

Idol v. Icon

September 18, 2022

Iconoclast

Union was the kickoff site for the Astor Neighborhood Architecture Tour yesterday, and it was wonderful. Lou Norsetter, Cathy Putman, and I shared some of the beauty and symbolism of our wonderful building to a sold-out crowd. Folks were fascinated to hear about how church leaders were frugal by using more elaborate and expensive building materials on the front of the building and more plain, less expensive materials on the back.

I also shared how our church reinterpreted classical religious symbology in our pulpit and lectern. Traditionally, pulpits are the place where clergy proclaim the Gospel and interpret the word of God, and throughout Europe you will find elaborately carved eagles on pulpits as eagles are symbols of spreading the Gospel. Lecterns, on the other hand, are where lay people offer readings and announcements. By carving our lectern, rather than our pulpit, into the shape of an eagle, our church leaders were making a theological statement. We were saying through symbol that our church understands that it is the responsibility of the lay people, not just the pastor, to spread the word of God and carry it out into the world.

Thanks again to Lou and Cathy for helping to share our church with the wider community.

After the architecture walk, our family spent the day yesterday at the Green Bay Children's Museum. If you haven't been to a Children's Museum, they're wonderful places, where kids get to learn about the world through hands-on exhibits, and parents get the joy of an hour or two in which they are not constantly saying, "no!"

Those of you who have been here this summer may have noticed that my daughter is obsessed with hats, and so it will come as no surprise that she gravitated right away to the dress-up exhibit. There she found a plastic Vikings helmet that she wore the rest of the day. When I sent a picture in her helmet to a friend of mine, he quickly responded that wearing a Vikings helmet is a bold choice in this neck of the woods, especially after last weekend.

Without missing a beat, I quickly wrote back that it should come as no surprise that I'm raising an iconoclast. An iconoclast originally referred to someone who literally broke down religious idols, but has come to refer to someone who criticizes things that we've come to idolize, particularly religious notions.

In many ways, even though iconoclasm is often understood as attacking religion, this church has, for close to two centuries, veered toward the iconoclastic, priding ourselves on breaking down beliefs and institutions that have become idols rather than icons. You see, an icon is something that is used to help us access some aspect of the divine, whereas an idol is something people worship, often mistaking it for the divine itself.

Of course, many of you know that our church was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Now, while harboring enslaved people as they sought freedom in Canada had to be done clandestinely, part of the documentation that we needed to provide to be officially recognized by the

Department of the Interior was evidence that this church was also active in the anti-slavery movement. Being an anti-slavery church in the 19th century was iconoclastic, it was an act of smashing long held, often revered, religious beliefs.

Many of you also know the story of this church voting to become Open and Affirming. It's interesting that, while being part of the Underground Railroad had to be clandestine, becoming Open and Affirming, by its very nature, had to be public. Over the course of years, church leaders studied and prayed and finally in 1999 voted to smash heterosexism which had become an idol in Christianity.

Even the fact that I'm standing here today as the Senior Pastor of this church is iconoclastic, as this church actively chose to break down the long-held dogma that only men are suited to be pastors.

“Leaves of Grass”

I think all of these examples, and the very Spirit of Union, are why I asked Lou to read the preface from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" as our Continuing Testament today, as our community celebrates the beginning of a new program year with our annual ReUnion Sunday. I was inspired to do so when Betty Bienash shared it as her gathering prayer in Worship Ministry earlier this month, and a reverent hush fell over all of us as she read it. The first few lines could be a paraphrase of the Gospels:

“This is what you shall do;
Love the earth and sun and the animals,
 despise riches,
 give alms to every one that asks,
 stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others,
 hate tyrants,
 argue not concerning God,
have patience and indulgence toward the people...”

It's almost as if you could hear these words coming out of Jesus' mouth, and in that, I can imagine any number of pastors quoting this passage.

But then it goes on:

“re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book,
 dismiss whatever insults your own soul,
 and your very flesh shall be a great poem”

This, my friends, is what makes this text sacred.

The invitation, no the direction, to question, to grow, to break down that which has become an idol, resonates so powerfully with the ethos of this church. We aren't here to throw the baby out with the bathwater, we aren't here to stop believing. We are part of this church precisely because

we believe so deeply in Christ's ways of peace and healing and love and inclusion that we are seeking a community that lives this with authenticity.

Scripture

We paired "Leaves of Grass" with a passage from the second chapter of the Book of the Prophet Joel today. Joel is not only saying that it's never too late to come back to God and God's ways, never too late to change, never too late to break down those idols that you've been mistakenly worshiping. What's interesting, and why I find this such a great text for us for today as we celebrate ReUnion Sunday, is that the prophet tells us that when we do break down those idols—whether they be vices like greed or violence or human institutions like amendments and party affiliations—we are to:

“Gather the people, consecrate the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy.” (Joel 2:16)

You see, where I think Whitman got it wrong and the Prophet Joel gets it right is that, when we take on the work of being iconoclasts, it will have a better chance of: 1) taking root in our lives, and 2) making a broader social impact if it is undertaken communally, intergenerationally, together. That makes sense, of course, around areas of slavery and homophobia, but I'd like to suggest today that community support is also critical in overcoming things like greed and violence. To have others that we witness, others to lend support, is critical in the Godly transformation of the world. It's critical as we “strive to do the will of God and make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations.”

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Joel 2:12-16 and the preface to “Leaves of Grass”
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