



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

February 12, 2017

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

A Rule for Living Faith—

Genesis 2:4b-25; Matthew 3:13-16

with Creativity

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

It probably began for us all with something like stickers and finger paints, crayons and markers. As toddlers, before we really speak, we make the crazy squiggles and circles, and tentative strokes on paper. Maybe random lines or dots. Before we conceive of anything particular we're trying to express, our personalities start to show in how we work—with controlled detail, or unbounded exuberance. And on the birthday card to a family member, our parents write our name, in case anyone wondered. Or confused it for the illegible scrawl of their parents, like me!

As we begin to understand our world a bit better, our work gets a little more defined, as well. Basic outlines of what we see in nature, structures, people ... all still pretty simple like stick figures. From those earliest days doesn't our creative impulse sort of dance between elation—"Mommy, mommy, look!"—and frustration if we can't seem to get out what we see and feel inside. We crumple and throw it away. If we're lucky, we receive comfort and encouragement to keep trying. And we've likely all had experiences, looks or comments, that demean or dismiss our effort and depress that creative impulse. I'm afraid it doesn't get much better than that for me. It makes me appreciate the abilities of others!

Friends, few of us are like Mozart composing music at age four, or reaching anything like artistic abilities of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, or Van Gogh. Few of

us can dance like Misty Copeland or write like Joanne K. Rowling. Most of us by comparison would be poor puzzling impressions of such masters. Still, friends, there's a creative spark in every one of us—flickering like a candle, flitting like a butterfly, flowing like a river, soaring like eagles, leaping like dolphins, stretching like a tree. All of us need to express it. Think of all the ways we do. There's classic artistry of painting, sculpture, sewing and knitting, acting, music of all kinds. What is it for you? Gardening, wood-working, plastering, building maintenance, car repair, attorneys interpreting law, engineering, landscape architecture? What makes your heart and mind shine? Cooking, home decorating, photography, industrial design, desk-top publishing, poetry, literature? Variations abound in the simple fact that no life exists, no accomplishments or innovations achieved, no food on our tables or buildings like this beauty without creativity.

The Bible tells us it all begins with God. Now much has been said and written about these verses from Genesis over the ages. Like art, some of it good and moving, others less helpful and more off-putting. First thing I hope we see today is simply that Genesis gives us more like basic stick figures of detail than water lilies by Monet. We flesh out the rest—the character of human nature, a lush Garden of Eden, apples as that tree fruit Adam eats, consequences on our relationships with God, others, and our world. Today we center on the clear message that from the beginning the Holy Source of All Life calls and empowers us to share the work of creation. In the first story in Genesis, God creates darkness and light, day and night, sun and moon, and gives everything life—imagine plankton and bacteria, tulips and oak trees, rainbow trout, blue birds, grizzly bears, our beloved pets, and finally, ultimately you and me in the Divine image and deemed very good. The second creation story affirms our special place as humans, made first in the list this time and given responsibility to name every other living creature. To

name, that is to exert some influence for good or ill. God trusts us to till and keep the garden, cultivating and nurturing abundant life for all creation. In the image of God's love, imprinted on our DNA, implanted like a seed in our psyche, in some way we all have the gift of creativity.

As John begins the story of God's love in Jesus, he says it this way. All life comes from God. And this life is like light for all people—light in which our eyes see beauty; our minds discern what's good; a creative spark in our hearts. As followers of Jesus, John urges, we show forth the divine love that gives life, we reflect the light of Christ. In terms of faith, that's what our creativity conveys. At our best, from children with markers to all our adult ways bright and beautiful, we radiate life, hope, and goodness, like Holy Light in the darkness.

The past two weeks, we've talked about a Rule for Living Faith. Not rules to be enforced by legalistic judgment. Rather regular patterns, routines, practices which help us live in the fullness of Love with God and other people. First, we talked about how contemplative practices center us in God's grace— like prayer, reading the Bible and other books, on-line resources. However it works differently for us at different times, we all need to feel close with God. Then we talked about how relationships with others encourage us, broaden our perspectives, and keep us accountable as good stewards of our time, talents, money, and responsibilities. However introverted or extroverted, we all need one another. Today, we try to inspire creativity. All of us are creative in our way. Friends, feel comforted and encouraged. It's a holy gift. See it. Claim it. Use it in some way to fulfill a meaningful life.

I knew a man who loved fishing and duck-hunting. And he loved wood-carving and detailing. You'd have sworn the big bass on his living room wall just jumped out of the lake. And the duck decoys ... magnificent! Not hard to imagine a poor creature would swoop down and then wonder why it didn't quack back! Inspired by his beautiful work, by his radiant pleasure, I tried my own hand. He gave me a scrap block of basswood. And during Lent, some years ago, as a kind of spiritual discipline, I tried carving a cross. First using a chisel—I wasn't patient or accurate enough. Then a rotary drill tool—breaking blades, tearing through little sandpaper bits. Finally I got out a jigsaw and it came out lopsided, all not unlike everyday life. As I carved, I prayed for concerns of the world, frailties and conflicts with others, and failings in my own life. Amid the hurt and pain, fear and longing, I prayed God's love would transform it all, I suppose something like the grace and goodness of Eden. I made the cross a candle holder. You see, for me the symbol of candlelight in the darkness is one of the most poignant expressions of hope.

And the cross, of course, is our greatest reminder of God's saving love, God's power to redeem, to transform bad times and experiences, to resurrect life in the fullness of love. I believe that's what creativity does for us. Creativity becomes an expression of Sacred Grace that gave us life in the beginning, and saves us in Jesus. It's like when art gets used for therapy.

One of the most poignant, persistent, and inspiring examples I know of is a program called Bright Stars of Bethlehem. It was during one of the most violent and difficult times of fear and loss and oppression for the Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem. The Lutheran Pastor there, with his church, began several programs to resist despair, to heal and really nurture gifts and

talents in people of all ages. A hospital. A school. And a comprehensive program of the arts—painting, dancing, music ... which helped children process their experiences and live into hope of a better life, longing for light, peace, true love as they waited literally in the darkness.

A few years earlier we visited that church in Bethlehem. And I've talked with the pastor a couple of times since here in the States. Whether or not we've lived through such real threats, don't we all know how fear and stress can suppress our creativity? I know when I'm amidst conflict, unsure about something or someone, or simply worn out, my creative spark seems dim. Or even worse, my emotions twist my impulse toward cunning hurtful purposes. That's precisely when it's so important to rekindle our creativity—a favorite hobby or trying something new. I believe it can open our hearts to Holy Love beyond us, and bring us back to life, hope, gratitude, generosity, joy.

I like how Marilyn Chandler McEntyre expresses it. "Even the empty vessel is full." As if Light is dancing on surfaces and edges ... breaking into shocking colors ... we exercise our creativity—"hammer and polish, hew, and spin, learning what art teaches: that the best of our making bears witness to what lies beyond."ⁱ In a book of her poetry interpreting light and real life in Van Gogh's painting, she writes. "We are called by the Light into the light we can't yet bear without the shades and protections of mud, mortar, wood, canvas, and color. Art is a form of mercy that meets us where we are ... stretching us toward what can't be seen with the naked eye or fully understood, but recognized and claimed if we assent to what is offered."ⁱⁱ Friends, we are called by Holy Light into human light through art as a form of mercy, stretching us like canvas from where we are to the life

God offers. Friends, do we see it? Do we accept it? Do we assent to what is offered?

That's what Jesus tries to get his disciples to do. To see and accept and live fully into the life of love he tries to teach them. He's just given them the Beatitudes—a vision of how to share a blessed and beautiful life. Now he tries to get them to live it. Like salt that doesn't exist for itself, rather for purification, seasoning, preservative ... to create and bring out goodness in other things. Like light for all the world to see. It was, for Jesus, a time of heated political and religious debate about the course of their society. Tension ran high. Sound familiar? Occupied by Rome and after their Temple was destroyed, religious leaders range from guerilla fighters to strict rule followers.

Jesus offers a divine alternative. Kindle your lamp and let your light, your creative spark, the beauty and power of God's love in Christ shine through you. Whatever your gifts, live with creative, life-giving energy, so others will see it. Not so others will complement us, as if we're being judged at school solo and ensemble. Rather, play something like we hear great artists do sometimes—surreptitiously, in the middle of everyday life, like the YouTube videos of the great violinist Joshua Bell playing on a street corner or subway station. In the same way let our light shine before others for the glory of God. One of the earliest Christian leaders said: the glory of God is a human being fully alive! That's the creative purpose of this sermon—to get us all to live with creativity. Maybe it's been little better than a simple, child-like stick figure drawing. In any case, I hope all of us leave this beautiful sanctuary inspired to live into something creative. I won't believe you if anyone says you don't have it in you! I don't accept it! If you feel demeaned or dismissed, let me try to inspire you with one more story.

A woman came faithfully to a gathering called sip-n-stitch. They knitted, embroidered and sewed, while sipping coffee and nibbling donuts ... or birthday cake ... or any other excuse for sweets. Then she suffered a stroke. One side paralyzed. She couldn't hold yarn and stitch anymore, or even make it much to the weekly gatherings. Still, she told me, she began another creative hobby at home—doing puzzles. Imagine her single weakened hand reaching out for each individual piece, examining the colors and shapes, trying to see how it could fit. She bought a puzzle when she visited a relative who was dying. All the pieces were the same shape. Picture how she first worked for months on the border, and reached the end. The final two pieces didn't match and so she tore it apart and began again. Anyone who came by got in on the effort with her, she explained. They worked on smaller segments ... a face over here, a table, a window in the middle framing the One at the center of all things. Then one day her octogenarian husband still actively farming wheeled her in to church and with her sparkling eyes and radiant half-smile, she presented me with this gift—a completed reproduction of the Last Supper. It's beautiful. Da Vinci's light shines brightly across the ages. And even more, as the frame sits above another beautiful window in my office, as I see faces of disciples gathered around the open inviting radiance of Jesus Christ, I still picture Inez's face, and hear her voice, awed by every ounce of her effort, inspired to live likewise.

Likewise, we sew blankets for every baby baptized. We make hats and mittens for anyone who may need a little extra warmth in winter. We plaster the hallway ceiling just through that arch by the lectern. We decorate our sanctuary for Christmas and plant bushes and flowers outside. We make cards and arrange flowers. We write memoirs of our lives and share it with long-time friends for whom it brings a smile as their own stories and fond

memories arise. We play bells, we sing in the choir, we'll share the wonderful concert of Elizabeth and friends later today. And the many expressions of our creativity like this tableau go on and on and on.

Few of us are like Mozart or Michelangelo. And it doesn't matter. Even if it can often seem, dear friends, like we're able to do little more than barely piece life together, what's most important is that we express our personalities, the very good image of the Ground of All Being with the detail and the exuberance of Holy Love.

It begins for all of us with scribbles and circles and stick figures. The Bible reminds us it begins with God. Many the gifts, many the people, Christ be our light! Shine through our hearts into all places of darkness. Let every instrument of creativity be tuned for praise! Let all rejoice who have a voice, a marker or brush, a tool or knitting needle to raise. And may God give us living faith always! Allelulia!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, "Where the Light Comes In" in *The Light at the Edge* (Mckinleyville, CA: Fithian Press, 2006), 39.

ⁱⁱ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *The Color of Light* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 11.