

You Asked For It: The Art of Praise

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: I Timothy 2:14-16

A little boy is coloring in Sunday School. The teacher asks, "Tell me about your picture." He replies, "This is a portrait of God." "But honey, no one knows what God looks like." And the boy responds, "They will when I'm finished!"

Human beings have been trying to "draw god" since the beginning of time: to express artistically what is essentially inexpressible; to reflect the Divine through music and the visual arts. Today's sermon request came from a member who asked me to talk about the stained glass windows literally surrounding us in this sanctuary. He said, "Sometimes I wonder whether we fully appreciate what we see every week." I was glad for the opportunity to consider the role of art in worship, even as I am mindful of what one American essayist cautioned, "Art does not take kindly to facts, is helpless to grapple with theories, and is killed outright by a sermon" (*Agnes Repplier, Points of View, 1891*). On the other hand, one member told me he enjoys staring into these wonderful windows when he finds his mind...er, drifting. You could say there's precedent in this: during the Middle Ages, stained glass windows were called "the Bible of the poor," because they could be "read" by the illiterate (though far be it from me to draw that parallel in this case!).

Fairmount's sanctuary windows were designed and painted by Joep Nicolas, a Dutch stained glass artist, who called them his "most inspiring and unique work completed in the United States." Church member and historian Fran Bayless has outlined the complex method Nicolas used in their creation, in a monograph of the windows, available in our church library. So first, let's take a good look at them. They tell the life of Christ, beginning here with the announcement to Mary that she

would become his mother, and encircling the sanctuary, in chronological order, except for the crucifixion which the artist felt needed to be centrally located. Nicolas's work is praised for its dramatic narrative design and attention to detail. At the same time, these windows illustrate how much the artist is captive to his own context: the characters look thoroughly European, rather than the dark-skinned Middle Easterners most of them actually were.

From earliest times, religious communities have prized elaborate artistic expression as an offering to God, in the service of praise and faithfulness. To illustrate this from the Judeo-Christian tradition, I want to read a brief portion of a much longer description of the design for the first Jerusalem Temple. Recall that King David had dreamed of building for the Lord a house of worship; it was his son Solomon instead who brought the dream to reality. Notice how no expense is spared to create its beauty, as if only the finest materials were worthy of its holy purpose: [READ I CHRONICLES 28:11-20]

Perhaps from those historic roots grew the inspiration for the Christian cathedrals of Europe and Asia, which stand witness even today to their creators' correlation between visual magnificence and spiritual devotion. Some -but not all - of our Reformed forebears rebelled against this notion, rejected what they believed to be Roman Catholic idolatry, and sought simplicity of design, without ornamentation (these are the same folks who got rid of pipe organs and other instruments and stuck to singing the Psalms *a cappella*). Still, stained glass windows have become an almost benchmark feature of traditional churches---in contrast to today's mega-church preference for auditorium-style sanctuaries with comfortable, individual seating and full technological capabilities. There, stained glass windows have been replaced by PowerPoint graphics and projected video images.

All these have their legitimate place in the worship of God, but it's good to be reminded of the particular message carried in the medium of stained glass: representative of a church

rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, reflecting classical ideas of beauty and truth. But don't take that too literally: our windows are but one illustration of how art and design can be enlisted to praise God—a God who is wildly imaginative and endlessly creative. . . and One who can never be confined to the cultural expressions and artistic renderings of any era. The story they tell of Jesus of Nazareth who lived among us and showed us that the heart of God is love, is universal.

Whether the work is stained glass or the graphic art of comic books, each represents a marvelous divine/human collaboration. “Art is everywhere,” acknowledged the Russian-born American sculptor Louise Nevelson, “except it has to pass through a creative mind.” God designed a world of enormous beauty and infinite variety, and humans take those raw materials, using them in various ways to inspire, provoke, exalt. There's no single way to do that; there are as many ways as there are individuals. Even so, we'll never exhaust the meaning and miracle of the Divine in human life. The God we worship and serve is a mystery, and no less a saint than the Apostle Paul marveled that we could never get to the bottom of it. You can almost hear his wonder in the first letter to Timothy, in the third chapter at the 14th verse: [READ I TIMOTHY 3:14-16] Try painting a picture of *that!* The designer of our sanctuary understood the impossibility of comprehending Divine perfection so well that he purposely wove an error into his work. If you follow the placement of the *fleur de lis* on the decorative edge of the right side of the dossal curtain, you'll find one missing, a mistake in the regular pattern. He hoped in so doing to remind worshipers that praise should be always be directed toward the perfect God, and not the artist.

There is the artist's joy in creating; but that's only part of the equation. There is also the joy produced in the person who looks at the art. We worship God through singing and prayers, offering our gifts, hearing a sermon, passing the peace to one another...and by absorbing the beauty around us: the intricate woodcarving of the pulpit, lectern and font, the colors and

design of the ceiling, the imperfect curtain, the paraments highlighting the season of the church year, and the windows. Art delights the eye, and offers a lens through which to discover some new insight, a different perspective, a heart-catching view. Through art we become discoverers of truth, to which our egocentrism, prejudice, or limited perspective blind us. In her novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, author Willa Cather wrote, “The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there around us always.” Art removes the blinders so we can perceive what is invisible to the naked eye, and in that way becomes an instrument of faith.

Art also inspires goodness. Brain research has shown how looking at art (paintings, sculpture, classical or modern) stimulates the part of the brain associated with empathy towards others and altruistic behavior. It releases endorphins creating feelings of well-being and peace, or as Picasso put it, “washes from the soul the dust of everyday life.” That’s why art education is an important component of children’s and youth curricula, from pre-school through high school, from our Church School program to after-school programs like Open Doors and Heights Youth Club. Church member Katherine Chilcote makes a career of gathering people together to create murals displayed in public spaces (including our Dining Room on the lower level) sharing history, giving witness, and instilling pride. When we view the murals, we discover more of who we are and why we’re here. The prayer shawls draping the communion table today—all hand-knit or crocheted by Fairmount members—will be given to persons as a visual and tactile symbol of this congregation’s care and God’s love enfolding them. When you imagine a shawl providing a soft snuggling blanket for [a new baby][little Charlie], or comforting warmth to an elderly person with chronic pain, or a consoling embrace to a grieving widow---it’s enough to make you want to learn to knit! Or if not that specifically, at least to think of

ways you can use the gifts you and I do possess to make the world a safer, softer, and more caring place.

Look again at the stained glass window closest to your vantage point. See if you can identify the particular event in Jesus' life it portrays. Who is there? What are they doing? What details do you notice? What feelings are evoked in you by the scene? What does it show you about Jesus? What might it invite you to do or become? Friends, the first step of faith is simply to notice, to see, yes, to imagine ourselves in that story. God invites our collaboration; calls us to employ our gifts in the divine work of redeeming this sweet and terrible old world. With God, nothing is impossible.

One day this week I was stopped at a red light on Taylor Road and noticed a woman on the sidewalk, seemingly transfixed, one hand tightly grasping the white cane indicating her sight impairment, the other hand examining a single dandelion held only an inch or two from her eyes. She was obviously enchanted by the brilliant yellow which she could see only when it was right in her face. I watched as she bent down with some effort and began picking all the dandelions she could find, a golden picture of cheer and affirmation of goodness. She made a bouquet of them with her, whether to give to someone or put on her own table I cannot say. All of this happened in the seconds before the light turned green. Yet that little moment, a slice of life along a busy street in the middle of a busy schedule, spoke volumes to me about how beauty guards us from fear and suspicion (i.e. "what's wrong with her? What is she doing???") and keeps us from a cynical appraisal of the world limited to productivity. The sight of this obviously-challenged woman whose physical blindness did not prevent her from enjoying the breathtaking glory of the created order lifted my spirits and galvanized my personal resolve to be a better person.

I don't think that's too much to ask of art. Thanks be to God!

