Malcolm Clemens Young Jeremiah 18:1-11

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, 2C32 Psalm 139:1-5, 13-17

13 Pentecost (Proper 18C) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist Philemon 1-21

Sunday 4 September 2022 Luke 14:25-33

**You Are God’s Art**

“… go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words” (Jer. 18).

We have a stained glass window with a larger than life image of the astronaut John Glenn in his spacesuit. Like him, this morning we will travel a great distance in a short time through three little sermons each based on a different reading.

1. The first sermon is called, “Hating Your Life.” The world’s Anglican bishops met together at this summer’s Lambeth Conference in England. A group of bishops issued a press release condemning same sex marriage. It demands, “repentance by the revisionist provinces,” and goes on to state that we cannot all be in communion if we have two different opinions about marriage and sexuality.[[1]](#endnote-1)

We experience this kind of Christianity frequently here in North America. All of us encounter Christians who seem to have absolute confidence in knowing precisely who God is and that they are doing exactly what God wants them to do. Often they seem to believe that God hates people whose faith is different than their own. Let me point out that lacking this kind of confidence is not the same thing as lacking faith.

In so many ways God will remain a mystery to us. The gospels do not contain simple instructions for us to follow, they do not mention abortion or homosexuality. Instead they offer an approach to living, an intervention in our lives that confronts us with hard questions.

Jesus in the Gospel of Luke says that his listeners need to calculate the cost of following him the way a builder needs to understand the expense of materials to construct a tower or a king needs to figure out the number of warriors required to win a war. Jesus talks about hating your parents, wife, children… “even life itself” (Lk. 14). The preacher Barbra Brown Taylor says that if we came here today thinking that we were disciples of Jesus Christ this reading clearly shows that we are not. We are more like friends of disciples than actual disciples ourselves.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We may feel a sense of despair, that we could never be capable of devotion like this, but at times we surprise ourselves. The truth is that Jesus does changes us. We do not always simply live for ourselves. On August 12 at the Chautauqua Institution a man rushed on the stage and began to stab the novelist Salman Rushdie.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Many years ago religious leaders in Iran encouraged their followers to kill Rushdie and this assassin would have succeeded if it had not been for Rushdie’s audience. Instead of running away, they leapt from their seats and saved the writer from being killed. When it came to the choice between witnessing this terrible injustice or in a sense, hating their own life, they chose to risk sacrificing themselves.

Rushdie once said that it is not just his right to speak that was damaged by this threat, but there are 138 million adult readers in the United States and our right to read is also endangered by tyrants. We know that writers in Russia, Ukraine, China, Turkey, Afghanistan and many other places are being tortured and killed. Their parents, spouses, children are being put at risk by their actions and yet they choose something higher than their own life. And sometimes we do too.

2. My second sermon is called, “Where reconciliation happens.” Cathy Stevens told me about her trepidation at the prospect of reading Paul’s Letter to Philemon at 11:00 a.m. service. She will be the only one to read an entire book of the Bible to us over the course of the next three years. Every year I discover so many new worlds in scripture. This may be the first time I realized the extent to which The Book of Philemon summarizes all of the Apostle Paul’s theology.

When people come to me seeking pastoral care, it might be a question of faith, or because something terrible has happened. But mostly it has to do with the greatest challenge of our lives – how can we be reconciled to the people in our life. This week for homework I want you to physically write a list of the five people, living or dead, who you most need to be reconciled to. Then spend the rest of the week carrying this paper with you and praying for them.

You may be surprised by a sense of how impossible the task of making amends is. You may be separated from people you are supposed to love because of issues having to do with substance abuse or mental illness. You may just inhabit fundamentally different thought-worlds or have mutually exclusive political viewpoints.

Onesimus a slave has run away from his owner Philemon and found refuge with Paul in the vast expanse of urban Rome. Every social and cultural force seems to ensure that these two people can never be in a relationship of truth with each other. And yet Paul reaches out to both of them. On the one hand he embraces Onesimus the slave and says, he is my child, my own heart. And on the other hand he embraces Philemon the slave owner saying you are my partner, my fellow worker; I have received much joy and encouragement from your love.

At the very center of this is the idea that although Paul could command it, he says, “I appeal to you on the basis of love” (Philemon). Imagine him holding the hand of each and bringing them together through the cross of Jesus. Imagine yourself brought together in such a way with the one who is estranged from you. Where does reconciliation happen? It starts within you in the place where you honor that freedom which every person has.

3. My final sermon is called “You Are God’s Art.” The preacher Sam Wells talks about art as a combination of material, form and idea. The material could be clay, the form could be a chalice, the idea could be a common cup that we share in communion. The point is that the artist does not make something out of nothing but out of what already exists and that art is spiritual, it realizes a kind of purpose, strives for a goal; it is shaped by invisible forces.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In a vision God invites Jeremiah to watch a potter at work. “The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel” (Jer. 18). This is the heart of what it means to be a Christian. The purpose of all this is to transform our lives.

Wells says that Christianity is not about imagining a perfect world and straining to get back to that original goodness. Instead, God takes the actual material of our lives and realizes an idea. The idea behind all reality is that God will go to any length to restore our relationship to her. St. Athanasius (296-373) describes us a kind of portrait (obscured by sin and) that God carefully restores. St. Augustine (354-430) writes that resurrection is like God reshaping the clay of ourselves into a new statue.

God starts with what we already are, with what we have been given and with what has been done to us. We have been blessed by our creation and we have been harmed by the world. Parts of ourselves that we may not even like may become transformed under God’s fashioning hand. Through the imagination of God we are becoming something new.

For the last six months I have been praying Psalm 19 “Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me; then shall I be whole and sound…” This has been a frightening thought, the idea that what is happening may be how God makes me more humble.

In church together we see the artist at work, not only in history but in each other’s lives. God’s hand is on us. Our longing for a deeper goodness, a truer existence, the beauty we were created for, is being realized.

For over fifty years Everett Davis has been our brother in Christ, worshipping here as a deeply proud member of our congregation. He worked at the stock exchange but we all knew him for his fantastic sense of style. On Thursday we had his funeral. His sister Gwen brought dozens and dozens of his hats and different bottles of his cologne. Everyone could bring something home that was his. I think the people who really knew Everett could see God, the artist, at work in him.

Let me conclude with a poem, a kind of hymn that Everett wrote: “The work I’ve done – it seems so small, / Sometimes it seems like nothing at all, / But when I stand before my God, / I want to hear Him say, “Well done.” / May the work I’ve done speak for me. // May the work I’ve done speak for me, / When I’m resting in the grave, / There is nothing that can be said, / May the work I’ve done speak for me.”

“May the life I live speak for me,. /When the best I try to live, / my mistakes He will forgive; / May the life I live speak for me. // May the service I give speak for me. / When I’ve done the best I can, / And my friends don’t understand, / May the service that I give speak for me.”

In our best moments we are all living for something greater than ourselves. We are where reconciliation happens. We are God’s work of art.

Images:
Gabriel Loire’s Clerestory window of John Glenn

Group picture of Lambeth bishops

Photograph of Barbra Brown Taylor

Picture of Salman Rushdie

Making pottery on a spinning wheel?

Everett Davis at Carnivale

1. <https://www.thegsfa.org/_files/ugd/6e992c_2f554b72149d495bb17635b79bb3fc22.pdf> and <https://www.thegsfa.org/_files/ugd/6e992c_8951f0f7ce4b4e7083f877b4b38294a2.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “The preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor once began [a sermon (hit “Preview”)](https://books.google.com/books?id=L-YAJDy2RH4C&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=Barbara+Brown+Taylor+%22Friends+of+the+Disciples%22&source=bl&ots=k-KLv9d7Vf&sig=ACfU3U02ZfG8zWbYoKKBeT9cyHMXotSrrw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiS8p7RuLPkAhWsxFkKHd8cDloQ6AEwAnoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=Barbara%20Brown%20Taylor%20%22Friends%20of%20the%20Disciples%22&f=false) on this passage from Luke this way: “If any of you came here this morning believing that you were disciples of Jesus Christ, then I guess that you know better now.” Her point is that, if we’re honest with ourselves, most of us are less like “disciples” and more like “friends of the disciples.” Matthew Boulton, “Giving Up: SALT’s Commentary for the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost,” SALT, 29 August 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/9/3/giving-up-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-thirteenth-week-after-pentecost> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Henry Reese, “I Was Onstage With Salman Rushdie That Day, and What I Saw Was Remarkable,” *The New York Times*, 2 September 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/opinion/salman-rushdie-free-speech-writers.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Samuel Wells, “Christ the Artist, We the Portfolio,” *The Christian Century*, 25 January 2017. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/christ-artist-we-portfolio?code=7rlomdt2SVAek47wXy58&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=d84f6ce2b2-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCP_2022-08-29&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-d84f6ce2b2-86237307> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)