

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 30, 2011, Epiphany 4, dedicated to our student seminarians, our new church start pastors and congregations, the staff of First Church, and always to the glory of God!

“A Vision of Beauty: Unseen and Unforgotten”

***Micah 6:6-8;
I Corinthians 1:18-31,
Matthew 5:1-12***

***(Part IV of VIII in the series
“Windows into the Soul”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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She is a vision of beauty. All who behold her testify to this. When she is singing, she is even more beautiful. She arrived in the summer of 1972. It was then that she rose in our gallery to become worthy of this praise. Built by Rudolf von Beckerath, of Hamburg, Germany, our beautiful tracker organ has 47 stops, 73 ranks, 3,719 pipes and is driven by mechanical key action and electric stop action. We know she is well suited to sing from a vast repertoire of classical music - including renaissance and baroque periods. We call her “the Von Beckerath Organ.” Many of us affectionately refer to her

as “Becky” (and to her big sister in the Chancel – the Kimball Organ – lovingly known as “Kim”).

As Becky’s glorious pipes and organ case were being constructed in the summer of 1972, it became apparent to everyone that her frame would soon block the church’s vision of another beauty named “Rose.” Now, largely unseen, but not forgotten, the Rose Window in the Gallery of First Church is one of the great treasures of this congregation and Columbus. Built 41 years before Ms. Beckerath, the Rose Window is another one of our faithful storytellers.

As your bulletin insert tells you, the Rose window shines as a great beacon of faith on Broad Street. At the close of our meeting today, I encourage all of you who are able to take a trip up the steps into the Gallery before descending down to Parish Hall for lunch.

Rose’s colors are brilliant and her themes are central to our faith. She tells us of Christ’s love in the Chi Rho monogram (“12 o’clock” in the circular window). Moving clockwise, her second symbol is the scale representing justice (a theme played out even more prominently in the Gladden Window in our west Transept). From love and justice, we move to her anchor of hope, her lamp of wisdom, her chalice of faith and her sword of courage. Then her lily of purity is a motif represented throughout the window.

All of these symbols are gathered together in the circle - a global, universal symbol that represents eternity and in essence - the circle of life itself. As our insert, so carefully prepared by Rick Sayre, points out: the “Rose” comes from the English and refers to the flower. But the style of architecture in which this flowering beauty, full of petals and curving designs, became famous can be found in 14th century French cathedrals.

Today’s readings call to us into the faith that “Rose” portrays. We are called to walk humbly with God, to glory in

the cross of Christ, and to live a life worthy of being called disciples of Christ. Like our Rose Window (our hidden but unforgotten vision of beauty), the prophet Micah, the Apostle Paul and our teacher and Messiah, Jesus Christ, offer valuable lessons for our faith as they turn our understanding of faith in God inside out and upside down.

Speaking through the prophet Micah, God boils down the faith to three things – to do justice, to love others with tender care and to walk humbly with God. These words are with us every Sunday morning in our Open and Affirming Statement. We realized nine years ago that an extravagant welcome to all people must be extended in justice and mercy, in unconditional love and in absolute humility. As Paul says in our passage today, “(If you boast) . . . boast only in the presence and glory of God!”

But Paul says so much more in First Corinthians 1:18-31. He is convinced that Christ has entered this world to turn it upside down. Speaking to a mostly Greco-Roman congregation (as a former Jew), Paul calls them out. To the Greeks, who are in love with their philosophical wisdom (that is - the life of the mind), the cross of Christ is foolishness. And to the Jews of the first century, the cross is a stumbling block for they desire miraculous demonstrations - like Jesus didn't jump off the cross during his crucifixion (as he was chided to do while he was hanging there and dying on the tree)!

For the Jews of whom Paul was speaking, Jesus' dying was an “anti-miracle.” Paul goes on to say: none of us get what we want in the cross of Christ. But all of us get what we need - which is God's ultimate miracle of resurrection and God's upside down logic in which the weak are strong, the low and despised are powerful and the natural order of things is not as it seems to be!

Paul doesn't make this stuff up! A rephrasing of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount lifts up the true nature of God in all of us and in our world:

You are blessed when at the end of your rope, God's rule arrives (poor in spirit).

You are blessed when you feel like you lost the one who is most dear to you and God arrives to embrace you and see you through (mourning).

You are blessed when you are content to live with just who you are - no more, no less. At that very moment, God arrives and you find you are a proud owner of everything the world can't sell you! (meek).

You are blessed when you've worked up a huge hunger - for God - and God arrives - providing you food for your life and spiritual journey (hunger and thirst for righteousness).

You are blessed when you care for someone and at the very moment when you feel "Care - Full" - God arrives and you discover you are really "Cared For." (mercy)

You are blessed when you get your inside world - your heart, mind and spirit turned 'round right. At that very moment God arrives and you see God - as well - in the outside world outside yourself (pure in heart).

You are blessed when you show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. At that moment, God arrives and you discover who God really created you to be and where your place is in God's family (peacemakers).

And finally (and perhaps most important of all): You are blessed when people are so threatened by your light shining and your commitment to God, that they would persecute you, throw you out, lie about you and discredit you and your good name on account of God. What this really means is that the truth of God is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. (drawn from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, pp. 1771-1772).

Nevertheless, Jesus tells us: Rejoice! It has happened throughout history to God's prophets and truth-tellers. They have always gotten into trouble for God. When this happens - go deeper into your commitment to God and God's way of truth, light, life and love.

Do you see how truth and beauty are seen by God - even when they are hidden to human eyes? God does not forget his beloved ones. While you may face lovelessness, injustice, hopelessness, ignorance, faithless cruelty, cowardice and the indecency of disrespect, God is shining light from the outside in and the inside out on every one of us.

What may be hidden to our eyes is seen by God. God sees us as God created us to be - full of love, light and life. In God's eyes, we are never unseen or forgotten. God sees each one of us as beautiful. Even more than Becky and Rose, we are God's vision of beauty. Amen.

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