

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The Third Sunday in a Season of Peace, September 19, 2021
Exodus 35:20-35
“Eyes for Peace” by Rev. Sue Trigger

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON (*Video*) Exodus 35:20–35 (CEB)

The whole Israelite community left Moses. Everyone who was excited and eager to participate brought the Lord’s gift offerings to be used for building the meeting tent and all its furnishings and for the holy clothes. Both men and women came forward. Everyone who was eager to participate brought pins, earrings, rings, and necklaces, all sorts of gold objects. Everyone raised an uplifted offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who had blue or purple or deep red yarn or fine linen or goats’ hair or rams’ skins dyed red or beaded leather brought them. Everyone who could make a gift offering of silver or copper brought it as the Lord’s gift offering. Everyone who had acacia wood that could be used in any kind of building work brought it. All the skilled women spun cloth with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and deep red yarns and fine linen. All the women who were eager to use their skill spun the goats’ hair. The chiefs brought gemstones and gems to be set in the priest’s vest and the chest pendant, spices and oil for light and for the anointing oil, and for the sweet-smelling incense. All the Israelite men and women who were eager to contribute something for the work that the Lord had commanded Moses to do brought it as a spontaneous gift to the Lord.

Then Moses said to the Israelites: “Look, the Lord has chosen Bezalel, Uri’s son and Hur’s grandson from the tribe of Judah. The Lord has filled him with the divine spirit that will give him skill, ability, and knowledge for every kind of work. He will be able to create designs, do metalwork in gold, silver, and copper, cut stones for setting, carve wood, do every kind of creative work, and have the ability to teach others. Both he and Oholiab, Ahisamach’s son from the tribe of Dan, have been given the skill to do every kind of work done by a gem cutter or a designer or a needleworker in blue, purple, and deep red yarns and in fine linen or a weaver or anyone else doing work or creating designs.

Holy wisdom, holy words,
Thanks be to God.

Stewart’s question about the use of art in the Church has been a source of controversy in Reformed churches for generations. It all began with Martin Luther and the reformation, a reaction against the elaborate imagery found in Roman Catholic churches that depicted God, Christ, and many of the saints. Icons were worshipped and saints prayed to as if they had a direct line to God, or worse, as if they were gods themselves. The reformers believed that worshipping graven images was wrong, and so they went in the opposite direction. In older reformed churches,

it is common to not see any art, no stained glass windows – nothing that would distract a worshipper’s focus away from worshipping God.

Thankfully, we are always being reformed by God and today, Presbyterians believe that painting, sculpture and other art forms are gifts of God, who inspires people with the ability to create artistic designs and to teach these skills. We read in the Bible of artisans who were called by God (see Exodus 31), and we know it still happens today. Throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), faithful artist-members gather together at conferences and retreats, celebrating God’s gifts of creativity and exploring together with heart and hands and voices what it means to be made in the image of a creating God.

As we think about the visual arts and peacemaking, we are going to begin by watching a potter, Anne Laird Jones, who is both an artist and theologian. Listen as she explains a theological perspective for the arts and how the process of creating pottery is a theological metaphor for peacemaking. Take a look. [\(show sermon video 1\)](#)

I love her imagery of the pottery as it is being fired into a strong vessel. Imagine that each of us are part of God’s vessel that when we are together as community, we have the power to effect change.

If you have been to the United Nations complex in New York City, you may have seen some of the beautiful art that is on display. Sue Rheem is a representative to the UN Presbyterian Ministry and she shares how art influences global peacemaking work. [\(show sermon video 2\)](#) Art invites prayer, meditation, and renewal as people gather to do the difficult work of peace making on a global scale.

The power of art to inspire and to tell a story is profound. Perhaps that is why it has been the source of so much controversy for Reformed Christians like us. While the Presbyterian Church USA is not against imagery in the church, we do have standards for the imagery that we put in our churches. Paintings, sculpture and other art forms must be rightly used. The Directory for Worship of our Presbyterian Book of Order says, “We offer creative gifts in worship, including music, art, drama, movement, media, banners, vestments, vessels, furnishings, and architecture. When such gifts only call attention to themselves, they are idolatrous; when, in their

simplicity of form and function, they give glory to God, they are appropriate for worship.”ⁱ *W-1.0204* Works of art used in worship should not call attention to themselves. They should, instead, direct worshipers to God. As Reformed Presbyterians, we understand that creating or owning beautiful works of art and enjoying them in the places where we worship is no substitute for giving ourselves to God and doing the other work we are called to do as the people of God.ⁱⁱ

That said, we also understand that art tells a story. The art a congregation chooses to put in their building says important things about their values and their identity. *(show sermon picture*

I) This is a window in St. Matthew’s Baptist Church in Louisville, KY. You can see the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus like flames, and next to Jesus you see people whose have been touched by the Holy Spirit. There are all kinds of people pictured; people of all ages, races, occupations, a person who is disabled. The window shows a church that believes that all are given gifts by the Holy Spirit for the common good. It also speaks to their commitment to welcoming all people. They have demonstrated that commitment recently when they were dismissed from the Southern Baptist Convention because of policies that were inclusive of LGBTQ individuals. The art they chose reflects who they are.

In our sanctuary are four beautiful stained glass windows. These windows do not have specific images, but are more free form and invite you to imagine as you look at them. The windows surround the sanctuary with warmth and color, reflect our reverence for all the earth through the elements of earth, water, fire, and air. The covenant window celebrates our community that exists in a covenant relationship with God and with one another. If you are worshipping with us in person, I invite you to choose a window to reflect upon. If you are watching at home, we are going to share a picture of the air window which is at the front of the sanctuary. *(show sermon picture 2)* Take a moment to look at the window you have in front of you, reflect upon what God is saying to you through this window. *(pause for a moment)*

Invite congregation to share their observations. Sue will take a handheld microphone around. How do these windows reflect or shape our identity as a community of faith?

The power of visual arts is deep, and we have seen how art can draw us closer to God. Anne Laird Jones demonstrated how art can help us understand our relationship with God and

with each other, as. Sue Rheem showed us how art can help people to center and focus their attention on the work of peacemaking. There is one more piece of art I want to show you that has a very powerful message for us as we think about visual arts and peacemaking. *(show sermon picture 3)* This statue is in the garden at the UN. It's the work of the Russian-born sculptor Evgeniy Vuchetich. According to the United Nations' website, the statue symbolizes "man's desire to put an end to war and convert the means of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of all mankind." The statue was donated by the Soviet Union. That is enough to give us pause, isn't it? The statue is named, "Let us beat swords into plowshares" and is inspired by the prophecies of Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 which have similar expressions of what God's peace looks like. Micah 4:3 says, "And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (4:3).

I am going to close with a quote from F. ROBERT SABOL, President of the National Art Education Association who wrote, "We continuously are inundated with innumerable visual images and messages on television, computers, digital communications devices, and in the printed media. Neuroscience has shown that a significant portion of the human brain is devoted to understanding visual stimulation and to decoding visual messages we receive through our sense of vision. We do this by using all of our higher order thinking skills, memory, and education. In our contemporary society, the visual arts and dependence upon visual imagery is essential in communicating and understanding information we need to live our lives. In order to fully understand visual imagery and its meaning, it is essential that all people receive an arts infused education. Such an education enables people to become informed citizens, critical thinkers, creative problem solvers and productive members of society."ⁱⁱⁱ

That quote alone should tell us just how wrong the reformers were about the power of imagery to educate. But I am thankful for their careful reflection on what imagery we use in church and what imagery we use to empower peacemaking. Through art we are able to speak to one another despite our differences. The arts speak when others fail. May God bless and inspire the artists.

ⁱ Book II of the Constitution of the PCUSA 2019-2021, The Book of Order, w-1.0204, Published by the Office of the General Assembly, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, p. 79.

ⁱⁱ Miller, P. Lynn, "Art is a Gift of God," *Presbyterians Today*, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/art/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mr. Porter, "The Importance of the Visual Arts," <https://www.ffc8.org/Page/1588>.

^{iv} Heid, Bill, *Swords into Plowshares*, *Worldview*, <https://www.offthegridnews.com/religion/swords-into-plowshares/>.