

March 27, 2011

DRAW ME A PRETTY PICTURE

Every morning when I walk into my office and take a seat behind my desk I look across the room and facing me are two paintings. One a print, the other an original. Centered on the wall is Claude Monet's *Red Poppies at Argenteuil*. Perhaps you've seen this painting. The scene is that of a landscape. In the background the sky is blue and populated with white billowy clouds. A French manor house sits in the distance in the midst of a column of trees. In the foreground is a bank of red poppies down which are walking two pairs of mothers and daughters, seemingly out for an afternoon stroll. The little girl in the first pair is carrying several poppies which she has obviously just picked along the way. If there is any doubt of this, you can see behind her a poppieless trail. I love this painting for many reasons, not the least of which is that it such a serene scene of color and light and gentleness. And who doesn't need some color and light and gentleness along the way.

Every time I look at that painting I receive a gift. A gift from someone I never knew. A gift from someone who never knew that this painting he was painting would be a gift to me. And sometimes I think to myself about the mind and heart of a person who thought it worth his while to set up easel and canvas in the midst of a French field and spend hours and days to

capture a scene of nature and humanity, a beautiful pastoral scene for someone, someday to enjoy ... to ponder and meditate upon. Claude Monet – had a vision of beauty ... and thought to pass this vision of beauty onto others.

That's the first painting.

The second painting is a painting I talked about in the Garden last year. It is an original (just in case you thought that the Monet was the original). It was painted the year I was born. It was painted by a man who had joined my church when I pastored in Philadelphia. The truth is he almost didn't join because of something he had done in the past. A rather heinous crime he had committed that he felt had disqualified him from joining the church. I convinced him that there was not a sin that God could not forgive – and only after that did he join the church and I learned later of his former life and the time he spent in prison as a result of his crime. The painting that hangs in my office is a painting he painted while in prison. Prison. Serving hard time. It is a beautiful oil painting of a little white clapboard church in the woods. The sky is faint blue and clouds hover above the steeple of the church. People are walking into the church for what appears Sunday worship. The trees show the colors of autumn. An inscription at the bottom of the painting reads, "A Future with Faith".

Now like the other painting there are several reasons why this picture hangs in my office. The most important of which is that it reminds me as it hangs next to the Monet that you don't have to be in a lovely French field in order to have a beautiful vision. You can be in a dark, dank cell and still see something and share something beautiful

What would the world be if it were not for those who no matter where they were not only had visions of beauty – but felt compelled to place them on the surfaces of the world for someone like you and someone like me to see?

I think it is interesting that the story of the New Testament is both begun and ended with pictures of an artist. When Jesus begins his ministry at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke he appears in front of the Nazareth synagogue and he reads to them a vision. It is a vision of the kingdom. It is a vision of what the world is supposed to look like. Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah and he says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Jesus looks into God's heart and says that the Spirit of God is upon him ... and that God has this picture he wants to paint – and it is a picture that includes the poor getting good news ... and captives being set free and the blind receiving their sight and the burdened being taken from

the oppressed and the world experiencing the longed-for Jubilee – the time when the world is reset and everyone is given another chance. This is the painting that Jesus paints for us right at the beginning of his ministry – as if to say that this is the picture he will seek to etch upon the canvas of the world.

And then at the very end of the New Testament story the apostle of Revelation, a prisoner – sent into exile paints for us another picture. This picture also comes from God through a vision the apostle receives of the heavenly city – New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. And the apostle writes to tell us of what reality of heaven is like. That heaven is our home ... it is our ultimate destiny. And that in heaven God dwells with us and we will have this unmistakable sense that we are his children. And when we are in such intimate communion with God we will truly experience God's hope for all his people. And that in heaven ... God will wipe away every tear from our eyes ... and there will be no more death. Neither will there be mourning or crying or pain anymore. In fact, in heaven ... God will make all things new. Isn't that a great vision? A great image? That heaven is the place where are tears are wiped away ... the prospect of death is no more. No more mourning ... no more crying or pain. Everything gets made over.

Two paintings at the beginning and ending of the New Testament story. One drawn by the Messiah – the other by a prisoner. Both of which speak to a reordering of the world – a new vision to live into. That it isn't supposed to be the way we see it right now. God has a vision of the world that is contrary to what you read on the front page of the newspaper. And it is in Jesus and his followers that he tries to paint this painting upon the surfaces of the world. With every stop along the way of his ministry – Jesus is taking his brush and seeking to stroke his vision upon the world.

So when Jesus gathers his disciples at the point of his ascension into heaven – he says something very important. He tells his disciples that the brush is being put into our hands ... and that we are to go and make disciples of all nations ... not just to get people to believe in Jesus ... but just as importantly to help people believe in the vision of Jesus. To see the painting he paints for us.

It is what Jesus is getting to when he teaches us to pray and says, “When you pray say, ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’” Lord, we want the painting of earth to resemble the painting of heaven. We want to see your vision of beauty here in this world. We don't want to wait for it. We don't want to give up on this world while waiting for

the world to come. We want to etch upon the canvas of this world ... what you want to see in the picture. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So something happens to you and me when we pray this part of the Lord's Prayer. And what happens to us is that we become artists. We become people who see it as their mission to bring the vision of God, the vision God has for the world, we see it as our mission to bring that vision from God's word to our heart ... and to the surfaces of the world. We take the brush from Jesus as we become his disciples and we say to Jesus ... allow me to help you paint the picture you want for the world.

Now that is a big jump from the role that you and I are most comfortable playing. The role we are most comfortable playing is the role not of artist, but of art critic. Not of creator and painter, but of judge of what we see already. Wouldn't it be fair to say that a good part of our time and conversation with others, goes along the course of critiquing the world as it is? We read the headlines, we become aware of bad things going on ... and for the purposes of small talk we get with our friends and shake our heads and say isn't it a pity the way the world is going? And we critique the crime rate ... we critique the values of a new generation ... we critique the policies of the current political leader ... we critique the services of the utility

company ... we critique the food at the restaurant. We become art critic. It is an easy role to slip into. I do it all the time.

But when Jesus says go and make disciples of all nations ... he is not interested in finding for himself more art critics. The world has enough art critics. What Jesus is looking for are artists. Jesus is looking for collaborators in his great painting. Jesus is looking for people are interested in the kingdom coming and the Lord's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

You see this is the adventure of discipleship – imagining what the world might look like if God has his way. If God has his way what might this church look like? If God has his way what might this neighborhood look like? If God has his way what might this city look like? If God had his way what might my school look like? If God had his way what might the economy look like? If God had his way what might my business look like? These are the things that disciples think about.

And not just think about ... these are the things that disciples do something about. Disciples see the world like Jesus sees the world – and when they wake up they wonder what part of the world can I take God's brush to? Is it good news to the poor? Is it release to the

captives? Sight to the blind? Freedom for the oppressed? Is it the chance for people to have a second chance at life? How might the world look different as a result of my being in it?

That's what our mission statement is all about -- Equipping Disciples for the Service of Christ. Helping people not only to see the vision of Jesus ... but then to release them to start painting. To create something that will come as a gift to someone else. To make the world a little bit more like heaven. Our Habitat folks dedicated another house yesterday. They handed over the keys to a livable home for a young family – That's a brush stroke of Jesus. I had the chance to walk for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation yesterday on Siesta Key Beach. I saw colors and colors - people wearing all different colors of shirts - thousands walking along side the water. It looked like a brush stroke of Jesus.

Thy kingdom come , thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven! God would be so happy if we would ever be accused of artistic forgery. If someone would accuse us of trying to take his picture implanted in our hearts .. and reproduce it somewhere in this world. What part of the world do you want to paint over? Where do you see God's will needing to be done? Where can his kingdom come? Time to take up a brush! Because you see when we take up our brushes and start painting – that's what gives the world hope. That's what brings people to Jesus.

How many of us at one time or another went to our children with a piece of paper and said, "Draw me a pretty picture." Well isn't that what God seeks to do in those of us called as disciples. God hands us a harsh looking world and says, "Draw me a pretty picture."

You remember the story of the two men, both seriously ill, who occupied the same hospital room. One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window. The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back. A curtain pulled between the two. The men talked for hours on end. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, their involvement in the military service, where they had been on vacation. And every afternoon when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The man in the other bed began to live for those one-hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside.

The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color of the rainbow. Grand old trees graced the landscape, and a fine view of the city

skyline could be seen in the distance. As the man by the window described all this in exquisite detail, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine the picturesque scene.

One morning, the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window, who had died peacefully in his sleep. She was saddened and called the hospital attendants to take the body away. As soon as it seemed appropriate, the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone. Slowly and painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the world outside. Finally, he would have the joy of seeing it for himself. He strained to slowly turn to look out the window beside the bed. It faced a blank wall.

The man asked the nurse what could have compelled his deceased roommate who had described such wonderful things outside this window. The nurse responded that the man was blind and could not even see the wall. "I guess," she said, "he just wanted to give you a gift."

I don't know what in your world you see or don't see. But that isn't the point is it? You don't have to be in a French field to see beauty. Why you can be in prison. You can have no sight at all. The point is what does God have in his heart? And what of that do we have in our hearts? Lord knows, there are enough critics out there ... but not enough artists. And in the Lord's Prayer – in this petition he teaches us, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” ... What God sets up for us ... is an easel and a canvas ... and says, “Draw me, would you, a pretty picture.”