

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

First United Church of Christ, Northfield
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson
September 16, 2007

The Visual Word

There was, in the late 1980's and early 1990's, a group of liturgical artists in Berkeley who banded together under the name "The Visual Word." Their conviction was that the good news of the Gospel was communicated not only by what we say and hear in church, but also by what we see, smell, and touch. It was a wonderfully talented group who worked in almost every medium, from traditional painting and weaving to glass blowing and paper cutting. They were clear that that the art they created was not just interior design for the church or a backdrop for the drama of worship. Art, they insisted, was itself a proclamation of the good news. Theology is expressed in spatial, visual terms just as authentically as it is expressed in verbal and musical terms.

So it is this morning that we are not only sitting in a refreshed and refurbished architectural space, we are sitting in a new theological space as well. And although I will have some words to say about it in a moment, let's first just look at it.

[Walk into aisle during the silence]

Now let me ask you what our sanctuary says theologically:

[wait for some responses]

Some additional possibilities

- God's space is bright, open, and has plenty of room for everyone
- God's space is rich and dramatic
- God's space is full of many colors, surfaces, and shapes
- God's space is always the same, even when it seems to change
- God's space is full of people – people who might never get to know each other any place else.

There is something ironic about using words to describe a message that is, at its heart, non-verbal. But there is also something familiar, because we often use words to paint pictures, especially when we are telling stories. Jesus was, as Carolyn and I said last week, a wonderful story teller. Most of the stories that are preserved for us in the Bible are relatively short, but even in their brevity they create visual scenes in our minds – just as they did in the minds of the first-century listeners who originally heard them.

I hope that as you were listening to Phill read the two parables from today's lesson that you drew some pictures in your imagination. Whenever I hear the story of the lost sheep, I remember a painting of the good shepherd at work. This is not the sweet Sunday School picture with Jesus sitting quietly in his long, clean, and tidy robe holding a docile lamb on his lap. No, this is the picture of a sweaty and dirty shepherd holding a

tree branch as he leans over a cliff to reach towards an equally dirty lamb who has fallen into danger. As for the story of the lost coin, I see the first century equivalent of myself frantically pawing through papers on my desk last week, looking for the sheet with the phone number I need.

Those are both vivid, human scenes. But Jesus makes it clear that these are not just stories about human beings who are searching for something valuable that they have lost; these are stories about God searching for something valuable that God has lost. The picture that he draws for us is not just a scene with a shepherd and a sheep, or a woman and her lost coin. The picture that he draws for us is a scene in which we are a sheep that has strayed or a coin that has been lost.

That's not really how we like to picture ourselves. We like to portray ourselves as good and honorable and faithful; more than that, we like to think of ourselves as confident, competent, and capable. We like to portray ourselves that way, but it is not especially accurate. The truth is that we are also crabby, rude, selfish, short-sighted, and sometimes just plain foolish. We are not the people we want to be, and we are not the people that God created us to be. We may think the word "sinner" is old fashioned and/or judgmental, but it is not really inaccurate. We are the ones who are lost, all right.

The amazing thing about the picture that Jesus paints for us in these parables, though, is that God does not punish us, does not abandon us, does not cast us out. God comes after us – chases us. And when we are found, God celebrates: God carries us on his shoulders and throws a party; God grabs us and calls the neighbors.

When we leave worship today, I am sure that there will be lots of conversation about the paint and the lighting and the carpeting (along with speculation about the pew cushion fabric); it will make wonderful lunch table conversation. I hope, though, that the visual word that you take home today will not just be of this room; I hope you will take home a vision of yourself being sought in love by God who wants nothing more than to welcome you, to forgive you, to be your companion – and to celebrate your homecoming.

Amen.

Prayer for September 16, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred silence.

God of grace and mercy, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning, and ask for your presence and comfort and challenge to all our loved ones and neighbors who are in need.

God of time and history, we pray today for our congregation and for our church. We thank you for the scores of people who make our life together so rich and enduring. We are grateful for the many gifts and talents that are shared here, and for the generosity of those who invest their time, resources, and energies in our common life. Help us, we pray, to welcome the gifts of all who come to our door, and to open ourselves to the new life each one brings to us.

We are grateful, too, for the long history of this congregation: for the pioneers who founded this community of faith, and for the uncounted and often unnamed members and leaders who carried its work forward for the last 151 years. And we thank you for the clergy who have served as ministers here, for their pastoral, priestly, and prophetic gifts.

This morning we are particularly mindful of the legacy of this building and land, and for all who have tended it through the years. May its presence in Northfield be a continuing testimony to the Good News of the Gospel.

O God of the future, we pray also for the future story of our church. As our city grows and changes, as our families develop in surprising ways, and as national and world events impinge upon our lives, help us to discern the ministry and mission to which we are called today. Hold us in the sacred tension between tradition and innovation, and help us to tolerate the uncertainty and grief that come with new priorities and practices.

Most of all, gracious God, we pray to be a community in which you are the center, so that all of our projects and programs are rooted and grounded in your love, your compassion, and your mercy.

All this we pray in the name of the one whose life was entirely rooted and grounded in you, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together in the words that he taught us, saying ...

Parts of this prayer were offered on September 19, 2004

