

## ***Pietò* at Piedmont Presbyterian Church**

Before any more words, I wish to express my gratitude to the Church Session and to the people of Piedmont Presbyterian Church for hosting my mosaic, *Pietò*, during the Lenten season. *Pietò* has been displayed in multiple exhibitions in Pittsburgh, PA and Portland, OR, but this is the first time it has been installed within a church, and in *my* church at that. The venue matters. Any church installation calls upon me to separate myself from the artwork as a product of my hands and to receive it, as best as I can, as a part of a place where people pray.

Pastor Sarah has already been kind enough to speak for me when some of you have attempted to discuss the mosaic with me within the sanctuary. My silence is a necessary part of my discipline as a maker of religious art. Outside the sanctuary, I can discuss the object that I made, but inside the sanctuary, I must disappear.

*This* is the gift that you have given to me: the gift to exercise this discipline.

As with any religious art, *Pietò* is of no value unless it can promote meditation and prayer. From childhood on, I have experienced many lessons in how to pray. Discussions of how not to be distracted in prayer, where we should pray, what we should pray always arise from these lessons. God *is* everywhere and we *can* pray anywhere, but Jesus went into the desert to pray, as did Moses, and Jesus regularly separated himself from his disciples so He might pray alone.

We in the Pacific Northwest enjoy our hiking and I have noted many times Protestants, clergy even, who would not consider elaborate art within their home church buildings, but who, nevertheless, speak of their hiking experiences in our nearby mountains as a spiritual encounter with God through his creation. This kind of reference taps into a part of United States history I need to revisit from my college studies decades ago and better document for moments like this.

During the early years of our nation-state, Europeans routinely argued that the United States was a second-rate country, a country of wilderness not culture, and, more than this, a country of second-rate wilderness, with wild animals both smaller and “less perfect” than those of Europe. Well, we would put to rest that second complaint in short order with each new discovery of river, falls, mountain, bear, wolf, moose. The first complaint, however, persisted: the United States lacked culture, order, infrastructure, architecture.

My memory from my studies—and this needs documentation—is that Thomas Jefferson, himself, took on this complaint directly. Though an amateur in one sense, Jefferson was no architect's errand boy. The University of Virginia campus and Monticello prove this undeniably. Despite Jefferson's love of classical architecture, he explicitly declared that, for the first few decades of our country's life—maybe even a century—the great buildings, the great *cathedrals* of the world would remain in Europe. He said this without apology because he also said that for every Notre Dame Cathedral or Cathedral of Chartres the New World had a Niagara Falls, a Grand Canyon, a Mississippi river. The dreamer Jefferson argued that, while the United States took the time to construct a society with its economy and cities and institutions, the United States would already and always have unequalled natural wonders to inspire and to evoke awe. Jefferson was content in the realization that monuments of our own construction would come in due time.

Jefferson's point of view would surface repeatedly as new Americans crossed the continent westward.

Always, to this day, what is sublime in nature touches us—I say—because we are, with it, God's creation. Having written all this, however, I have not yet made the point that the wilderness sublime of our history is no longer as conveniently accessible as it once was. Few of us can access the wilderness in an afternoon walk as Henry David Thoreau once did. Our places of retreat for prayer exist in the places we create for it within reach from our homes and community: our churches. And, while a box against the rain and a fire against the cold can be enough to allow prayer, by themselves, these do not promote prayer, support prayer, become prayer. For these goals, we can use architecture and art to evoke the awe and wonder for God and his gifts.

Presbyterians are not known for their inclusion of religious art within their architecture, but this is largely a consequence of historical circumstances not driving church practice today.

The **Book of Order** of the **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)** encourages the inclusion of art:

**W-1.3034**

(2) The Reformed heritage has called upon people to bring to worship material offerings which in their simplicity of form and function direct attention to what God has done and to the claim that God makes upon human life. The people of God have responded through creative expressions in architecture, furnishings, appointments, vestments, music, drama, language, and movement. When these artistic creations awaken us to God's presence, they are appropriate for worship. When they call attention to themselves, or are present for their beauty as an end in itself, they are idolatrous. Artistic expressions should evoke, edify, enhance, and expand worshippers' consciousness of the reality and grace of God.

The **Book of Order** also recognizes that prayer involves the whole body.

**W-2.1005**

**Enacted Prayer**

In the Old and New Testaments and through the ages, the people of God expressed prayer through actions as well as speech and song. So in worship today it is appropriate

- a. to kneel, to bow, to stand, to lift hands in prayer,
- b. to dance, to clap, to embrace in joy and praise,
- c. to anoint and to lay hands in intercession and supplication, commissioning and ordination.

In Luke, Jesus reminds us that what we consider with our senses, our eyes in this case, affects our soul.

**Luke 11:33-36**

**The Lamp of the Body**

**33** "No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead he puts it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. **34** Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. **35** See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. **36** Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you."

I have a practice, more than a habit and less than a doctrine, of looking upon a cross, any cross, when praying the "Our Father". This began in my teens and functions as no more than my way of disciplining my body to join me in this particularly important prayer. There is no specific argument for me to associate a cross with the "Our Father", but the general reminder of the gift of the prayer from the One who was given as a gift from the subject of the prayer for the purpose of giving His life on the

cross is an obvious one.

More simply, crosses are commonly found in any Christian setting and so they serve me in my conscious effort to consider and to meditate upon the meaning of each word as well as to fight against the tendency we all have to drift in our thoughts as we exercise a routine behavior.

Architecture and art serve this function and more. A church with a high ceiling can inspire awe in a manner not so different from a canyon or a great plain. Figurative art, too, can discourage us from daydreaming *and* recite to us the scriptural narrative *as well as* invoke the commentary of our own thoughts written in the margins of our bibles or recited in a sermon or published in a contemporary book resting on the shelf of our local Christian book store. A single image can do all these things.

These were my goals in making, *Pietà*. And, even as I lift my finger to my mouth to discourage any comments from you in response to that last sentence, I can say sincerely that I know that I can do better.

In a separate document written immediately after completing, *Pietà*, I consumed ten dense pages to provide myself descriptive text about *Pietà* to selectively use in future exhibition settings. Pastor Sarah has said that she would include it on our church website. You can find within this document a detailed description of my intentions for, *Pietà*.

In the end, however, there is only one question that really matters: Does *Pietà* move you to meditation and prayer? Whatever that meditation and prayer might be belongs to you and not to me. As a part of our sanctuary, this art must serve you in your pursuit of God or it doesn't belong.

Again, my friends, thank you for this gift. I hope you see my gratitude within my eyes every time we meet. I'll close with this invitation and questions:

- What do you think Presbyterian art should look like?
- What stories should Presbyterian art tell other Presbyterians?
- What stories should Presbyterian art tell our neighbors?
- What does it mean to create a Presbyterian place for prayer and meditation?

The answers to these questions are not for me, except, of course, to the extent that I am a part of all within our church.

Yours within the family of God and within the human pursuit of God,

Tony Zinicola, Jr.