmic passage was written in elegant script, "Be still and know that I am God." [Psalm 46:10]

Theo entered the sanctuary and took a seat as others trickled in.

The architecture of the place inside and out was a celebration of lines and angles, of stone and wood and glass, of mundane materials used majestically in celebration of order and mystery.

It was a manifesto of beauty.

The designers had made a thousand small decisions to ensure the grandeur and wholeness of the finished work. How many souls had been stilled and comforted in that hallowed space over the decades? [Where prayer has been valid]

Sitting there, Theo imagined the men who built the structure: the muscles and motives, the sweat and swearing, the tools and tempers that, taken together, had produced so remarkable

an edifice. He pondered the stresses that held arches in place, those and other invisible forces that, properly understood and employed, brought grace and symmetry to such places.

He gave thought to the history contained in and represented by this single structure: the baptisms and burials, the marriages and messages, the hearts mournful and glad and bored and worshipful that had filled the long benches over the generations.

A reverent hush filled the room as the organist played a prelude to the morning's service. The music was conducive to contemplation, or sleep, depending on one's disposition at the moment.

As the last note of the song faded, Father Lundy rose to welcome the congregants and make his opening remarks. He had just begun reading a passage of scripture when, to the complete and utter shock of everyone present, a loud disturbance erupted at the back of the room. The sound of breaking glass, a falling vase, sounded through the high rafters.

That shock was heightened when the words being spoken became audible and distinguishable.

"You get your blue blood hands off of me, you pin-striped whore of Babylon! Touch me again, and I'll ride this Noble Invention right over your hypocritical ass! Get out of my way!"

An usher, fighting an onset of total astonishment and embarrassment, was trying to restrain a wild-eyed woman wearing a blue hat from bringing her bicycle into the sanctuary. She had forced her way through the door, bicycle in tow, and was intent on joining the congregation assembled there.

Or, more precisely, intent on finding and joining Theo.

Every head turned her way. A number of the leaders and others moved immediately toward the disturbance and encircled the intruder. Any semblance of order or sanctity fled the room as Ellen, not to be deterred by another act of bureaucracy, railed against her opposition. She was equal parts prophet and whirling dervish.

"Your sign outside says 'visitors welcome.' Well, St. Smartass, I'm a visitor, so get our of my way. You touch my property one more time and see what happens, you throne-sniffing Pharisee. Get the hell out of my way! All of you. Right now!" [The Episcopal Church Welcomes You]

Her fist was raised and ready.

St. James had never experienced, and likely never would again, such a display of righteous indignation on its premises. Some of the congregation watched or ducked down cautiously behind their pews, horror-stricken at this unexpected visit from an uninvited guest. After all, there had been killings in churches in recent years. Others, who recognized the woman from having seen her around town, were curious and even amused that an actual sinner had entered the elegant premises of James, the saint. The biblically literate among them might have expected a finger to start writing on the wall at any moment: Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin. [Daniel 5:24-28, Aramaic]

Panicked cell phone calls, many from the sanctuary floor, were made to 911 with the expectation that, in a matter of seconds or minutes, officers would arrive, arrest the troublemaker, and restore dignity to the meeting. In the meantime, Father Lundy implored parishioners to remain seated and be calm. Few paid him any attention. The main event was clearly at the back of the sanctuary. Across the room, people gaped, craned their necks, and whispered excitedly about the scene unfolding before them.

And then came a voice.

"Darling. Ellen. Ellen, darling. Hello, dear. Good morning, dear." Mrs. Ocie Van Blarcum, her white hair shining like a nimbus, stepped between Ellen and the others and touched her hand.

There was no sense of alarm or urgency in her voice. But her forceful presence made it abundantly clear who was now in charge.

Immediately, the confusion began to subside, affirmation that a gentle answer (still) turns away wrath.

“Ellen, please come sit with me, sweetheart. We’ll find a place for your bicycle. Would you like to sit with me and my family?”

Ellen stood silently for a moment, still defensive against the bodies that surrounded her. It took a moment and several hard blinks, but eventually a glimmer of recognition filled her gaze. Her hands relaxed.

“Hello, Miz Ocie.”

Mrs. Van Blarcum was a matriarch of St. James, a venerated and lifelong member whose family name was empaneled in the grand window that covered most of the sanctuary’s west wall. She knew well and lived devotedly the ethic of the eponymous James: “Faith without works is dead. [James 2:26]” She was not merely capable of saintliness. She was saintly. Some would have argued she was a saint.

While she fit in comfortably in the highbrow world of St. James, Ocie Van Blarcum was no stranger to the soup lines and homeless shelters in Golden. She and Ellen had seen each other often at such places.

She understood the difference between “troubled mind” and “troublemaker,” and she recognized in Ellen all the signs of the former – a wounded soul, a lost sheep, a “least of these, my brethren.” [Matthew 25:31-46]

The sound of sirens had grown in strength until they were just outside the building. Clearly, more than one police vehicle had responded to the disturbance. Mrs. Van Blarcum instructed several of the ushers and vestry members, in a tone of voice that would not be defied, to tell the policemen to leave. Her eyes blazed with an authoritative “right nowness.”

“Ellen, come this way, darling. My family is right here. On that row. We have room for you.”

Ellen shook her head, “No, ma’am. I’m looking for Mr. Theo.”

At that moment, he smiled and stepped forward into the small space that belonged to Ellen and Mrs. Van Blarcum.

“And Mr. Theo has been looking for you,” he said cheerfully. “Good morning, Ellen.”

Theo and Mrs. Van Blarcum knew each other only vaguely. They had met on a previous Sunday and had crossed paths occasionally since then. Standing there together with Ellen, they were the embodiment of goodness and mercy. And for the moment, the room belonged not to Father Lundy but to Ocie and Theo, surrogate shepherds of the flock.

No one shaving or dressing or selecting shoes or watching television before driving to St. James earlier that morning would have guessed that a church service could be as engrossing as this one was shaping up to be.

No one could have anticipated the sight of an old man guiding a garishly attired homeless woman and her bicycle down the center aisle, eighth pew from the front, and helping her find a seat at the end of the row.

Ellen kickstanded the Noble Invention, sat and patted her blonde dress, touched her necklace, rested her hands in her lap, smiled at Theo, and then directed her attention to the pulpit.

Father Lundy began to speak. By then he had regained his composure. He knew a teachable moment when he saw one. He also knew that the congregation, if only they could see it, had just witnessed and participated in a sermon. Need he say more?

His voice was thick with emotion as he spoke. "Let us be silent and pause to reflect before we have our morning prayer."

The organist, in a stroke of musical eloquence, played a simple rendering of "All Things Bright and Beautiful" as a never-before, widely-enlarged sense of reverence filled the room. Some still looked at Ellen. Most, "the oldest first," had redirected their attention away from the spectacle of her strange appearance and had turned their gazes inward.

One could almost hear the sound of stones dropping to the ground. [John 8:1-11]

After the morning service, it was agreed that, in the future, Theo would sit in the last row, on the outside aisle, so that when and if Ellen attended (which, in fact, she began to do regularly), her bicycle could be parked beside her. That way the Noble Invention would not impede movement up and down the center aisle when collection of the offering and celebration of Holy Communion took place. It was the practice at St. James to dispense the bread and the cup at the altar to all in the faith who were able to walk forward. After the first week, when Ellen insisted on wheeling her bike with her to the Communion rail, Theo was able to convince her that it would be safe at the pew. He and Mrs. Ocie would guard it.

He also encouraged Ellen to be on time for the service. She was never late again.