



GSR in the Classroom: LENT

LESSON – ADDING TO THE BEAUTY DURING LENT

BEFORE YOU READ: Alone, or with a partner, consider:

- What's messy in life?
- What conflicts, distractions or challenges seem like muck that holds you down?

Keep in mind while you read:

Pause, as you read, to consider ways in which God is present in the messy parts of your own life and in situations you observe



THE BEAUTY OF THE TREES REFLECTED IN WATER (SUSAN ROSE FRANCOIS)

LENT: FINDING BEAUTY AMID LIFE'S MESS

BY SUSAN ROSE [FRANCOIS](#)

[March 8, 2019](#)

Somehow, the season of Lent sneaked up on me this year. Normally I spend some time in prayer as the Lenten season approaches, to ponder my intentions for these 40 days.

Each year is different.

When I was a Catholic schoolgirl, my siblings and I would give up things we loved for Lent, like chocolate or a favorite TV show. We all knew what the other siblings had given up. In theory that helped us keep each other accountable, but in reality, we would sometimes simply use the

knowledge to torment one another, like when I would announce loudly to my sister that I was going to watch the exact show she had been holy enough to give up as her Lenten sacrifice. In retrospect I'm not sure how holy that was of me, even if I avoided eating chocolate all 40 days that year.

I was in the giving up mode for a long time, until I drifted away from the church and gave up my Lenten practice itself. One year, after I had returned to being a regular churchgoer as a young adult in my late 20s, I decided to use the season as an opportunity to clean up my own language. I kept track of the not-so-good words that would still slip out and pledged to give an equal amount of money to our parish food pantry. If I'm honest, it was harder than I thought. I also ended up buying a lot of food for the hungry. Most importantly, the experience made me more mindful of the words I chose in general.

In more recent years, I have been more inclined to take up a positive practice during the Lenten season — such as using nonviolent language or being kind or patient with people who might drive me crazy. [These words about fasting](#), attributed to Pope Francis, have become a popular Lenten challenge. For example, fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. Fast from worries and trust in God. Fast from words so you can be quiet and listen. The list is quite thought provoking. The approach is also a way to integrate the practices of giving up and taking up practices during the Lenten season.

What's important, if we want to engage this holy time as an opportunity to reflect, renew and recommit to our faith, is that we should have some sort of intention going in. Even the most apparently trivial intention — like giving up watching Netflix before bed — can have far reaching consequences, such as more time spent in prayer or with loved ones, or even a better night's sleep.

This is all a big **preamble** to say... Lent began this year without my having made my Lenten intention.

And yet... as I sat in prayer on Ash Wednesday morning, one word kept coming to me. Beauty.

The seed I think was planted last month on my annual silent retreat, when I spent quite a bit of time in the beauty of God's creation. It was inescapable and pure grace.

VOCABULARY

preamble: a preliminary statement or introduction

redemption: the act of saving or being saved from evil or sin

Beauty.

The seed was nourished this past Monday, as I joined with the rest of my leadership team at the intensive care unit of the hospital to accompany one of our sisters on her final journey to the heart of God. There was beauty there too, even amid the sadness, in the deep love and connection among her family, community members and friends.

Life can sometimes be so messy that we don't see the incredible beauty of it all. I was reminded recently of a plaque that my friend Susie had hanging in her dining room. It said, "There is no place where God is not" in beautiful calligraphy. Sometimes, however, the way the word "God" was written looked to me more like "Goo." Indeed, there is no place where goo is not, and God is even there in the mess if we but take the time to look.

Beauty.

After my morning prayer on Ash Wednesday, I joined our sisters for Mass at our retirement center. There was beauty in the way the more able-bodied sisters helped those who needed a hand to stay steady. There was beauty in the way the chapel was decorated for Mass. There was beauty in being present together as a community in prayer. There was beauty in the sitting at the table over coffee after Mass, telling well-worn stories and merely enjoying each other's company.

When I received my ashes, the word beauty came to me once again, along with the lyrics of a song by Sara Groves I'd prayed with on retreat — ["Add to the Beauty"](#):

*It comes in small inspirations, it brings
redemption to life and work, to our lives and
our work.*

It comes in loving community, it comes in

helping a soul find its worth

Redemption comes in strange places, small spaces, calling out the best of who we are.

And I want to add to the beauty, to tell a better story, I want to shine with the light that's burning up inside.

This is grace, an invitation to be beautiful.

The invitation for me this Lent, it seems, is to focus on beauty, to add to and look for and create and celebrate beauty amidst all the goo of life. I've been invited to focus on beauty in my work, in loving community, in the challenges and in the blessings. I do believe in the power of redemption, in the awesome continuing work of our creator God, in and through us and yes, even in the most messy bits, when beauty can be harder to see.

My Lenten intention, given to me as sheer grace, is to remember all of this these days and to be an engaged participant in the beauty that surrounds us.

We'll see where this Lenten journey leads.

May you and I be graced with a beautiful Lent.



Susan Rose Francois is a member of the Congregation Leadership Team for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. Read more of her work on her blog, [At the Corner of Susan and St. Joseph](#).

AFTER YOU READ: Alone, or with a partner:

- Identify one personal challenge and one conflict in your community or in the world that you can pray about or act upon in the remaining days of Lent.
- Discuss one way in which you can bring beauty to these situations.

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT: In the following excerpts from the gospel for the fourth Sunday of Lent, Jesus gives sight to a blind man:

“As Jesus passed by he saw a man blind from birth.

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*[H]e spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva,
and smeared the clay on his eyes,
and said to him,*

*‘Go wash in the Pool of Siloam’— which means Sent —
So he went and washed, and came back able to see.*

*His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said,
‘Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg?’*

Some said, ‘It is,’

but others said, ‘No, he just looks like him.’

He said, ‘I am.’

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*They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees.
Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a sabbath.
So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.
He said to them,
'He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see.'
So some of the Pharisees said,
'This man is not from God,
because he does not keep the sabbath.'
But others said,
'How can a sinful man do such signs?'
And there was a division among them.
So they said to the blind man again,
'What do you have to say about him,
since he opened your eyes?'
He said, 'He is a prophet.'*

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*They answered and said to him,
'You were born totally in sin,
and are you trying to teach us?'
Then they threw him out.
When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out,
he found him and said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'
He answered and said,
'Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?'
Jesus said to him,
'You have seen him, and
the one speaking with you is he.'
He said,
'I do believe, Lord,' and he worshiped him."
John 9: 1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38*

Read the story in its entirety at [John 9:1-41](#)

Alone or with a partner, consider the following:

- Describe the blind man's experience with rejection. When have you experienced rejection in your life?
- What can we as Christians learn from the way Jesus responds to the blind man? How should we respond to people in need?
- What are some of the blind spots that shield you from seeing the suffering of others?

THE CHURCH'S CALL

Pope Francis uses Jesus' healing of the blind man to show how an act of love can incite anger among those who fear the truth.

"[M]any times, a good act, a work of charity, provokes gossip and questions from people who do not want to see the truth.... The blind man who is healed is first interrogated by the astonished crowd... and then by the doctors of the law.... While the blind man gradually draws near to the light, the doctors of the law on the contrary sink deeper and deeper into their inner blindness. Locked in their presumption, they believe that they already have the light, therefore, they do not open themselves to the truth of Jesus. They do everything to deny the evidence. They cast doubt on the identity of the man who was healed, they then deny God's action in the healing, taking as an excuse that God does not work on the Sabbath; they even doubt that the man was born blind.

Their closure to the light becomes aggressive and leads to the expulsion from the temple of the man who was healed... Jesus 'opens his eyes' for the second time, by revealing his own identity to him: "I am the Messiah", he tells him.. At this point, the previously blind man exclaims, 'Lord, I believe!' and he prostrates himself before Jesus."

[Pope Francis, March 30, 2014](#)

- How might standing on the side of justice bring disapproval from your family, classmates or faith community?
- Have you ever compromised your convictions in a tough situation to avoid conflict and later regretted it? What impact did that have on you? If you had a chance to do things differently, what would you do? How did that change your life?
- In what ways might we commit the same errors as the Pharisees by fostering narrow perspectives on Jesus' mission, and subsequently, the church's mission?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Sister Susan Rose Francois, who wrote the column you just read, took part in the "Nuns on the Bus" tour that visited the national conventions of the Republican and Democratic parties in 2016 (read more [here](#)). She and other sisters shared lemonade and conversations with passersby, offering a little beauty amid the goo of political tensions.

The sisters asked people these questions:

- Who in your family is it difficult to discuss politics with and why?
- What worries you about this election?
- What gives you hope for our nation?

Consider discussing these questions with your class, family or friends.

Nuns on the Bus is an effort of Network, a Catholic social justice ministry inspired by sisters. Learn more about Network's advocacy and vision [here](#).



ACT

1. This Lenten season, join Sister Susan Rose Francois in her invitation find beauty amid life's messes and to creatively add to the beauty of Lent. End your day with this video: [The Art of Examen: Creativity](#).
2. Think of two people you know, one who has faced adversity and the other who has witnessed adversity. How did each person embrace beauty amid the pain and sadness?

PRAY

Jesus, you call each of us to be alert to the many sufferings our time.

Guide us to see the world through the eyes of faith.

Guide us to work to be builders of bridges, not walls.

Guide us to find ways to calm the waves of violence in areas of conflict and in our cities.

Guide us to influence leaders of nations to work for an end to the arms race.

Guide us to open the tombs of our hearts to the needs of the vulnerable and the marginalized.

Guide us to welcome all who knock at our door in search of bread and hospitality.

Guide us to recognize the dignity the outcasts and the disadvantaged.

Guide us to see you working through us to bring peace.

Lead us on our shared journey of conversion as we confess our blindness and our shortsightedness.
Amen.

[Adapted from Pope Francis' Urbi Et Orbi Message, April 21, 2019](#)

