**“The Value of God Shaped Art”**

**Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18; Jeremiah 18:1-11**

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Several years ago, on a long flight to Europe, I watched one of the few films on offer—The Monuments Men, George Clooney’s tribute to the men and women of the wartime *Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program,* who found and restored thousands of works of art looted by the Nazis for Hitler’s projected museum or private collections. Having read the reviews, I didn’t have high hopes for the film; nonetheless, it was impressive to see the lead characters venturing into salt mines, in a kind of harrowing of hell, and risking their lives under enemy fire to rescue works like the Ghent altarpiece and Michelangelo’s Madonna and Child of Bruges. Was it worth dying for? Yes, the George Clooney character says, because works of art are the bearers of our civilization’s deepest hopes and highest achievements. But there is more to it than a celebration of creativity, as the film itself suggests; the characters are shown in *awe,* and even in *prayer,* before works of art that had once lived in churches and homes where they were actively venerated.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Which reminded of today’s text from Jeremiah where God is depicted as a potter, and we are depicted as clay. Which also reminded me of an old hymn that some of you may be familiar with (it’s in the Methodist Hymnal), *Have Thine Own Way, Lord.* (Don’t worry—I’m not going to sing it!). The words in part are:

*“You are the potter/I am the clay/Help me to be willing/To let you have your way.”*

However, the problem with this hymn is that it doesn’t get the theology quite right.

You see, the biblical references to clay find the clay *answering* the potter: *“Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again?”* (Job 10:9); *“Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles’”* (Isa. 45:9)? And in Jeremiah 18 it is the very resistance and responsiveness of the clay that matters.

In other words, the Bible depicts God’s relationship with people as a *genuine relationship* because it is *responsive.* How people respond to God matters to God and affects how God responds to people. The divine relationship is analogous to human relationships—which are necessarily mutual and developing (or else withering away).

According to Jo Bailey Wells, the very manner in which God speaks to God’s people through prophets is intrinsically *relational.* And thanks to scholars like Walter Brueggemann in particular, the church is waking up to the fact that Hebrew Bible prophetic language is not neutral or merely *descriptive* (“Jack loves Jill”) but *expressive, engaging, committing*—always seeking to evoke a response (“I love you”). Precisely because the language seeks a response, its outworking will depend on the nature of that response. An announcement of coming disaster, for example, implicitly seeks a response that will enable the disaster to be averted.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And here in Jeremiah 18:1-12, we find that the early verses offer the background picture familiar from our hymnody: *the potter has total mastery over clay.* But the imagery allows for depicting both *sovereignty* and *flexibility.* In short, God’s plans do not function like *blueprints*—whereby one mistake ruins everything. When things go wrong there is *scope* for new initiative and re-creation. God re-cycles![[3]](#footnote-3)

Like most artists, the potter finds that the first attempt wasn’t a huge success, and the original plan is *research* that leads to an improved outcome next time round. That’s how art works. Art doesn’t fundamentally lie in the creation of the material. The material is a given—to be understood, practiced upon, cherished, for sure, but not created. Art lies in the re­creation of that material in a new form, according to a governing idea or set of ideas.

And this is a good way to understand *Christian faith,* as well. Christianity is not about imagining something perfect called creation and straining to get ourselves back to that ideal state; it’s about taking the material of humankind and the surrounding world and universe, exploring the form of a relationship between God and us, and contemplating the governing idea that God the artist will go to any lengths to restore that relationship.

In the words of Athanasius, *“When a portrait . . . becomes [damaged] through external stains . . . the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material.”* This, too, is the story of our faith, that God does not [reject] us as flawed but reworks us into something more beautiful.

And the agent of this remarkable artistic project (for Christians) is Jesus. We are his portfolio. Vincent van Gogh wrote: *“Christ lived serenely, as a greater artist, despising marble and clay as well as color, working in living flesh . . . this matchless artist made neither statues nor pictures . . . [but] loudly proclaimed that he made . . .*living*people, immortals.”* In other words, Jesus heals the diseased and comforts the distressed, and makes them icons of the beauty of God.

Paul says that Jesus is *“the image of the invisible God”:* not that God the artist created Jesus the material and form, but that Jesus is the ultimate depiction of God’s way of turning us from formless material into works of glorious and eternal art. Theologically we call this *justification* and it’s the work of Jesus. Continuing to work with the material that we are and redeeming the form according to the idea or pattern of God’s grace is called *sanctification* and is the work of the Holy Spirit. Augustine, describing our resurrected bodies, says that an artist who makes an unsatisfactory statue need not throw it away but simply moisten the material and remix it. He calls God the almighty artist who removes our shortcomings and makes us beautiful like never before.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Think of it this way:

There is a wonderful book, titled: The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography, by the Orthodox monk-scholar Fr. Maximos Constas.

Fr. Maximos Constas has an eye for *ambiguity.* For Constas, the art of the icon requires a certain strangeness, a disruption of the symmetries that naturally please the eye, in order to transport the viewer from the image to its divine original. Nowhere is this strangeness more apparent than in the majestic sixth-century Christ Pantocrator of Sinai [a title of Christ represented as the ruler of the universe, especially in Byzantine church decoration], an icon whose asymmetry has been the subject of endless commentary. Using a split photography technique, Constas discovered *“a timid, slightly sad-looking young man . . . yearning for contact and love”* on one side and *“a ponderous Titan, aloof to all relations”* on the other.

Some interpreters think that this duality is a lesson in Chalcedonian Christology, but Constas suggests that the real subject is *“the paradoxical co-existence of mercy and judgment.”* The effect is intentionally disturbing: *“Beholding the face of Christ, the viewer . . . judges his own likeness poor and disfigured.”* Yet the ultimate message is a hopeful one, for the tender side of Christ’s face, commanding the viewer’s left visual field (which is favored, Constas notes, by our asymmetrical brain), is what unites the composition. It seems that the iconographer instinctively understood how to portray the polarity of divine mercy and judgment in such a way that mercy would be undimmed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Friends, works of art remind us that we are *God’s artifacts*—sometimes beautiful, challenging, profound, incomplete, delicate, or mysterious. As we return again and again to magnificent art works, which stretch our understanding of material, form, and idea, we turn even more inspired to one another, seeing new treasures, absorbing texture, and rewarding relationship.

Ask yourself: *what is a church except a community in which we see the artist at work refining, caressing, transforming, remolding, and restoring?*

Artworks invite, inspire, and provoke us to allow the Holy Spirit to make us into something good, beautiful, and true.

*Which of us can say that we are not vessels that are broken in the potter’s hands? Which of us cannot say, looking at the idea of a church as a community in which people are being transformed by the artistry of God, that our deepest longing is to be remolded by that potter into something even more beautiful?*

According to Sam Wells, *“the art of congregational life is about starting with who we are and what life has given and done to us, and discovering together, through the imagination of God, a form we would never otherwise have assumed.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

As Calvin Didier (a former pastor of this church) said:

*“When art and religion cohabit, they conspire to transcend the limiting perimeters of our lives whatever the nature of those frontiers. So each prophet, priest, or saint revealed in paint, stone, or stained glass exalts human destiny … With religion in pursuit of the saving grace that transforms life, art can be sacramental. Art is an outward and visible sign. At its best, art externalizes grace.[[7]](#footnote-7)*

*Let us pray --*

1. Thanks to Carol Zaleski, Professor of World Religions at Smith College who jogged my memory by sharing a similar story! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jo Bailey Wells, *Blogging Toward Sunday,* The Christian Century, September 4, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sam Wells, *Christ the Artist, We the Portfolio,* The Christian Century, January 25, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Carol Zaleski, *The Buddha and the Pantocrator,* The Christian Century, January 12, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sam Wells, *Christ the Artist, We the Portfolio,* The Christian Century, January 25, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Calvin Whitefield Didier, *The House of Hope Presbyterian Church* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)