

**THROUGH PARABLES AND PICTURES,
THROUGH STORIES AND SONGS**

This past spring Saugatuck's annual Women's Retreat focused on the theme: "Jesus in Our Lives." As a part of their time together, the women had the opportunity to view dozens of posters and prints representing various artists' depictions of Jesus. Some of these same posters were later displayed at our Maundy Thursday Agape Meal. The paintings and sculptures represented by the posters depicted Jesus as a white man, a black man, a bearded man, a laughing man, a crying man. They showed him in a wide array of scenes from the gospels, ranging from birth to death to resurrection.

The week after the retreat one of the women who had attended shared with me her excitement about one of the pictures in particular. It was a contemporary drawing of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is shown praying on the night he was arrested.

In the drawing, Jesus is down on one knee, one hand pressed to his forehead, the other to the ground. He is depicted as a very strong, very masculine man, yet one who is clearly in grief and pain. As my friend meditated on the picture, she found herself very moved, and stirred at a very deep, deep level.

This past week, as I secured her permission to tell this story, almost three months after it all happened, she was in tears as she remembered the experience. "I came out of it," she told me, "Feeling Jesus is truly my friend and guide. And I just knew he could help me go through something very painful."

When I asked if she knew who the artist was, she had no idea. But that didn't really matter. It was the drawing itself, and what the artist had communicated through it, that had served as a channel for God's Spirit to touch her soul. It had allowed her to connect with Jesus himself in a new and powerful way.

Walter Lippman once wrote, "Art enlarges experience by admitting us to the inner life of another [human being]." (*A Preface to Politics*)

That is exactly what happened to my friend. The drawing of Jesus praying in the Garden, allowed her to not only enter the inner life of the artist, but the inner life of Jesus. It allowed her to personally experience his inner strength.

I suppose someone could have given a lengthy lecture at the retreat, outlining a detailed theological understanding of Jesus. Someone could have passed out erudite monographs describing the various attributes of the Christ. And while such a scholarly approach may indeed have real value, it rarely leads to the kind of holy connection my friend found in and through that simple drawing. For the reality is

the arts are often able to speak to us in ways that transcend the merely intellectual. As Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote, “Art is not . . . the manifestation of some mysterious Idea of . . . God . . . [rather] it is a means of union among [people] joining them together in the same feelings” (From *What Is Art?* Quoted at length in *Philosophy: A Modern Encounter*, edited by Robert Paul Wolff)

Jesus himself realized the power of art. Not the visual arts—as a good Jew he would never have even considered using pictures to convey his message of God’s love. No, he used another art form. He told stories. Wonderful, seemingly simple stories. The Prodigal Son. The Lost Coin. The Good Samaritan. The Ten Talents. The Mustard Seed.

Although the Gospel of John relates several instances of Jesus offering lengthy theological discourses, most scholars agree that the primary way he taught was through the use of stories, what we have come to call parables. These usually short and commonplace tales find their way into one’s heart as well as into one’s head. Much like all good art.

The poet W.H. Auden once said, “You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences” (*The Poetry of W. H. Auden*, 13)

Jesus rarely tells people what to do, rather he asks questions, he tells stories. He was a good teacher; he knew the power of good art. “With many such parables,” Mark writes in today’s lesson, “He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them except in parables.” (4:33-34a) Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it: “He was never without a story when he spoke.” (*The Message*, 1816)

The teachers who we’ve honored here this morning understand that. Throughout the year they’ve used the arts to help convey the good news of God’s love. Through parables and pictures, through stories and songs, they communicated their message of love. What child will soon forget the wonder of the birth of Jesus having participated in the annual Christmas Eve pageant? What youngster will fail to remember the agony of Good Friday and the joy of Easter after taking the dramatic walk through Holy Week? And the truths conveyed in the annual Story Tent productions rely on all the arts: storytelling, painting, music, dance and drama. Any and all of the arts can be used to convey the gospel message of hope. Often in ways that affect one for a lifetime.

Tasmania is a remote island off of the southern tip of Australia. It is about as far from Connecticut as you can get. But there, too, the arts make an impact.

Much of Australia and Tasmania was originally settled as a prison colony by the British. Banishing criminals to the furthestmost corner of the world seemed a wise idea in the nineteenth century. Folks then, as today, were somewhat obsessed with

security. The journey from England to Australia was not unlike the journeys taken by slave ships. Chained together, crammed into the hulls of ships, many of the prisoners didn't even survive the trip. When they arrived in the seemingly God forsaken prison they were caged like animals, in tiny cells.

One of the prisons was located at Port Arthur. The prison there was in operation from 1830 to 1877. The cells did hold some murderers and rapists, but many of the prisoners were lower class souls who couldn't pay their debts, or who were caught in petty crimes like stealing food for their hungry children. It was a horrible place to begin with. Far, far from home. And the punishment often came no where close to matching the crime.

Author Susan Muto once toured the remains of the Port Arthur prison. It was a rainy day, not unlike so many days this past week. "Everything," she writes, "looked bleak, the air was chilly, and I felt my melancholy mood perfectly matched the day. As I walked in the cold mist from rampart to rampart, I wondered how these prisoners . . . could have found meaning in life. I passed a spot called the 'Isle of the Dead' with unmarked convict graves. As these men watched one another waste away, could they believe there was anyone who loved them? . . .

"Suddenly I rounded a corner of the compound and stood still. There, rising in the middle of the fortress, was the framework of a Gothic cathedral, its spires stretching upward in transcendent beauty. Though by now the mist had changed to rain, I felt as if the sun had broken through."

Muto asked the guide about the church. Its design, she was told, was created by one of the inmates, who sketched it out on bits of paper with charcoal he scavenged from a wood fire. Other inmates did the actual building.

Muto writes: "The bodies of these builders may have been enchained, but not their spirits. Though they were starved, beaten and buried, their dignity lived on in ancient arches."

The sight of that outline of a cathedral, that frame of a church, reached deep into Muto's soul. Like the woman stirred on retreat by the drawing of Jesus, like his early followers who were moved by his stories, Muto was impacted in a powerful way.

The church in the midst of the prison yard, she writes, "became a symbol of the truth that in the midst of affliction the soul takes flight. One is free to find meaning no matter how severe the misery. In coping with obstacles, one finds opportunities for spiritual growth." (*Meditation in Motion*, 94-95)

There are so many other examples of lives transformed by the good news made known in and through the arts! Stories told or written, pictures painted, music sung

or played, drama, dance, sculpture, architecture—all can, and often do, serve as a vehicle for sharing with others the depth of faith.

From the days of Jesus himself the imaginations of millions have been stirred though parables and pictures, through stories and songs. The hearts of millions have been warmed. The very souls of millions have been touched at the deepest of levels.

Thank God, who is the original artist and the source of all creativity, for imagination, for artists and for the art they create. Thank God for teachers who use that art in the service of sharing the good news. For though it's many forms, lives are indeed, not only changed, but in the truest sense saved.

**Amen
John H. Danner**