

What are we building?

Luke 21:5-6

November 17, 2013

I have never understood ice sculpture or sidewalk art or sand mandalas. You know what I mean? Artists spend hours and hours creating wondrous and beautiful works of art -- carving shapes out of a block of ice, applying pastels to concrete, laying out a design and placing grains of sand -- and then, in a moment, when the temperature rises or the rains come down or the mandala is destroyed, on purpose, it's gone. It's just gone.

I don't understand it. I couldn't do it. I couldn't take all that time and spend all that energy and put so much of my imagination, my skill, my self, into a work of art, only to see it destroyed, so quickly gone, as if it never was. If I am going to make an effort to create something beautiful, I want it to last. Really! I get upset when my grandson Hayden knocks over the towers I build with his colored blocks!

But, you know, I like to make music. And it's no different! You play the piece, you sing the song, you create something beautiful out of your imagination and your skill and your self ... and then it's gone. The music is not the notes on the page. The music only comes to life, the music only is, when it is performed. And when the performance is done, the music is gone. It remains only in memory. Music is art created in time, art created for a moment. Its beauty is temporary and fleeting.

Music, like ice sculpture or sidewalk art or sand mandalas, is perishable art.

And so is cooking ...

And so is dance ...

And so is gymnastics, or any sport for that matter, because sport too is about applying skill and imagination and body, your self, to create something beautiful, for a moment -- a leaping catch, a soaring dunk, a beautiful sequence of passes resulting in a goal, a beautiful sequence of jumps and spins on the ice. You do it, but then it's gone. It doesn't last.

And the same is true of preaching. What I do Sunday after Sunday is perishable art!

What are we doing? What are we building? What are we building here together? Perishable art! "All this you see -- the time will come," Jesus said, "when not a single stone here will be left in its place."

All this you see, all the beauty you see here -- stained glass windows, organ pipes, the vaulted ceiling, the marble font -- the time will come when none of it will remain, when all of it will be gone. What are we building? Perishable art.

Is that upsetting? Or is that liberating?

I think you do appreciate perishable art, because your enthusiastic and generous response to our 2014 stewardship appeal proves it. This was no appeal for a capital project. You were not being asked to invest in a sanctuary renovation or a window restoration or an organ enhancement or a kitchen makeover, things you can see and touch and say, "That's what my money did!"

No, you were asked to invest in mission, in music, in ministry to children and youth, in the day to day operations of being church together. You were asked to invest in perishable art, and you did!

We are building perishable art. That's what we do as members of the church of Jesus Christ. That's what we do, and that's what we are! We are perishable art! Aren't we?

For a while, for a few moments, for a few years, for the short span of time between birth and death, we use imagination and skill and our very selves to make something beautiful out of the lives we have been given. It is there, it is beautiful, but then it is over, then it is gone. We are perishable art.

Think about that. If you are perishable art, what does that mean for the way you live your life?

This is what it meant for Francis, the young man of Assisi. He rode his horse out of Assisi and into battle, into the horrific endeavor that was the Crusades, joining those who sought to make their mark, their lasting mark, on the shape of the world. He came back, not a knight, but a fool, no more trying to change the world, but instead himself entirely changed, seeing the world and everything in it from a wholly new perspective, as if he were standing on his head, because God had turned him upside down!

Francis called himself and the band of followers who joined him, *les Jongleurs de Dieu* -- God's jugglers, God's jesters, God's fools. In his biography of Francis, G. K. Chesterton writes:

Francis really meant what he said when he said he had found the secret of life in being the servant ... There was to be found ... in such service a freedom almost amounting to frivolity. It was comparable to the condition

of the jongleur because it almost amounted to frivolity. The jester could be free when the knight was rigid.

Because the knight bears the heavy burden of duty, the heavy weight of trying to fulfill a daunting mission, of trying to complete an elusive quest, while the jester plays and juggles and laughs. Why can the jester play and juggle and laugh? Because he is free. Because the fate of the world does not depend on him.

Les jongleurs de Dieu, God's fools, know that the fate of the world doesn't depend ... on us. We are fools, we are jesters, we are jugglers, we are servants, not holding the fate of the world in our hands, but playing, creating, making fun, making beauty, all to bring delight to our Master. We are art, perishable art, and that is liberating. We are free, free to be, free to be what we are, all for God's delight.

We are art, perishable art. We tread this world lightly, not with the heavy steps of determination and ambition and moral indignation, but with the light and airy steps of a dancer. God is maker of heaven and earth, not us. God is the beginning and the end, not us. We are just players, artists, here for a brief moment, doing what we can, using any skill and imagination that we have been given, to make something beautiful.

What do we have to lose? Nothing, because it's not ours to lose.

What do we have to gain? Everything, because every moment of being gives us a new opportunity to bring God delight, and bringing God delight is delight!

We have been talking this fall about some of the distinctive marks of the followers of Jesus, some of the things that mark us, some of the things that people will see in us, when we follow Jesus. We now have quite a list!

When we follow Jesus, we want one thing. We don't want many things, just one thing. We want Jesus. We want to be where he is and go where he goes.

When we follow Jesus, our hearts are wide open -- welcoming, loving, including anybody, everybody.

When we follow Jesus, we are generous. We don't hold on to stuff. We use stuff to bring blessing to other people, especially to people who have little.

When we follow Jesus, we live by faith. We may not even have much faith at all, but we use whatever faith we have, no matter how small, because Jesus says whatever faith we have is enough.

When we follow Jesus, we are grateful. We are grateful, not just for the gift, but especially for the giver.

When we follow Jesus, we never give up. We never give up!

When we follow Jesus, we are humble. We know that everything is gift. We know that on our own, we are lost, and that life, new life, comes only by God's grace. We do not rely on our own wisdom, but we let God be God and us be us, the humble creatures, the dependent children, that we are.

And we end today with this: when we follow Jesus, we don't put too much stake in any building, in any institution, or in any cause. When we follow Jesus, we are not crusaders or builders of any monument or any legacy.

When we follow Jesus, we are dancers, we are jugglers, we are jesters. When we follow Jesus, we are artists and we are the art, shining brightly for a brief moment, making something beautiful out of the lives we have been given in honor and in praise and to the utter delight of our Lord.