

Freedom to: The Arts
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Exodus 31:1-11

You are all sitting in a Christian Reformed Church. And if you know anything about the history of our denomination, you know that we are the Dutch cousins of the Reformed-Presbyterian family of churches. And if you know anything about the Reformed churches, you know that they spring up out of the reformation in general and the theology of John Calvin in particular. Which is why we Christian Reformed folk named our denominational college after him.

So let me ask you this: if John Calvin, our theological forbearer, were to show up at LaGrave on a Sunday morning, what do you think his first reaction to our worship would be? We can't know for sure of course. I don't know how Calvin would feel about children's sermons. I don't know how Calvin would feel about our choir processional. But I do know one thing that would seriously displease our Genevan friend. John Calvin would absolutely hate our windows. John Calvin did not like religious art. Visual representations of God the Father especially offended him. He thought they were an insult to God's majesty. We should not dare "to subject God, who is incomprehensible, to our sense perceptions, or to represent him by any form. (Institutes 2.8.17)" "God's glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him." (1.11.1)" Calvin's argument is pretty straightforward: God's glory is beyond human comprehension, so you can't represent that infinite glory in a finite piece of wood or stone or in some paints that you squeeze out of a tube. It's a solid argument. Calvin has a point here. But for Calvin, it wasn't just pictures of the Father that worried him; it was pictures of the God the Son. Calvin didn't like images of Jesus either. In a sermon on Deuteronomy he strongly objected to images of Jesus saying, "*Is [a painting of Jesus] not a wiping away of that which is chiefest in our Lord Jesus Christ, that is ... his divine Majesty*" Calvin didn't even like crosses in church. (So he probably wouldn't like our cross processional either.) In the Institutes he says, on decent sermons on the cross and you wouldn't need all those gilded crosses (1.11.7) so that was Calvin: just give me the word!

Calvin's views have had serious influence in the art and architecture of the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches. Go to just about any other Christian Reformed Church other than LaGrave and what will you see? Probably not a stained glass window. Reformed churches have traditionally been simple, unadorned structures. The chapel at Calvin College is a good example of what I'm talking about. There is no decoration on the inside of that building. There are no crosses, no stained glass, no murals, and no paintings. The pulpit is at the center and there is nothing in the building to distract you from the pure, unfiltered Word. John Calvin would have been pleased. But here in LaGrave, things couldn't be more different! We've got frescoes of Jesus in the hall, we've got windows picturing Jesus all around us, and we've got a carving - a graven image - of Jesus right behind me on our reredos! Are we in the grips of idolatry? Are we misguided heretics? Should we, as some followers of Calvin did in the Reformation, smash these images out of our windows and paint over our frescoes and take an axe to the reredos?

No. Heavens no. Absolutely no. John Calvin was right about many things. I think Calvin was generally right about his forbidding images of God the Father. I think that Calvin was wrong about images of Jesus and I think he's wrong about our windows. Explaining all the reasons why

I think Calvin was wrong will take more than one sermon, but part of the reason I think he was wrong has to do with today's Bible reading.

Let me give you a sense of the flow of Exodus leading up to our passage. In chapter 19 the people arrive at Mount Sinai, and they get a sermon. Moses reminds them what God has done for them, and calls them to faithfulness. The people all commit. After the people commit, God gives them the law. First the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and then all sorts of smaller laws in chapters 21-23. So in those chapters, it's word: sermon and laws. Calvin's favorite stuff. But then in chapter 25 things change. In chapters 25-31 the subject is something like divine interior decorating. That's only a slight exaggeration. For the last 5 chapters the Lord has been giving Moses instructions about how to build the tabernacle, that tent where Israel will worship. He tells Moses how the tent should be made. He talks about how the tabernacle furniture should be constructed, he suggests colors for the various curtains and hangings, he suggests carvings and yarn colors and embroidery patterns and he gives precise measurements. In our text the instructions are completed and God appoints two men, Bezalel and Oholiab, to be the lead craftsmen for his tabernacle. They will implement the divine design. He fills them "*with all wisdom and knowledge and understanding and skills to make artistic designs in gold and silver and wood and bronze.*" God calls these artists and gives them skills to build his house."

What does this tell us? It tells us that we humans need more than words. We humans need more than sermons and rules. Laws are not enough. God does not encounter us only through our brains and our ears; God encounters us through all our senses and by engaging every part of our life. God could have just given Israel the law, and stopped. He could have stopped with the moral instructions and the words of encouragement. But that's not the only way God chooses to engage his people. In the building of the tabernacle and all the feasts and rituals that accompany it, God doesn't just give us words; he appeals to all our senses. He gives Israel feasts like Passover where they can taste and see that the Lord is good. He prescribes the use of incense so that Israel can smell the aroma of his faithfulness. He gives them instructions for the making of anointing oil so that that the anointed ones can feel the oil of blessing run down their heads and onto the collar of their robes. And he gives this beautiful tabernacle where every curtain, every carving, every priestly garment and every tassel, every dimension and measurement forms Israel's life. God uses every detail of the tabernacle to give Israel's freedom its proper shape. The word may be the central means by which God communicates in this book, but words are not enough. God speaks to us through beauty. He reveals himself to us through all our senses.

There's a little phrase in our passage that shows us that God strongly intends beauty to be part of our worship. In verse 3 God tells Moses that he has not just chosen Bezalel and Oholiab because they are good artists, he says, "*I have filled them with my Spirit.*" That's an important phrase. In the Old Testament, before Pentecost, you don't hear that phrase very often. When God pours out his Spirit in the Old Testament it's a sign that this person has a really important role in accomplishing God's purposes. So, for example, in Isaiah the spirit of the Lord descends on the prophet to speak the true words of God. Israel needs the prophets and their words. In the book of Judges the Spirit of the Lord descends on Samson and Gideon that they can defeat God's enemies. Israel needs these leaders and their victories. In the book of Numbers the Spirit of the Lord descends on the elders of Israel so that they can lead and judge the people. The people of Israel need these men and their good judgment. And now the Spirit of the Lord descends upon these artists so that they can make His tabernacle beautiful. Because we need these people who can create beauty and art in the world and in our worship. God puts his Spirit on Bezalel and Oholiab so that they can create the tabernacle, so that Israel will have more than words for their

worship. Later, in the New Testament, their work will be fulfilled. John 1:14 announces that fulfillment. *“The word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* Oholiab and Bezalel building a physical worship place points to Jesus. Actually the word for dwell is *eskenosen* which literally means ‘to pitch a tent.’ As in: the word become flesh and tented among us, or as some have translated it: “the word become flesh and tabernacled among us.” Jesus is that word made flesh. Jesus is that new tabernacle. And just like the old tabernacle, he speaks to us through all our senses. He speaks words that we can hear his glory. He gives us food to eat, bread and wine so that we can taste his glory. He comes in the flesh so that the disciples could touch the wounds in his hands and side and feel his glory. He comes as a human being whom we can see! We see him smiling at a wedding banquet with his friends. We see him wading into huge crowds of broken people, spending entire days healing them and listening to their stories of pain. We see him dying on the cross and offering forgiveness to you and me. *“The word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we have SEEN his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth.”*

Put it all together and a picture merges: it’s not simply that worship arts are OK; I think the testimony of Scripture is that we need the arts. The God who made us with all our senses, the God who has revealed himself to us through all five of those senses, the God who sent his Spirit on Bezalel and Oholiab so that they could make the tabernacle, that God still sends his Spirit upon men and women and gives them artistic talent so that the glory of God can be seen. All this isn’t just permissible; we need this. I don’t know about you, but these windows are very important to me. This helps me to survive. I come into this space on a Sunday morning and look up at these windows and I think: “Oh yeah! This is who I am! This is my story. There’s my king.” You come in here and we’re surrounded by the true story of life. Out there all kinds of dark and crazy things happen. But when I come to this place, seeing these windows help re-center me. On a Sunday morning I feel anxious about my sermon, focusing on my performance, which is bad, and I look up and there’s Jesus lifting up his hand and blessing me and I remember where my help comes from. I listen to the political power struggles on the news all week. So depressing. Then I come here and see Jesus hanging on the cross and I realize: power isn’t about force and vengeance; it’s about love and grace. During the week I hear people’s stories of loss and tragedy and worry (lots of those), but I come here and see Jesus stepping out of the grave and I realize: all this darkness and death is not the end. The end is life. The end is love. This isn’t just permissible; I need this.

I don’t know how many of you know the name Paul Claudel. Paul Claudel was a great play write and author who lived in Paris in the early 20th century. He was quite influential. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize on multiple occasions. As a young man in Paris, Claudel was enamored with the Bohemian life and radical ideas. He was a fashionably agnostic, but also unsatisfied and restless. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve when it was dark and miserable outside, not having been in a church in years, Claudel wandered into Notre Dame Cathedral. The choir was practicing for vespers. The sound of their voices echoed through the church. Claudel found himself standing in front of the church’s famous Rose Window, that 13th century masterpiece. And as he stood there looking up at that window, beauty overwhelmed him. The beauty of the window. The beauty of the singing. In an instant his hard heart split, and the love of God flooded him. Here’s how he described it: *“In an instant, my heart was touched and I believed. I believed with such a strength of adherence, with such an uplifting of my entire being...that since then all the books, all the arguments, all the incidents and accidents of a busy life have been unable to shake my faith.”* And it was beauty that did it. Of course Paul Claudel

would later need all the words and the theology, but God used beauty to overwhelm his heart. If you go to Notre Dame today there is a little sign on the floor that marks that moment. It says, “Ici s’est convertit Paul Claudel.” Here, Paul Claudel was converted.

Praise the artistry of our creator God, the Lord of all our five senses. Praise God for calling Belial and Oholiab and giving them his Spirit. Praise the God who still calls artists and still fills them with the same Spirit, so that we might see His glory.

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