

God's Works of Art Ephesians 2:4-10 2Cor.5:16-19

Our next reading this morning is from 2Corinthians 5. It's a wonderful text for Easter season. After speaking of Christ's dying and rising and our being raised with him, he says...

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view (literally, "according to the flesh"—that's a figure of speech that refers to having a worldly perspective on others; Eugene Peterson translates it this way: "We don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look... We look at the inside"); even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view (according to the flesh), we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

This is the word of the Lord.

One of the books for my summer reading a few years ago was *Leonardo DaVinci* by Walter Isaacson. If you like a good biography, you'll enjoy this book. He writes not only about DaVinci's life extensively, but it contains a lot of great history of the renaissance in Italy. So if you like *history* you'll love this book.

One of the many fascinating things I learned about Leonardo DaVinci is how long it took him to finish his paintings and other projects he was commissioned to

undertake, or which he just decided to undertake on his own. Any good artist takes their time to complete a painting, but Leonardo took years. Many years.

One of his two most famous paintings, the Last Supper, was painted not on a canvas but on a large wall in the mess hall of a monastery, above a passageway (show slide). The idea being, when monks ate their meals there, they would be reminded of the sacramental meal, and Christ's presence with them. It took Leonardo 5 years to finish that painting. As quoted in the book, monks and priests would come to sit and watch Leonardo do his work, and one of the monks wrote this in a journal:

“He would come here in the early hours of the morning and mount the scaffolding, and remain there, brush in hand, from sunrise to sunset, forgetting to eat or drink, sometimes painting continually. At other times he would remain in front of it for one or two hours and contemplate it in stillness, examining and criticizing to himself the figures that he had created. He would sometimes clear away, or paint over the movement of just one slight hand gesture, or a facial feature.”

That's a cool description of a master artist at work, taking his time, fully attentive to his creation. (slide off)

Leonardo's most famous painting is the Mona Lisa. He started it in 1503 in Florence, Italy, and finally finished it in 1517 right before he died in a small town in France. He literally carried it with him from place to place, carefully working on every detail of the painting until he was satisfied with it. For 14 years!

Now, being a pastor and preacher I had to make the comparison: God being the master artist, and we—each of us—being God's work of art. And not just a work of art that he cranks out quickly, which are then factory-reproduced, but each of us a work of art that God carefully and painstakingly takes his time with, paying close attention to every detail, lovingly crafting it until it is finished to his satisfaction.

At the end of the marvelous passage from Ephesians that Katie read, Paul says, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Our chair Bible translation, the NRSV, says, "...we are what he has made us." Which is okay, but that's a dull translation. Literally in the Greek it is: we are God's work of art (NEB: handiwork; most translations: workmanship). This word was also used in other places (in secular Greek) as "masterpiece." Think of it: you are God's masterpiece. God's work of art. God's handiwork. Do you believe

that? I'm guessing that some of you don't believe it, or you're not sure, so I'm going to do my best to convince you of it this morning.

The fact that we are God's masterpiece, God's work of art, only makes sense: simply look at the creation around you! Especially at this time of year. We will quickly and enthusiastically say that this is God's masterpiece: we marvel at the beauty of creation around us, the spring colors, the trees budding, the mountains, Puget Sound, and all that, but we quickly forget that *we are part of it!* I'll remind you that in Genesis when God created most everything, the first 5 days, he called it good. Then on the 6th day when he created humans, he called us *very* good. Only we get the superlative! So, you are God's creative, artistic expression, just as much as the Olympic mountains, the pod of Orca whales in Puget Sound, as much as a flowering dogwood in spring or a maple tree on fire with dazzling orange and red in autumn.

I know that for some people that's hard to believe. We may have old tapes playing in our heads; or negative self-talk may lead us to believe we are anything but God's work of art. But it's true. Take it on faith.

Yes, we struggle. Yes, we see flaws. Yes, we've made mistakes. Yes, we—unlike a painting or a sculpture—have free will and can choose to go our own way and believe, or not believe, whatever we like—about God, about others, and

about ourselves. We can choose to look in a mirror and wonder if we're looking at a work of art, or something else. But I'm here to tell you that the Biblical witness says that what *God* sees is his masterpiece, a work of art; and God wants you to live into that reality.

God has stated clearly here and in other places (psalm 139 is a good example) that we are, each of us, a unique and unrepeatable work of God, a work of God's creation. We may feel broken and like our life is a mess, but it is in God's nature to restore and to heal to make alive—to keep working on that masterpiece, and not give up on it. Because God created it very good.

And that is what the apostle Paul is saying in our passage from 2Cor.5 this morning: anyone who is in Christ is a *new creation*. It's his way of saying that God never gives up on his artwork, his craftsmanship, and keeps renewing it and restoring it. Re-creating, if you will. God carries us around with him—in his heart—like Leonardo DaVinci carried Mona Lisa with him everywhere, to keep working on us, as we are willing to let God do so.

All of this reminded me of that great line from Paul's prayer for the Philippian church, in the opening of that letter: "The one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion..." Not "might bring it completion" or "I hope

God brings it to completion,” but “will.” God, who began a good work, **will** bring it to completion.

This is where faith comes in—to see ourselves as God sees us, and to believe that the Master Artist continues to be at work in us. This isn’t just self-help motivational guru let’s-just-give-ourselves-a-big-hug squishy stuff. This is the gospel.

And remember: it’s not about how we look; and it’s not about how we feel. Feelings can be misleading and deceptive, and they often are. It’s a matter of seeing ourselves *as God see us*, believing what *God* has said about us.

God is a wonderful artist, and we are God’s work of art. And not just to be looked at and admired as in a gallery, but to be a blessing to others. This week I was remembering something Cathy Draper said that her dad would tell the kids occasionally: “Try to be useful as well as ornamental.” And that’s exactly what it says in our readings: we are created for a purpose: “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time to be our way of life” it says in Ephesians. In 2Cor5: as new creations we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. I’ll talk about this in a moment.

But first I need to point out that Paul, in all his letters, makes grand statements from time to time, these magnificent one-liners that are easy to miss,

and he gives us one of those gems here in the 2Cor passage: that those who are in Christ are a *new creation, the old having passed away, and everything becoming new*. That's an amazing affirmation, when we think about it. Everything old has passed away; everything has become new. *Everything*. Wow. Sit with that for a few moments and let it sink in. It's a startling, and wonderful, affirmation.

Using the artist & painting metaphor, I like to think of being "in Christ" as like being a canvas that willingly submits to being worked on—saying yes to God's renewing and re-creating work in our lives, through Christ. Surrendering to the creative process. As Paul says in Romans 12:1-2... "Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice... do not be conformed to worldly ways (according to the flesh again) but be *transformed* by the renewing of your lives." Being 'in Christ' simply means offering ourselves, consenting to God's creative, transforming work.

What I'd like to especially note here is Paul's language, that 'in Christ' there is a movement from *what is old* to *what is new*. He doesn't say, "the *bad* is gone, and now it's *good*." That's moralistic language that isn't used in the gospel. Jesus never said, "You bad people! Be good!" and neither does Paul in his letters. Paul speaks of old and new. Jesus talked about lost and found. Sick and healed. Distant, and near. That's the type of language that's used in the gospel; it's grace language, relationship language, transformation language.

Not “bad and good.” That’s because the gospel says, as Genesis says, we already have inherent/original goodness. *Very* goodness. Perhaps we feel broken, or feel distant, or lost, or messy. But the original goodness, the original design, is still there. Jesus simply wants to call it forth...

So, Paul never says, “Be good.” What he says is, “Be... *renewed*. Be... *reconciled*. Be... *transformed*. Be... *in Christ*.” Let God continue the transforming work of art that is your life. Consent to the master artist, and be renewed.

Switching metaphors here for a moment, it’s a fun fact that the word “new” here is the same common household word that was used to describe fresh bread made every morning. Isn’t that fun? So, we could say (perhaps taking this a bit too literally, but what the heck): “If anyone is in Christ they are fresh every morning; that which is stale and crusty is gone, and everything is fresh every day.” Chew on that one for a while (pun intended). Me, I’m not fresh until I’ve had coffee, so the freshness takes a little while to set in, but eventually it does.

Paul’s language of old and new could be looked at this way: what isn’t useful any more is discarded; and what is fresh and useful has come.

So... what’s old? Unhelpful ways of relating to people is old and not useful (seeing people with judgment and criticism); non-useful or self-destructive habits are old, old tapes in our heads; old patterns of thinking... Those aren’t useful

anymore; they're old. What's new and fresh? Loving ways of relating to others (with reconciliation and grace), useful and fresh ways of thinking, and of seeing ourselves; useful and fresh habits, a mindset of peacefulness and joy, and so on.

Which brings us back to the assertion that we, as God's creations, God's works of art, we are not meant to simply be on display. We are meant to be of service. Again, we are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for works of service, which is to be our lifestyle (habit). In 2Cor5 he says that as God's new/fresh creations, we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. We are trustees of it! We entrusted with the good news of the gospel and the good work of being God's reconcilers and peacemakers.

And a big part of reconciliation is the work of trying to see others as God sees them—as people also created in God's image, who bear the image of God equally, as God's work of art and as people worthy and deserving of love. That's hard work sometimes! There are some people we struggle to see as bearing the image of God, and as God's work of art. But because God never gives up on anyone, neither are we to give up on anyone, or on the work of reconciliation, where possible.

When our son was going to college in the south, I had a chance to visit him a few times. And in Alabama in particular there are memorials and monuments

to abominable practices like slavery, and discrimination, and horrible acts of terrorism against African Americans, which were based on that which is old—old ideas, old ideology & old theology, and of selfish gain (slavery was based on personal prosperity & building the economy). Those ideologies and practices are old and not useful anymore! But the hopeful sign amidst all of that is, people can change, and many are changing, in spite of the retrenchment of those old ideas right now. There is newness. As African Americans and Caucasian Americans are coming together to do the work of reconciliation, which is God’s work. It doesn’t always make the headlines, but it is happening (often under the radar). Of course, there is more work to do, and it’s an ongoing process, but this is one area where we can, and must, do the work of reconciliation. It’s a slow process of transformation, as it is in our lives (like a Leonardo painting), and also in culture. We can’t give up, though. We need to keep doing the work of reconciliation.

Paul begins the 2Cor passage by saying: For the love of Christ compels us, because we are convinced that one has died for all... therefore, now, we regard no one from a human point of view. What that means is, we don’t see people from the old perspective. The old perspective being: evaluating people by their looks, or their resume, or accomplishments, or their bank account, their ethnicity, or even their political affiliation. Or, evaluating people by “Do I like them?” or

“Do they annoy me?” That’s all “according to the flesh”—the human point of view. Rather, we are to work toward looking at others on the basis of their worth as people who are created in the image of God.

With this in mind I’ve provided a beautiful and timely prayer by Pope Francis, which is in your bulletin. For folks at home, you can access this in my sermon notes on our Maplewood web site. This prayer is contained within Francis’ encyclical, his plea from about 10 years ago when he was making the Biblical case for the care of creation, and the concern over the damage caused by climate change—damage to the earth that God made and called good. Damage to human beings, especially those on the margins, who God called very good.

I love every line of this prayer, and I wish everyone would pray it every day!

“For Our Earth” from *Laudato Si’*
by Pope Francis

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover the worth of each person and thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace. Amen.

Every part of this prayer is important right now, and for our purposes this morning I'd like us to pay particular attention to his "Teach us to discover the worth of each person..."

This is what's new—seeing ourselves, and others, with the eyes of Christ, to discover the worth of each person. So that we can be reconcilers and ambassadors of grace.

It's a tough time to practice that, these days. But to quote John F. Kennedy in his famous "We choose to go to the moon" speech: "We do these things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard." This work of reconciliation is our moon landing today. It's not as flashy as a moon landing, but it's essential to our survival as a people. It might seem impossible, but with God nothing is impossible. My paraphrase of Kennedy is, we don't do this because it's easy, but because it's the gospel. To which I would add, and because it is so needed right now.

So, all of you works of art, God's masterpiece: go forth in peace and in love, following the risen Christ out into the world to be reconcilers and peacemakers.

Let's sing God, You Spin the Whirling Planets