

# **We Are God's Work of Art**

Isaiah 64: 1-8 & Ephesians 2: 1-10

*Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 12<sup>th</sup> November 2006*

For artists, art historians, and general lovers of art, it's probably fair to say nothing compares to the city of Florence, Italy – the birthplace of the Renaissance. The *Rinascimento*, in Italian, meaning rebirth, the Renaissance, that revolution in arts and letters, architecture and science in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, was spurred on by a rediscovery of classical Greek culture during the so-called “dark” Middle Ages; the Renaissance, with its celebration of the human form and a desire to live well in the present, to create environments, communities where humanity might flourish, hence the birth of humanism – all this is associated with Florence.<sup>1</sup>

I had the opportunity to spend two days in Florence on my vacation in Italy, in that city in love with art. One really needs more than a week there to appreciate the concentration of art in that place. I got up early and took advantage of the day, taking in as much as possible, like a sponge. When I went to bed, I was on sensory overload. I got into the Uffizi Gallery that has the largest and most valuable collection of Renaissance art in the world. I just walked around with my jaw wide open in awe, seeing the paintings one studies in art history class, never expecting to see them in the flesh. Of course, I visited *lots* of churches: I saw the cathedral or Duomo with its famous dome by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) and its 11<sup>th</sup> century baptistery, I went to the Basilica of Sante Croce which contains the tombs of [Niccolò di Bernardo dei] Machiavelli (1469-1527), Galileo [Galileipoo] (1564-1642), a tribute to Dante [Alighieri] (1265-1321) (who lived in the city), and the tomb of Michelangelo (1475-1564). (This sermon is not a plug for the Italy tour I'm planning for April, by the way, but there are fliers available in fellowship hall.)

There's something that has stayed with me since Florence. It was the work of Michelangelo that particularly struck me, not only in Florence but throughout Italy. Michelangelo left the imprint of his psyche, his soul on everything he did. Whether it was his painting of “Creation” in the Sistine Chapel, or the sculpture of “Moses” in Rome – just breathtaking – a piece that overwhelmed and disturbed Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) on his visit to Rome, which confronted Freud with his religious past that he was in many ways denying in his writings on psychiatry (the inspiration to his classic

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<sup>1</sup> Within our theological tradition, John Calvin (1509-1564) was a student of humanism, and so the Reformed tradition, to a considerable degree, is a child of the Renaissance.

text, *Moses and Monotheism*<sup>2</sup>); or Michelangelo's famed statue of "David," you can tell it's his work.

The tour group I was with had an appointment with David, as our tour guide put it, at the Accademia in Florence, and the tour guide through the museum was remarkable (I'm going to try to get her for the April trip – again this is not a plug for the upcoming trip). What was so striking in the museum was where "David" is situated, at the end of long corridor lined with five, massive sculptures all by Michelangelo, leading to "David." It's the sculptures lining the corridor that were particularly significant. They are known as the "Prisoners," (Atlas, Young Slave, Walking Slave, Bearded Slave, and St. Matthew) and what's distinctive about these sculptures is that it's tough to know whether they're completed or not. They look unfinished. You can see the block of marble all around them, but you can also see the figures. It's as if all of these forms, particularly "St. Matthew," are struggling to break free from the stone and come to life, it's as if these forms are emerging to life, coming alive, struggling to step out from the stone. It's what's been called the "technique of the unfinished," in that they are not free-standing forms, but, again, coming from the stone. It was a way to demonstrate movement. They could be finished or unfinished? How do you know? The artist knows.

And this is what struck me; it was Michelangelo's spiritual attitude toward art, particularly sculpture: *he believed within every block of marble is a hidden figure and it's the work of the artist to set it free.* With his chisel and hammer he cut away the excess stone, almost allowing the stone to speak for itself, as if telling him what needs to be cut away in order for the figure to be born. These prisoners in stone are being liberated by the careful love of the artist, bringing something new to life.

Now, there are plenty of "God as Artist" analogies around. But, to be honest, I'm usually leery of people who try to prove the existence of God by saying the beauty of the creation points to the creator, the artist. I'm usually skeptical when people try to reason their ways into proofs for God, because it can't be done. It's questionable how much nature really tells us about God. One knows nothing about humanity forgiven for sin or the redemptive love of Christ by looking at a sunset. There's a lot in the world, and in broken, fallen, human nature that I don't think God necessarily wants to take credit for as the artist.

But what struck me in Michelangelo's philosophy of sculpture is that it's *dynamic, interactional, relational*, and reflects something, I believe, Paul is lifting up here in

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<sup>2</sup> *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, 1939

Ephesians (you were probably wondering when I was going to get to the text). “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” This is a very significant verse, often overlooked because we Protestants are always quick to quote verses 8 and 9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” This is all true, of course. We have, through what God has done through Christ – *already* – come to know the “immeasurable riches of [God’s] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” You see, through Christ, we have already inherited a new way of life and are living in faith by virtue of that grace, and not works. That is, we are accepted by God not through any good deed, act, or charitable endeavor, but purely, wholly, through the generous goodness of God through Christ. This is all true. This is how rich we are in grace, *now*, not in some distant future or only if we make through the Pearly Gates. We need to embrace this, to “accept our acceptance,”<sup>3</sup> as theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), so aptly put it, then realize there’s more to be done. Grace is significant, but it’s only the beginning. Grace is the starting point and verse ten points to what comes next.

Again, verse 10, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” “For we are what he has made us.” Behind this English text is the Greek word, *poesis*, from which we get our word “poem,” meaning “creating” or “making.” Another way of saying this verse is, “We are God’s work of art.” The Christian’s self-image should be shaped by this understanding, that who we are and are becoming, our identity in Christ, is the result of God as Artist, who not only created us and endowed us with God’s image, but through the power of Christ at work within us and among us is still creating us, still making us, still forming, and still reforming us, as a potter mold the clay (Isaiah 64:8) As Don Postema so aptly put it in his book, *Making Space for God*, “We are being created and recreated by the saving touch of Christ, who, [as the artist] Van Gogh (1853-1890), said, ‘is more of an artist than the artists,’ who working in living flesh and living spirit, made living people, instead of statues!”<sup>4</sup>

The point is this: God the Artist isn’t finished with us – no matter how old we might be. We are on the way of becoming who we are through Christ Jesus, whose Spirit will form us, if we let him. If you’re still breathing, then the Spirit is still forming

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<sup>3</sup> From Tillich’s seminal sermon, “You Are Accepted,” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955). The entire sermon is found here: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84>.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, B9, III, 499, cited in Don Postema, *Making Space for God: The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bible Way, 1983), 19.

you. Like Michelangelo, calling forth a figure out of stone, the Spirit of Christ, working with flesh and blood is trying to bring us to life, trying to free us from our own individual blocks of marble that imprison us. The Spirit as Artist longs to bring us to life, so that we emerge into figures, into living people, authentic human beings who will do good things in the world, people who will bring life and beauty to birth for the sake of the world, forever being and becoming people of *Renaissance*, of rebirth, people of *Resurrection*, of new life, people coming to life, giving new hope, new possibilities for this is our way of life, this is why we have received such grace.

To me, all of this is part and parcel of the gospel, it's what makes me "tick," its my view of the Christian life. But I was troubled recently when I read these statistics in a recent issue of *Time* magazine. 85% of the American population says they follow the Christian faith. But we don't all view God in the same way. 24% believe in a Distant God who does not interact with the world, but observes from a distance. God is more of a cosmic force that set the laws of nature in motion. Curiously, 37 % of those with household incomes over \$100,000 a year take this view – I guess with such economic security, who needs God? 31% of Americans believe in an Authoritarian God who is deeply involved in daily events, but a God who is fundamentally angry at sin, punishing the unfaithful or ungodly. 16% believe in a Critical God, who does not really interact with the world but is unhappy nevertheless with its current state and will exact divine justice, meaning punishment. Finally, only 23 % believe in a Benevolent God who is deeply involved in daily life and world events, who is mainly a positive force reluctant to punish. Sadly, within this number, people under thirty are the least likely to hold this concept of God, just 13% do.<sup>5</sup>

My guess, the image of God the Creator, the Artist, the Poet forming human beings in kindness, for goodness, probably resonates with about 23% of the American population. If God is authoritarian just waiting to punish us, or critical about to unleash harsh judgment, or simply distant and doesn't really care, then how can grace – the most significant message of scripture, especially the New Testament – make any sense? What a different world it would be if people believed that God really wants to do something beautiful with our lives. What a different world it would be if people really believed God was on their side, instead of believing that God is fundamentally against us, angry with us because we don't measure up. What a different world it would be if people really believed God was for us, trying to bring us to life?

Do you see yourself as God's poem? What will it take for you to see your life as God's work of art? Do you believe through Christ, God is making, forming, creating

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<sup>5</sup> *Time*, October 30, 2006.

something beautiful in you, for you, and through you for the world? Or maybe you think God has done just about all that can be done with you. Maybe you think you're not good enough for such generosity. Some, I fear, think there's too much ugliness in them or in their lives for God to possibly do anything beautiful through them and have given up hope. The American painter, Charles Hawthorne (1872-1930), who ran the famous Cape Cod School of Art said to his students, "Anything under the sun is beautiful if you have the vision – it is the seeing of the thing that makes it so. ...We must teach ourselves," he said, "to see the beauty of the ugly, to see the beauty of the commonplace. ...In every town the one ugliest spot is the railroad station [or bus station], and yet there is beauty there for anyone who can see it."<sup>6</sup> Others, I'm sure, feel they've messed up their lives so much they're beyond hope. But I'm convinced that God does amazing work, maybe God's best work with the messiest among us, maybe especially there. Have you ever seen an artist's studio that isn't a chaotic mess?

When I read Ephesians, I see God working with the ugly parts of our lives, a God whose love can transfigure all for the sake of beauty and goodness and kindness. To create and make something beautiful with us, with *all* of our foibles and hurts and pains and disappointments and stupid decisions and rejections, that is *grace*. And we experience this, and know it true, discover it for ourselves only in relationship with the Artist, when we stay close to the Artist, when we work with the Artist.

When Michelangelo began work on "David" he chose a crooked, misshaped piece of marble from a heap of marble that had been rejected time and again by other sculptors, judged useless and impossible to work with. If that was true for Michelangelo, just think what God can do with us.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Hawthorne, *Hawthorne on Painting*. Introduction by Edwin Dickinson; Appreciation by Hans Hofmann (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 17-18.