

September 4, 2022
"Works of Art, in Progress"
Jeremiah 18:1-6 / Psalm 139:1-15
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

I am not an artist, at least not in the conventional sense. I suppose the closest I come is as a writer. As a journalist for a brief time, as a grant writer at different points in my work life, as a campus minister and now pastor, a writer of sermons and occasional liturgy. In that way, I know something of what it's like to put myself into creating something, to express myself BY creating something, to make it my own – or at least try to.

But beyond convention, the truth is that we are all artists. We all know what it's like to put ourselves into creating something, to express ourselves by creating something, to make it our own. As Pablo Picasso once said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up."

We are all creative, or at least have the capacity to be. Beyond merely traditional forms of art, in which we may or may not excel, we can be artists through the work we do and the way we do it, in the way we live, in the ways we see and engage and transform the world around us. In the ways we are able to imagine beyond the world as it is, life as it is, to what it can yet be. Possibilities to make something out of nothing, or turn something into something better.

As the German artist, teacher and art theorist, Joseph Beuys, suggested, "Every human being is an artist, a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives."

And as the British artist, Henry Moore, said, "To be an artist is to believe in life." Which is to say, theologically speaking, to share in the divine and ongoing work of creation and recreation. To invoke divine imagination and embrace our calling as co-creators with the God of life, of all life. To help point to its overwhelming beauty in the midst of its often overwhelming brokenness.

We are the artists, and we are also the art. Works of art. As Eric Overby wrote in his book, *Senses*: “Art is that which helps you see beauty in the mundane ... Let my life be a work of art.”

Our two scripture readings this morning point to God as the attentive artist.

From the Psalmist, as Bruce just read for us, we find God the textile artist – God the knitter, the weaver, the seamstress. God who searches us and knows us better than we know ourselves. Who is with us from the beginning, with us wherever we go. Who longs to bring us back into the light when the darkness overwhelms.

“For it was you who FORMED my inward parts; you KNIT me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

“My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately WOVEN in the depths of the earth.”

“You HEM me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.”

God is the artist and we are God’s handiwork. God’s little works of art, fearfully and wonderfully made, each of us unique and all of us a reflection of divine creativity and imagination within the broader canvass that is Creation – the earth, and the universe that stretches mysteriously beyond our knowing.

That is the good news of creation!

And then from Jeremiah, we get an image of God the potter. The relationship between potter and clay, between molder and molded, between shaper and shaped, illustrating the relationship between God and God’s creation.

“Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.” Like clay in the potter’s hand, so are we in God’s hand.

Now if you’ve ever worked a potter’s wheel, you know it’s WAY harder than it looks. I tried it once in art class when I was in high school, and it was a disaster. Nothing good

came of it. Nothing ever came together, it just kept falling apart, spinning out of control. I gave up.

But God is no amateur. God does not give up. The vessel may at times become spoiled, wobbly, out of balance, unrecognizable, may even feel ruined, but always, always reworked. God the potter, the divine Spirit within and among us, is always reworking, recreating. God the potter does not shut the wheel down and quit. God the potter does not throw the clay away and start over.

That is the good news of RE-CREATION. God is not finished with us yet. We are works of art, all of us, and we are also works in progress. By God's grace, "moving onto perfection," as Methodism's founder, John Wesley, described it – seeking to be "perfected in love."

The grace-filled journey of faith, the spiritual life, is about acknowledging that truth – and opening ourselves and our lives to the reworking in the midst of all that life brings. Through both joy and pain, success and failure, gift and loss.

Inviting the gentle touch of the divine potter within us to shape and reshape us more fully in the divine image, to soften our hearts, to bring us more fully into authenticity and abundance and our rightful place within the divine tapestry of creation. Seeking to live more fully within the divine heart and the divine imagination, and to embody and reflect more fully the divine love to which we are all called.

Irenaeus, the 2nd-century Christian bishop, put it this way:

*It is not you who shape God;
It is God who shapes you.
If then you are the work of God,
await the hand of the Artist
who does all things in due season.
Offer the Potter your heart, soft and tractable.
And keep the form in which the Artist has fashioned you.
Let your clay be moist,
lest you grow hard and lose
the imprint of the Potter's fingers.*

When we sing, 'Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me ... melt me, mold me, fill me, use me,' as we did this morning, we are acknowledging both the truth that we are works in progress, and our deepest desire to maintain the imprint of the Potter's fingers as God's works of art. To be renewed in reflecting the God in whose image we are created, the God who is love itself.

Spirit of the living God, God the artist, melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Bring me to life again and again and again.

MELT ME down to my beloved and authentic essence. My God-given self. Melt me down to know who and whose I am.

MOLD ME into the shape of faith, hope and love. Mold me into the shape of life made ever new.

FILL ME with goodness. Fill me with abundance. With joy. With humility. With wisdom. With vision beyond my own self and my own life. Fill me with imagination beyond the world as it is. With the assurance that I am yours, and so with the confidence and courage to be myself. Fill me with the truth that we all belong to you and to each other and to creation, and so with the grace to treat ourselves and each other accordingly.

USE ME for love, love above all else, on earth as it is in heaven. Use me to be your hands and feet in the world, to be the artist you need me to be. Use me as you used Jesus.

And so, friends, imagining God as knitter, as weaver, as seamstress, as potter, as artist, as creator, and embracing yourselves both as God's works of art, in progress, and as God's co-artists, co-creators, let me close with a poem prayer from Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

*There are those who hope to get through life unaffected,
untouched.
But I say: life, affect me. God, touch me.
Let this life and all its pains and beauties shape me.
For whatever genius you place
in the wrenching hands of fate and all that befalls me,*

*you also work your art in me;
and it is only in the dance between hand and clay
that the masterpiece is born.
I'd rather be shaped by life than by my own little self.
So, yes, I will let beauty shape gratitude and wonder in me,
and suffering shape patience and gentleness,
and failure shape humility and perseverance,
and pain shape sensitivity to the heart,
and even loss, oh, the firm hand of loss pressing on the clay,
shape love and more loveliness, and attention to this day.
I will be shaped, molded and remade a thousand times,
because all the Artist ever means is to perfect me,
I who have always been, ever from the beginning,
dust of the earth you have gathered up,
shaped with loving hands, and breathed your life into.
Shape me, God, create me again,
and keep breathing new life into me.*

Shape us, God, create us again, and keep breathing new life into us.

May it be so.