

“Love Front Porch”

Matthew 10:40-42

Pentecost 4A

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your holy spirit. Silence in us any voice but your own that as your word is proclaimed we may hear what you have for us this day. Amen.

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“If my hands were anything other than hands, they would be a street corner jazz quintet.”¹

Artist, poet, performer, Vanessa German, says this as she paints and sculpts on her front porch in the Homewood neighborhood in Pittsburgh, PA. It’s a neighborhood where kids often deal with the effects of violence on their streets. When she tells people she lives in Homewood, their jaws drop, like they feel sorry for her. She disagrees. She says “Homewood is like my Harlem.” There is such life and creativity in the community. She lives on a corner busy with activity, people waiting for the bus, children playing.

As people move about they see her making sculpture and art. They ask her what she is making. The kids asked her, “Can we do it, too?” She opened up her front porch. She gathered whatever she had, scraps of material, paint brushes, pieces of wood. The kids would come in her front yard and make art and foster community.

Her front porch and her front yard were covered with art, supplies, and kids. Letting kids come and make art, while she was making her art was good for the soul. Kids have come to find a sanctuary on her porch, a place to bring their creativity and have found a place to belong.

More specifically this story is about how she helped her neighborhood speak love in a difficult situation.

21 shots fired down the road. Two young people dead. And yet somehow, in the midst of their grief and pain, instead of trying to provoke change with anger or outrage, this community was able to sow love.

Vanessa German began making and distributing non-violent yards signs in the neighborhood. She says later “I began handing them out because friends and neighbors who, like me, saw this as an opportunity to say ‘STOP!’, not with judgment, but with love. The signs say: “No Guns, Keep Summer Fun.” “Stop Shooting-We Love You.”

Since her first batch of 200, she’s made over 800 more. She says “people flock to these signs, they place them all around Homewood and beyond as a way to come together as a community, as citizens in a global hood to respond with ‘Love.’”²

This is a repentant moment for this community. Following the love-sparked inspiration of an artist, they decided to turn together.

They decided in the midst of an anxious, scary, and grievous situation to start seeing God’s love everywhere... even in the people who run in gangs, even in the people who carry guns.

This project is called LOVE FRONT PORCH. Love Front Porch says, “Believe what you believe in, Love what you love, Let it be what it is and do what it has to do.”

German say, “I believe in the power of love.” Art is love. And the community is the museum, the gallery and exhibit space. Art Unites. Vanessa claims that space is where people of all ages can transform a community. When the community stands side by side, they are better together.

I’m not sure what sort of result this yard sign campaign yielded. I don’t know if the gun violence decreased, I don’t know if the message even got to the gangs. But I do know there is something irresistible about the love that this community showed.³

I love the story of Love Front Porch. I’m challenged by it too because it completely collides with my need for privacy and protection and my control of who’s on my front porch. I usually think twice before I answer the door for someone selling candy or telling me the last rain storm did damage to our roof. It makes me wonder whether I could learn something from Love Front Porch.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me... whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” (Mt.10:40-42)

Jesus speaks these words of encouragement at the end of a larger discourse about the mission set before the would-be followers of Jesus, and what their participation in this work means. The work reorients them in their identity and purpose.⁴

This message suggests that they are no longer members of their own individual families and residents of their respective neighborhoods, but disciples of a teacher. This is where Jesus suggests that the disciples' love for him must extend beyond their love for their family, indeed, beyond their love for their very own lives.

This makes me think about the mission to which we are called as a community of faith and a community broken and divided along racial and socio-economic lines.

I think about the last weekend of May, just a month ago, when following the love-sparked inspiration of artists across this city of Columbus, people together to create art on the boarded up windows just a few blocks from this church. And now the ADAMH building immediately across the street from the church has art to reflect the times in which we live. #ArtUnitesCbus (Hashtag Art Unites Cbus).

If you haven't taken the opportunity to walk past these murals, or driven through Broad and High or up through the Short North - I would encourage you to do so. You can also check it out on artunitescbus.com.

#ArtUnitesCbus is an initiative to employ Columbus-based visual artists to paint murals on the plywood installed over the windows throughout Columbus. What started as a project just at the Ohio Theatre and Greater Columbus Arts Council office quickly became a city-wide movement supported by businesses, artists and individuals who wanted to express their support for the protests and hope for the future.⁵

The art tells many stories. The message of love and peace and justice rings from these vibrant images and poems and the voices long

silenced. They are cries for justice and reconciliation. They are the tears streaming down faces of those who have wept for 400 hundred long years. They are the frustrations of our Black brothers and sisters who still live in fear on the very streets of this city, those who don't have the same opportunities white brothers and sisters have.

When we take the opportunity to welcome these murals and their stories, we see those who have struggled for justice, those who fought and are still fighting for justice, equality and human rights. Maybe we can see them and hear them better than we ever have before.

Artist and CAPA graphic designer Lisa McLymont was asked to help the Ohio Theater which sustained damage back in May. Given a very short turnaround time, Lisa reached out to friends at Blockfort Gallery and Studio, just blocks from the church in the Discovery District, to assist in one of the first murals. I share part of her experience, with permission.

The design for the Ohio Theater was the image of a sun and clouds with a quote from "Les Miserables" stating "Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise."

McLymont wanted "to anchor the meaning of what the Ohio Theater is, to speak to what was happening in front of it and to recognize that the protesters deserve support and deserve hope--and hope for the city as well. It really hit home for a lot of people and it took off from there and inspired tons of other murals in the city."⁶

She also designed and painted the mural on the ADAMH building across the street from this church. It's a night cityscape with a blue background and shining yellow stars across its entirety. On it is a

quote from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr which reads, “Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”

The first murals that went up--brought raw emotion to the mistreatment of our Black, Indigenous People Of Color in our society and in our community.

McLymont adds that the “panels by black artists [were to] support a protest that is really serious about Black lives being killed and taken and lessened...”

She says, “Artists didn’t make the work on [crappy] plywood boards to be preserved for years beyond this moment. We, at least the black artists, made reactionary art to amplify the protest message and demands of our oppressed community. Justice. Equality. And our lives mattering. Hope, love and peace are all the positive spin to a desire to not be cut down in the street. None of that will stop police killing Black people or push for systemic change recognizing Black lives as mattering.”

When, over a month ago, George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis Police officer and after some 30 days of continued protests on the streets of Columbus, many are discouraged and frustrated that little has happened to curb police brutality in our own city, let alone set a course for transforming our community.

A June 26th article from ColumbusAlive that highlights McLymont is titled “When murals matter more than lives!” Has the meaning of the murals changed into something else?

She’s frustrated that, “We’re still protesting and nothing’s changing. The meaning of the murals has shifted into something else, and honestly, I didn’t expect that.”

The message and the lives of the people who created the murals across this city are of greater value to God than the mural images themselves.

Many in our city are working to preserve these murals; finding their ways to galleries or businesses or museums.

McLymont is proud of creating something that the city wants to save. She, by no means, is a proponent to discarding all the art, but it's a matter of emphasis.

People of faith, at this time in our broken community---murals can't matter more than lives. We cannot save the murals without first and foremost committing ourselves to the important work of Black Lives Matter, ending police brutality, the school to prison pipeline and the systemic issues that are pervasive in our society.

Like Vanessa German, Lisa McLymont is transforming her community. She speaks love and justice into a difficult situation. Maybe the transformation of a neighborhood and a community begins at a place, where people can come together--- it's like the love-inspired artists in Columbus had been on Love Front Porch.

Once you've been to a place like Love Front Porch---

Once you see the people and the stories of those who create art from a place of deep pain and woundedness---

you can't go back to seeing the world the way you used to and you are compelled to do something to change it.

Because of God's great love for us in Jesus Christ, discipleship means carrying out and embodying Jesus' mission. Those who go out are

likened to prophets, the righteous, the little ones. The image links the disciples to strong prophetic tasks and acts of justice and mercy, even as they are reminded of their own vulnerability and fragility.

We can see the mission of the disciples, this outpouring of welcome with new eyes, as we hear the stories, struggles of courageous women like Vanessa and Lisa. Speaking up for justice and wanting to heal their communities is the work of prophets.

I am not sure where you are these days. Maybe you find yourself struggling to see God's love. Maybe you've tried to follow but have fallen short. Maybe you have been so distracted by one pandemic or another, that you have overlooked God's love breaking in.

However you are, I know an opportunity where the inspired artist on the front porch of our lives invites us... with a face full of love... to repent, to turn, to change our lives and follow...

Christ invites us to start recognizing that God's irresistible love is already present in our lives and waiting to be found. As we welcome one, we welcome God among us.

When we begin to understand the love God showed the world through the faith of Jesus Christ our whole world changes.

We start to look at the world through God's eyes rather than through our own, and see that EVERYTHING has value, because God loves it, because Christ died for it.

Everything in our world God loves beyond our ability to love.

The call to a radical welcome and inclusion is all around us. It always has been. It always will be. The welcome of those into your midst

in the name of Jesus Christ, has the power to unite a community, to unite a city, a country, and our world.

The Good News is that God will continue to raise prophetic voices in our midst to call us anew into community with God. The bad news is that we often reject their voices. God keeps sending people out into our midst because we are so hungry for love and wholeness. Let us pray that God's Spirit will give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to receive.

May we all find our way to LOVE FRONT PORCH. Amen.

¹ <https://www.steeltown.org/project/love-front-porch/> Short Documentary about community in Pittsburgh.

² Vanessa German (<http://lovefrontporch.com>)

³ Rev. Trip Porch, First Presbyterian Church, Granville. Grateful for his collaboration and great sermon illustration of Love Front Porch.

⁴ Mihee Kim-Kort. Matthew 10:40-42. Connections: Lectionary Commentary. WJKPress, p.116.

⁵ www.artunitescbus.com

⁶ Joel Oliphint, www.columbusalive.com, June 26, 2020 When Murals Matter more than Lives.

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 10.

Matthew 10: 40-42:

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Hear what the Spirit is Saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God.