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“Our First Century of Making Art”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia

Season of Advent, Love Sunday, December 19, 2021

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Luke 1:39-55

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Our First Century of Making Art

This morning I am going to offer a meditation on the arts,
on the role this church has played in the arts for our first 100 years,
and then a few thoughts on my colleague in Christ Kathy Westbrook,
who is retiring at the end of this month.

Then I am going to open up the conversation and share the microphone,
inviting you and yours to offer a word or image on any of the above:
the arts, the church's 100 anniversary, or our beloved church organist.

Art isn't nice.

"Art isn't nice"
is the shortened version
of a comment made by Bertolt Brecht,
creator of the Three Penny Opera.

Brecht said, *"Art is not a mirror held up to reality
but a hammer with which to shape it."*

Brecht reminded us that art – at its best -- is a life shaper and a community builder.
Art changes people, and in doing so, can change society.

You know as well as I that
art is imagination.
Art is hope.
Art is life.

Art takes the place of words, expressing and releasing into the world
what we feel and think
yet choose to not communicate with mere words.

Choreographer Pavlova said,
*"Do you think I could have danced it
if I could have said it?"*

The arts – drawing, dance, design, sculpture, theater, music, and so much more –
the arts serve and emerge from our fingertips and toes and lips and senses
to communicate that which must be proclaimed,
expressing that for which there are no words,
conveying a message that must, absolutely must be set free,

set free by one soul to fly to another soul.

Consider the artist known as JR.

Who ever imagined that photography
could be installed with paste and glue
into streets, prison yards,
apartment buildings, boundary walls between nations?

Born in France in 1983,
JR was an average teenager with a passion for graffiti.
He lived graffiti and truly enjoyed the movement.
His graffiti moniker was Face 3.
However, the day he found a camera on the Parisian subway
his perception on street art changed.
He photographed other graffiti artists
who communicate messages via walls and street art.
He tracked “invisible” neighbors in the forbidden undergrounds of Paris.
In 2004, JR photographed the riots that broke out in the banlieues
and pasted up large prints of their faces around the city.

In September 2017,
while echoes of Americans chanting “Build the Wall”
reverberated around the world,
JR traveled along the US-Mexico border.
He snapped a photo of a Mexican baby named Kikito,
who lives with his family close to the border in Tecate.
Kikito was in his crib, standing, holding the top lip, watching, waiting, wondering.

JR enlarged the photo of Kikito to the size of this sanctuary.
He erected a scaffolding on the Mexican side of the U.S.–Mexico border,
pasting the photo of Kikito onto the scaffolding,
so we see the toddler, standing, hands on the lip,
curiously peering over the fence.

On the last day of scaffold installation,
a 50-foot table was built on the Mexican side of the fence,
and on the American side a 50-foot tablecloth was spread out,
as if there was only one 100-foot table,
one table with no barrier bisecting it in the middle.
Mariachi bands on both sides of the border
played the same music, in sync, making a joyful noise.
Tacos and refreshments were served and shared,

freely offered, gladly received.
A festive picnic ensued.
Food was passed through the fence,
and was eaten off the table surfaced with a photograph
picturing the eyes of a young undocumented U.S. immigrant
(Known as "Dreamers").
The image of her left eye was on a table on the Mexico side.
The image of her right eye was on the tarp on the U.S. side,
When viewed from above, like from a drone,
her two eyes on the tabletop surface
created the impression of a single, long dining table looking up,
looking to the heavens, dreaming of a day...

JR fully expected the picnic to be shut down by the US Border Patrol,
However one of the U.S. border agents showed up,
then shared a cup of tea with the artist.

If that wasn't the Great Banquet, initiated by art and courage and tacos, what is?
And even for those of us who weren't there, we who anticipate the Great Banquet of God
we can taste the tacos,
hear the Mariachi music,
share in the dreamer's moment,
the day walls were ignored, and community is fostered.

Art isn't nice.

Art is profound, cosmic, transformative.
Art overcomes harsh barriers and false boundaries.
The image of a child named Kikito peering out from a crib,
looking past the barrier to see your eyes,
wondering if you'll love him,
pick him up,
play with him...this is what art does, becomes, transcends.

Art shapes lives, builds community, changes the world.

Art isn't nice.

Art is here.
First Christian Church of Decatur has been a friend of the arts for a century now.
Truth be told, this church is more than a friend;
this significant congregation is a catalyst.

The grace of God was visited upon the souls of 23 citizens of Decatur
gathered together on Christmas Day in the Shealy home in 1921.
100 years ago this Christmas Day

our founding members signed a charter
that established the First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia.
And the world has not been the same since.

Over these first 100 years of breaking ground and bearing grace,
this church stepped out for mission and community service,
and we stood tall for inclusivity.
Our trademarks of hospitality, healing and hope
empowered the congregation
to support signing the Atlanta Civil Rights Statement of 1957,
to become racially integrated
in the early 1960s,
to include women and men as elders and deacons
in the early 1970s,
to be open and accepting of all souls
in the late 1990s,
to officially declare ourselves an Open and Affirming Congregation
in the 2010s.

And through it all we sang the songs of the faith.
We sing our lives out loud.
We play musical instruments and make joyful noises to the Lord.
We send our choirs and handbell choirs out into the world
to sing and ring in faraway places and in retirement homes across town.

After 9-11,
we hosted a local painter's canvas across the baptistry,
an oil painting depicting the tragedy of the Twin Towers' destruction
and the hope of a people intent on thriving after trauma.

We tell the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ
in dramatic fashion,
telling His story through pageants and plays and performance art.

We host concerts, orchestras, choirs, acting troupes,
world-renowned soloists
and nervous children in their first performances.

15 years ago the Midway College Chorale performed here on a Sunday morning.
One college student sported a nose ring.
She asked me if she should remove it; I said no, be yourself.
It was must have been the first nose ring
many in our congregation had ever seen,
based on the way our folks stared at her, jaws agape.

There is a common theme
 running through us,
 us being the musicians and artists,
 the dancers and performers,
 the writers and singers of the songs of our faith,
Our common theme is message.
Our art bears a message, which gives it the gravitas to last and be lasting.

Art isn't nice.

Art bears a message.

Art has purpose.

Art tells, sings, portrays, proclaims, performs an idea.

The message is love.

Love is the message.

God loves you.

We love God, and we choose to use whatever is at our disposal, our gifts, our talents,
 our voices, our senses, to make this truth known.

We have been making art here, there, everywhere for 100 years, so far.

There is one among us whose art has been shared in this space
 for 46 of the 100 years.

Kathy Westbrook has shown up and lead us in worship for almost 5 decades,
 week in, week out, with grace, hope, joy, and love.

She endured and enhanced the presence of 4 senior ministers and 3 Choir Directors.

She has played for countless funerals and weddings and special services.

My words to describe Kathy are:

Amazing.

Incredible.

Honest.

Tenacious,

Dedicated,

Persevering,

Faithful,

Talented,

Always, Always, Always Well Prepared.

Friend

Now is a wonderful moment for you, my friends,
 to share a word or image about Art,

or our First 100 years as a significant church,
or Kathy Westbrook.

All Power Be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!