

FINDING COSMOS IN THE CHAOS: THE CHURCH AS A WORK OF ART
1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25; JOHN 2: 13-22
MARCH 23, 2003 – LENT III
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The story goes that Flannery O'Connor, the great, devout-Catholic, southern short story writer of the last century, was informed by writer Mary McCarthy, a lapsed Catholic, that she, McCarthy, thought of the elements of communion as a symbol.

In a letter dated December 16, 1955 O'Connor said, "not only did she say it was a symbol she said it was a pretty good one; to which I then said in a shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of, but I realize now this is all I will ever be able to say about it outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me, all the rest of life is expendable."ⁱ

Despite Presbyterian and Catholic difference over the meaning of communion John Calvin would have applauded Flannery O'Connor. Calvin too knew that religious experience goes deeper than symbolism. He talked about the mystical presence of Christ in the bread and wine.

I share this story today because there is a tendency in our modern, rational world to objectify and label religion. If we can turn religion into symbol then we can tame religion of its unruly impulse and fire-like intensity.

One preacher asks, "where has the Firemaker gone? Where is the God of the burning bush... the pillar of fire and cloud, the God who personally incinerated one whole bull in the contest on Mt. Carmel?"

The obvious answer is that *we* have turned away. From our fright at the foot of Mt. Sinai to our uneasy acquaintance with the patriarchs and prophets, plenty of us have concluded that we are not up to direct encounter with God. We want to be warmed not burned, safe fire is our invention. It is what we preach and risk boring rather than scaring people.ⁱⁱ

We are talking in week three of Lent about spirituality and the arts. About finding cosmos, the order and purpose and life of God, in the chaos and confusion of the world.

Today I want to consider the Church as a Work of Art. In doing so, I agree with Flannery O'Connor, "if it's a symbol, to hell with it." Religion is as real as it gets. Religion at its core is the essence of life, of truth, of authenticity.

I am not saying this is the church you and I experience every time we walk into this building. I am saying wherever the church comes alive in some act of kindness or justice or compassion that's what it is.

You might say that we have done our best to marginalize and tame art like religion. We say artists are quirky and temperamental, we say art is costly and only for rich people, we say art is irrelevant to day to day human needs. We marginalize and domesticate art.

But like religion, art is the stuff of life. Walt Whitman scribing in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "This is no book; who touches this, touches a man."ⁱⁱⁱ If it does anything art embodies truth, justice, meaning. It is dynamic and pulses with life.

Art and religion are feared because they are unvarnished truth.

Maybe you heard about the recent incident at the UN. Secretary of State Colin Powell was to appear before the Security Council in early February to make yet another case for a pre-emptive war with Iraq.

In preparation for Powell's appearance the huge reproduction of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* – which hangs outside the entrance to the Council where representatives make statements to the press – was covered with a huge blue curtain.

Perhaps you know the story of this striking painting. On April 26, 1937 German bombers attacked the town of Guernica in northern Spain. It was essentially a test run for new Nazi war technology and slaughtered 1600 civilians in the process. The world was outraged. Picasso, then living in Paris, was compelled to create this work that became his statement against the horrors of war and one of the greatest artworks of the 20th century.^{iv}

The official explanation by the UN was that the blue curtain was a technically better background for cameras covering statements being made outside the Security Council.

But Mr. Powell could not very well seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by Picasso's shrieking and mutilated men, women and children, and bulls and horses, says Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times*.^v

The act of shrouding Picasso's unvarnished, cubist truth of war, reveals a remarkable degree of willingness by our leaders to obfuscate, evade and deny the grim realities of military action.

Taming the message of art and religion. The Scripture lessons today speak to our theme. Jesus chasing the moneychangers out of the temple in a wonderful display of anger. So indignant was he that the purpose of the temple, to worship God and exhibit righteousness of life, was being obscured by the presence of money changers and merchants.

When the church fulfills its mission it is like a great work of art, say a great painting. It depicts the truth about God and humans. To the extent that the church does not fulfill its mission, because we lack courage or commitment, we obscure the truth about God and human life. Our self-serving, willful actions are like a huge blue curtain draped over the church, over God's vision for life.

Picture Jesus, not at the temple, but the UN when Mr. Powell was making his pitch for war. I can see him walking up to that blue curtain, grabbing it at the corner, yanking the whole thing down in one furious sweep of his arm, then turning to the diplomats saying, "be not deceived, your war will destroy human life as gruesomely as you see it here. Which of you can say every means of avoiding this catastrophe has been tried? Which of you will accept the blood of children on his hands?"

Sometimes the message of art and religion falls on deaf ears. St. Paul said at Corinth: "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God's weakness stronger than human strength."

The initial reaction to Picasso's *Guernica* was overwhelmingly critical. The German guide to the Paris Exposition called Picasso's work, "a hodgepodge of body parts any four year old could have painted. A madman's dream."^{vi}

But the underlying truth of St. Paul's message to the Corinthians, the truth at the core of what we mean when we talk about the church as a work of art, is Caroline Gordon's observation, "We do not judge great art. It judges us."^{vii}

The German guide to the Paris Exposition thought it was judging Picasso's *Guernica*, but the entire Nazi regime stood under the judgement of that painting. Some years later the Nazis occupied France and came to the house and studio where Picasso worked. Looking around his room – which was covered wall to wall with his typical paintings of twisted faces and contorted bodies – a Nazi officer demanded of Picasso, "Are you responsible for this?" To which Picasso said in an exchange reminiscent of Jesus and the Pharisees, "No, you are!"^{viii}

We do not judge great art or the church as a work of art, it judges us.

When we say the church is a work of art we are saying the work of the church founded on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus stands in judgement of human life – not the other way around.

Because his life was everything a human life should be and because the cross was the ultimate act of his life that sacrifice judges everything we do, all that we are.

Herein lies the opportunity for our lives to be changed and for the church to renew the world: seeing through the great mural of Christ's life the vision for our best living. It is what Dostoyevsky means on the bulletin cover giving his ultimate allegiance to Christ the truth above all truth.

When we talk about the church as a work of art we also acknowledge this: God is the source of life. Every moment is holy.

This is what the church as a work of art seeks to embody. We Presbyterians say there are two sacraments: baptism and communion. What we mean is these are the two ecclesiastical acts Jesus commanded his followers to observe. But really all of life is sacramental. Every moment a precious gift.

A sacrament is when something holy happens. Transparent time, says one writer. Time which you can see through to something deep inside time. Such moments happen everyday: watching something get born, making love, a high-school graduation, somebody coming to see you when you're sick. If we weren't blind as bats, we'd see every moment as sacramental.^{ix}

The mission of the church and of the artist is not just to see life this way but to communicate at every opportunity that life is holy; to be intentional about making such moments happen with more regularity in our lives and in the lives of others.

The church, we might say, is a gallery of acts of kindness and justice; a collection of stories of courage told again and again; a stage on which we dance the dance of forbearance and forgiveness.

Being a good Presbyterian, if you are like me, you want to design some system or plan complete with goals and objectives to crank out works of sacramental art all the time. Surely, we can bend our resources and will toward this noble end – that Westminster would not only be a work of art but a veritable Metropolitan Museum of courageous deeds and brave moments inspiring our city and world to deep change and renewal.

But then I was stopped in my tracks this week by something I came across from Simone Weil, the French mystic. She said this, she said we cannot go toward God we can only wait with an attentiveness that has no particular object to gain. This is the highest form of prayer.

“Attentiveness without object” religious advice from a religious person that tells us as much about the foundation of art as it does the life of faith. If the church is a work of art the creative spirit that makes it so comes not from us but from God through us. We cannot control the Spirit but only wait and discern it in our midst.

I can imagine Emily Dickinson, when she ventured into her Amherst garden, being attentive in just that way – beginning a poem without knowing what she was beginning.^x

Or our own wonderful watercolorist Margaret Martin walking down an Allentown street bathed in February light beginning a painting without yet knowing it; attentive to the holiness of that particular moment on that particular street surrounded by those particular houses and trees and cars.

Or you or me in some particular moment we face today: a child falling sick, a matter of justice where we work, our nation at war – being attentive. Waiting for God to lead us deeper into that moment of life, into those relationships, into that issue until we hear what word we are called to speak or see what action we are called to take.

This is, I am sure, how Jesus found himself at table one night washing his disciples’ feet, breaking bread with them, then accepting his cross the next day. Flannery O’Connor was right there is nothing symbolic about that supper at all. Every time we partake of it we enact in our time the truth of God’s limitless love for all time. It is the center of existence.

The church is a work of art shimmering truth about God and human life.

When we speak or dance or sing such truth there is no way to tame God’s judgement or cover-up the invitation to be born again. Amen.

* * * * *

Endnotes:

ⁱ Alfred Kazin, God and the American Writer (New York: Vintage Books, 1997)23.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, When God is Silent (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 1998)65.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Schjeldahl, “The Searcher: Marsden Hartley’s eloquent restlessness,” The New Yorker, February 3, 2003, 94.

^{iv} “Guernica: Testimony of War,” www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/gmain.html, 3/20/02, 2.

^v Maureen Dowd, “Powell Without Picasso,” The New York Times, Wednesday, February 5, 2003, op-ed.

^{vi} “Guernica: Testimony of War,” 2.

^{vii} Madeleine L’Engle, Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980)46.

^{viii} Art Daily, “UN Covers Up Picasso’s Guernica To Avoid Offending the Regime’s War Criminals,” Independent Media Centre, Ireland; indymedia.ie/cgi-bin/newsire.cgi, Monday, February 3, 2003, 2.

^{ix} Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 83.

^x Alfred Kazin, Writing Was Everything (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1997) 101.