

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. **18** And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. For the word of God.....

This week we conclude our series on the Wonder of Worship contemplating these beauties behind me. It was the week that excited Scott the most, but then life happened and on Monday, the baton was reluctantly passed to me, and in the spirit of the illuminated authenticity that is a stained glass window, I confess to being entirely stumped.

I'd never really contemplated stained glass windows before. Not really, not critically.

Obviously I'd seen them before, I've wandered through the giant cathedrals in Rome and the Sistine Chapel, meandered through the Sound of Music church in Salzburg, spent a rainy afternoon in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and sang for many a wedding in the grand pearl of the plains that is the St. Bonaventure's Church in Raeville, Nebraska, population 22, but I never really thought much about the windows beyond window dressing.

Often these windows that surround us in worship become something we take for granted, things we walk past but never stop for, things we stare blankly at when a sermon is less than engaging, decoration that fills church sanctuaries with dancing light, the ultimate in the ordinary turned sacred that we've been talking about the past few weeks....but easy to look past.

So I dove into stained glass world. The history of stained Glass in sacred spaces, it turns out, goes all the way back to the 4th and 5th century, but most art historians agree that the Middle Ages were the heyday of stained glass artistry. In that time period, stained glass had a very specific purpose: to provide biblical illustration for a largely illiterate population. Tiny pieces of monochromatic colored glass were molded together with thick slabs iron, and it would create this intricate imagery that belied the simplicity of the glass itself. And out of these materials would be crafted scenes from the Bible. The stations of the cross. Mary cradling a baby Jesus. Saints doing the things that made them saints. A peasant may not have been able to read the scriptures for him or herself, but by gazing at the windows in those ancient churches, he or she could find some image of the divine reflected there in a way that was at once artistic and entirely recognizable. accessible. This grand art that surround them in worship served to spoonfeed imagery into their brains, not only illuminating an image of God that they couldn't read for themselves, but taking out any of the guesswork about what the Divine looks like.

Not only did these stained glass windows tell stories, but they were a surefire

way to ensure the stories would endure .. precisely the way in which the church deemed to be acceptable. Time would pass, priests would come and go, but these glorious windows depicting perceived realities served as subtle and enduring messages from one generation to another. A guide to recognizing your saints, if you will. This is what the Jesus looked like. This is how one should think about the scriptures. This beauty is what to expect from God, with no exceptions.

This heritage of sacred biblical representation through bits of ordinary colored glass and iron is one that continues today. We may not have as much of an issue with illiteracy and can read the bible for ourselves, but walk into most of the old first churches and you will encounter vivid, explicit depictions of the greatest hits of our scriptures. Inherited messages that inevitably and not-so-subtly shape the way that the perceiver thinks about God and sacrality and our own history.

But if you'll notice, These Jazz aged windows that we find ourselves contemplating today are a little bit different. Where often resides definity here resides ambiguity. Swirling patterns that one could stare at every Sunday for their whole lives and find something new in each time.

The year was 1920. A very turbulent year in our nation's history, it turns out, a roaring start to the roaring 20s. It was in the year 1920 that social Landscapes in America changed at a rapid pace. Women obtained the vote.

A guy named ponzi came up with a sales scheme. a guy named Warren G. Harding was elected president, and everybody knew about it in real time because in 1920, the first comerically-licensed radio station began broadcasting live election results, essentially giving birth to mass media. The constitution was ratified not once that year, but twice, once for the aforementioned vote and once to do away with that most evil vice – alcohol. Music was getting jazzier. Hemlines were getting shorter. Rules were being broken, roles were being reevaluated.

And it was in this turbulent year that an American man named Charles Jay Connick was commisioned to sauder bits of colored glass together to make the light dance joyfully in the brand new First Central Congregational Church building.

When he died in 1945, Charles was hailed by many as the world's greatest contemporary craftsman in stained glass, although I suspect Mr. Tiffany might have something to say about that. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he drew much of his inspiration from those same windows from the Middle Ages, but what truly set him apart was the way he used traditional materials and methods to create lively and modern designs that reflected the turbulent time in which he was creating. While artists like Tiffany and John Lafarge relied on the trickery of opalescence and shading to give their imagery depth, Connick preferred to use the clear Middle-Age-style glass, praising it as, “colored radiance, with the lustre, intensity, and baffling vibrant quality of

dancing lights.” clear bits of glass through which the radiance of God could shine through. His creations of glass and iron served as testaments, not only to the time in which he was living but to the wider mission of the church itself. His reason for doing so was fairly simple, and actually, reads quite similar to the musing of George Herbert whom we read earlier: “If churches are made radiant and beautiful places of worship, we can have a spiritual regeneration without anyone knowing what is going on. Beauty can preach as very few men with bundles of words can preach. I want to make beautiful interiors for both churches and souls. I want people to hear my windows singing...”

And here we sit, 96 years later, living in and marveling at that same radiance that so inspired and touched him, listening to the silent syncopated rhythms echoing out from the glass, receiving unspoken messages from Charles and all the First Central saints that have gone before us.

As I madly researched his work this week, I assumed that this ambiguous, non-personified design was simply his style. But the Internet is a wild and wonderful place, and I discovered that upon his death, his designs were given to the Boston Public Library, who in turn scanned them into a free online public database for anyone to view. As it turns out, these windows in front of you are actually somewhat atypical to the Charles Connick style. Most of his work depicted those same familiar scenes from scripture. The style was the more whimsical and freeform style of the 20s, but the concrete depictions

were there, just as they were in those great stained glass messages from the Middle Ages. And it occurred to me that if he deviated from his own artistic norm at, it is likely that he was commissioned specifically to do so.

One of the great tragedies of history is that it doesn't necessarily preserve nuance to decision making, but I began to wonder: if our ancestors intentionally commissioned Charles to craft their legacy in this way, than what message were they trying to send us? What image of God were they attempting to pass on?

What does it say that where others chose to pass down concrete depictions of the Divine, our own saints gave us the gift of ambiguity? That where others were intent on seeing a bunch of white guys dressed in glowing robes, our saints chose to see, not a specific physical form or depiction of a specific being, but a free-form image of dancing light? That in such a crazy year of change, not only in American History but in the life of this church, our saints preserved the syncopation rather than the steadiness, the question rather than the answer?

These beautiful jazz-age windows behind me that shape our worship, bestowing sacrality through dancing light, serve as a reminder to us that God is, in fact, the architect of ambiguity. Their silent singing calls us to live into that ambiguity, encountering the image of God in those whom we meet without reservation or preconcieved notions of what that might look like. To

recognize the sacred in the most ordinary of places and circumstances.

The years go by, the words go silent and the music dissipates, the water is drained from the baptismal fount, the candles are all extinguished, but these singing windows remain in their full glory. Waiting to be contemplated. Silently and powerfully preaching the mystery of our faith through color and light.

CREATOR GOD

architect of ambiguity

artist of all that is seen and unseen,

We thank you in this day for dancing lights,

for messages sent from the past that help us live into our callings for the future.

for this community of open arms and hearts, and for all in the world through whom we are granted glimpses of your image.

Help us to recognize you in all times and places,

In times of great rejoicing and celebration, and in the times that challenge us to the very core of our beings.

Be present with victims of violence, that they may know comfort.

Be present with those in immense grief, that they may know peace.

Be present with all who cannot see a way out of their darkness, that they may know light,

Be present with us, God, as we navigate the intricacies of your world, and be present with all for whom that navigation is difficult.

Hold us fast in the light of your love and help us to recognize ourselves in your image.

All this we ask in the name of your son Jesus, who taught us to pray... Our
Father