

Sermon – Art and Imagination
Scripture: Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21
Sunday, May 21, 2017
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Our first scripture reading is Acts 17:22-31. Paul, speaking in Athens, affirms the signs of faith in the philosophies and artistry of the Greek culture and reflects on the altar “to an unknown god.” Paul then affirms the God he knows; the Creator God whose image cannot be formed by the art and imagination of mortals and who raised Christ from the dead. Hear now God’s Holy word.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, God who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God's own self gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us. 28 For "In God we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are God's offspring." 29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now God commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and of this God has given assurance to all by raising Christ from the dead."

Our second scripture reading is John 14:15-21. This is a continuation of Christ’s Farewell Discourse and the first of four teachings in John’s gospel about God’s spirit. Jesus names the spirit as “Advocate,” from the Greek word *parakletos*. Jesus reassures disciples of all times and places with the promise of the “Paraclete” – a companion, advocate, and counselor. In the absence of Jesus’ physical presence, followers of Christ receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in which *they live and move and have their being*. The spirit empowers those with whom the spirit dwells to speak and to live Christ’s love.

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and the Father will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees the Spirit nor knows the Spirit. You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and the Spirit will be in you. 18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

The title of the sermon: Art and Imagination

The text: Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. Acts 17:29

Let us pray. Holy Creator God, in whom we live and move and have our being, in all the ways you have made yourself known to us, you are greater than any image we can create. And yet we pause to reflect on all the ways the gift of art and imagination deepens our understanding of who you are and who you call us to be. As we seek to hold these two truths simultaneously, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

On this Founders' Sunday we gather to affirm the progressive vision of the Reverend Albert Hale that continues to shape and energize the ministries of Westminster Presbyterian Church. This year's theme "Albert and Art" is both a tribute to the creativity and discipline of the pastor for whom we named the circle of our endowment campaign and an opportunity to honor the art and imagination which enrich our lives and deepen our faith.

How grateful we are for the art that surrounds us in this beautiful gothic sanctuary. These resurrected stained glass windows tell the story of our faith in colorful and vibrant images. Stained glass windows over the ages have painted a picture of the biblical stories for those in church who could not read or write yet who could imagine what the images portrayed: a God who joined us in our humanity to conquer death by dying on a cross.

In a recent publication of [Faith and Leadership](#) (August, 2011), Dr. Richard Hays, New Testament Professor at Duke Divinity School reflects on why those who are engaged in the church's ministry care about the arts. He surmises.

First, we care because arts create the imaginative symbolic world in which we live and move; we are constantly surrounded by images, music and stories. And so if we seek to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5), we need to reflect critically and faithfully on the artistic media that profoundly shape the consciousness of our culture. How does the architecture of the buildings in which we live and work shape us? How do iTunes and Netflix tell us stories about who we are and what we should desire? How does the diction of advertising stunt our capacity to speak kindly and truthfully to one another? If theological education focuses only on ideas and fails to reflect on their artistic milieu, we will be quite literally tone-deaf or insensible to major elements of human experience, and we will fail to perceive ways in which the gospel may challenge and transform us.

Second, Dr. Hays reminds us, *it is often through the arts that we most deeply internalize the truths of our faith.*

Finally, he affirms, because we are made in the image of God the creator, we are destined to be creators of images and stories. It's in our flesh and bones. God is the great artist who conceived and constructed the intricate cosmos, the sculptor who shaped the human form out of the mud of the earth. God is the poet who imagined Israel's improbable epic drama ... -- and then inspired psalmists and prophets to sing the story, and to re-imagine it for later generations living new chapters in the drama... The more fully we acknowledge God's creative power, the more freely we will celebrate the creative expression through which we respond to God's grace.

Oscar Wilde, Irish novelist, essayist and poet who became one of London's most popular playwrights in the 1890's is remembered for his quote: "*Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.*"

Oscar Wilde, in his pithy way, foreshadows the thoughts of Dr. Hays and makes us wonder...
“Do we create the art or does the art create us? We must always be mindful that what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us.

In the spirit of “Albert and Art” and the creative expression through which we respond to God’s grace, I would like to close with Oscar Wilde’s imaginative short story “The Selfish Giant.”

The selfish giant had a beautiful garden. He visited a friend for seven years, during which time the children would stop in his garden on their way home from school and play. When the giant returned to his castle, he chased the children out of his garden. Then he built a high wall and said, “This is my garden, I want it all to myself.” He put up a sign that said “Trespassers will be prosecuted.”

The children were very sad because they had no place to play. As time passed the selfish giant’s garden grew to be a sadder and sadder place. Soon it became winter all the time...never spring.

One day the selfish giant woke up and spring was in part of the garden. The children had found a hole in the wall and came in to play. When they saw the giant, they ran out and winter returned. Only one little boy did not run. He remained beneath a tree, his eyes filled with tears. When the giant lifted him up, it blossomed into spring.

The giant realized the children brought the spring and broke down the wall he had built. Every day the giant welcomed the children into his garden. He celebrated all the seasons each year and grew old surrounded by the children. Only the little boy he lifted into the tree that day, whom he loved, never returned and when he asked the children about him, they did not know who he was.

Years went over, and the Giant grew very old. One winter morning he looked out of his window and saw the most marvelous sight. In the farthest corner of the garden was a tree quite covered with lovely blossoms and underneath it stood the little boy he had loved. He hastened across the grass, and came near the child. And when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, “Who hath dared to wound thee?” For on the palms of the child’s hands were the prints of two nails, and the print of two nails were on the little feet.

“Who hath dared to wound thee?” cried the Giant; “Tell me, that I may take my sword and slay him.”

“Nay! answered the child, “These are the wounds of Love.”

“Who art thou?” said the giant and a strange awe fell on him, and he knelt before the little child.

And the little child smiled on the Giant, and said to him, “You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise.”

When the children returned, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, covered with white blossoms.

Thanks be to God for the wounds of Christ which make us whole...and for the visual, musical and literary arts which open our eyes, ears and imaginations to the wonder, mystery and grace of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.