

“GODS’S HANDIWORK”

Jeremiah 18:1-12; Ephesians 2:1-10

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The version I memorized went like this: “And we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works....” It recalls a little more explicitly the imagery from Jeremiah of God as the potter and Israel as the clay. I’ve always liked this idea that we are a work of art, and as such, we reflect something of the artist. Paul is telling the believers in Ephesus that the character of God is reflected in the works that they do, that God can be seen through them in the same way that artists can be seen in the work that they do.

I love the way Brian McLaren puts it in his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*: “Like God, like believer, we might say. Our image of God, our image of ourselves, and our process of individual and cultural development move together as in a dance” (p. 94). At the center of this dance between creator and creation, between artist and work of art, stands Jesus... “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” This morning I want to explore our identity as God’s handiwork by bouncing back and forth between Jesus and ourselves as reflections of God’s intentions for the world.

Let me begin by saying that Jesus was fully engaged in life. Wherever the quality of life was compromised, Jesus was there. Most of the time we are happy to imitate him. We believe in helping improve the lives of the disabled, in giving sight to the blind, in helping the deaf to hear, in healing the sick, in bringing comfort to those who grieve. If we could raise the dead, we certainly would. We believe that the practice of forgiveness can restore a relationship, that loving the enemy can make a friend; even if these are more difficult to implement.

But there are some things many Christians believe about Jesus that aren’t so; and these beliefs limit the “good works” we might otherwise do. I want to talk about three of these “false” beliefs: 1) Jesus was not political, 2) Jesus didn’t care about money, and 3) Jesus only loves Christians.

There are many people who see Jesus as just a spiritual leader, and he certainly was that. But if you read the gospels, you will see that he criticizes the religious leaders. What most people don’t realize is that these leaders play an important role in the political infrastructure of the time. The government used them to collect taxes, to keep the peace, to inform against revolutionaries. Now Jesus didn’t advocate violence, but he believed that the oppressed should be set free. He spoke frequently about the “kingdom” of God not just as a future hope, but as a present reality. When he said “blessed are the peacemakers,” he wasn’t just talking about mediating family disputes. He had a vision not just for the Jewish faith, but for the world. He spoke frequently about justice. Politics impacted the lives of people that Jesus cared about. Did he organize a rebellion against Rome or a march on Jerusalem? No. But he said some things that made the government nervous enough to put him to death.

Of course, just because Jesus did and said some things with political implications doesn't necessarily mean that we should mix faith and politics today. We live in a "free" country where the government doesn't tell us how to practice our faith. Or does it? Didn't our government at one point say that black people were only worth 3/5 of what person? Didn't government tell women that they couldn't vote until 1920? Doesn't government even today impact the lives of people we love in a negative way? Shouldn't Christians be engaged in the struggle for quality education, affordable housing, protection of the environment? "Created in Christ Jesus for good works," surely some of these works can only be accomplished through the political process. Do we really imagine that God, creator of the universe, doesn't care about what the government does? Maybe our politics should be a little more informed by our faith in Christ Jesus.

Maybe I shouldn't talk about politics and money in the same sermon, but they're very much related. Every day I get emails soliciting contributions to some political campaign. I have literally received hundreds of emails from the same campaigns in the last six months asking for money. Even more amazing than the number of requests is the reality that political campaigns raise enormous sums of money.

You've heard plenty of clergy complain about the idolatry of money. But it's nothing new. Jesus noticed how well off the priests were at the temple, while most Jews struggled to make ends meet. He even complained one day when the priests accepted the last two coins a widow possessed, all the money she had to live on. We have of course turned her into a model of generosity, but that was not Jesus' point. He accused the leaders of devouring widow's houses. The point: there's something wrong with a faith that takes from the poor and gives to the rich.

Jesus talked a lot about money. No one can serve God and money, he said. He told the story about how money came between a rich man and his salvation. What do you suppose he would say about the growing gap between rich and poor, the income disparities between upper management and labor, between men and women doing the same job? What would he say about the living wage? Do we really imagine that God doesn't care about the homeless? When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor..." he wasn't endorsing poverty, but reminding his disciples that the poor were on God's mind. Shouldn't they be on ours as well? Isn't this a part of what "created in Christ Jesus for good works" is all about?

Brian McLaren wrote this: "The God imaged by Jesus exerts no dominating supremacy. In Christ, we see an image of God who is not armed with lightning bolts but with basin and towel, who spewed not threats but good news for all, who rode not a warhorse but a donkey, weeping in compassion for people who do not know the way to peace" (p. 92).

It is this Jesus that gives shape to the vessel God intends us to become. This Jesus is not about judgment but about service, not about evil threats but the promise for good, and not about violence but about peace. And yet there are some who claim his name as

Christians who believe that Jesus will send those who do not believe in him to the eternal fires of hell.

Not everyone agrees with me, but there is no such place. And just to be clear, Jesus was a Jew who loved his brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith. He was about helping them think about their faith differently from what the religious hierarchy demanded. He taught that people mattered more than rules, that power and prestige were not a measure of one's worth before God.

He was not a Christian, nor was he the founder of the Christian faith. We see in him the very image of God. We see in his life and teachings God's intentions for us, for all of us, not just the ones with the right doctrine, but for those with the "wrong" doctrines and the ones with no doctrine. Jesus had lunch with sinners, welcomed outcasts back into the community, grieved over a rich man who could not find his way to God, and spoke with people he wasn't supposed to speak with. In reaching across barriers, he expressed God's desire for the welfare of all people.

"Created in Christ Jesus for good works": this means that Jesus forms our very identity. This means that he gives shape to our whole life. He gives shape to our politics, to our relationship to money, to our connections with others, to our love for all creation.

It isn't always easy to say what the good thing to do is. Often the "good work" that is called for is complicated. But if we see ourselves as followers of Jesus, if we see ourselves as God's handiwork, we'll start by imagining Jesus in our shoes. We'll stop pretending that there are parts of our lives that don't matter to God. And it's not that God is trying to be intrusive, controlling, or judgmental. It's because all of this is God's creation, and you, in particular, are God's handiwork. You have a piece of the artist in you. And you have been made for some good purpose. Just as God's love has entered the world through Jesus, so also God's love enters the world through you. God's hope for you is the same hope as expressed at Jesus' baptism. "This is my beloved in whom I am well-pleased." Baptized into Christ, God also takes pleasure in us as we listen to and follow Jesus, whether that be in the politics we practice, our commitment to the well-being of others, or in the message of God's inclusive love for all. "You are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Amen.

Brian D. McLaren. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*. Convergent Books: New York NY, 2016.