

“GOD’S GIFTS: III – ‘IT’S WHAT’S INSIDE THAT COUNTS’”

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Genesis 1:26-31

John 4:1-39

Back in the year 2007, Mom, Susan and her husband Bob and I, went on a cruise to Alaska. It was my first cruise, and it was wonderful. The sights were absolutely breathtaking. I know many of you have been there, in fact, some of you, I know were there just this summer. At any rate, on that cruise we took a couple of excursions, and one of them was to a village to see totem poles.

I want to tell you – they were incredible! Reaching up high into the sky, filled with intricately carved figures and painted in bright and bold colors. Each of them told a story and our guide shared some of them with us.

They were amazing things to see and our guide told us a little bit about the process of carving them, but I guess I was overwhelmed and didn’t remember much about that.

Fast forward a few years after that to the day that I discovered that Barton Funke was a woodcarver. Now, you have to know that I’ve known Bart for a long time – a long, long time. In fact, hold onto your hats – at one time in my younger days, I actually babysat for Bart and his siblings when his parents went away to banking conventions.

When I came back to Elkton after having been away for many years, I got reacquainted with him and found out that he was an art teacher, but it still was a while before I came to know about his woodcarving. He does some amazing things, and you’re seeing evidence of that up on the screen – pictures of some of the works of art he has created.

When I conceived of this sermon series using the arts, I knew that Bart would be one of the artists I wanted to feature. So I did with Bart what I did with Andee – I asked him to tell me about the process of woodcarving. And here’s some of what I learned from him.

Carving, much like the quilt making we learned about two weeks ago, begins with a plan in the artist’s mind. So the first part of the process is putting that plan down on paper – beginning to lay out the design for the carving. Bart says that “sketching helps him visualize what he needs to do in three dimension.”

After he's got the plan down on paper, he actually carves a small model so he can work out a plan for carving the larger piece. Then he's ready to draw a rough layout on the piece of wood.

Speaking of the wood – I asked him how he chooses the wood. He said that well, sometimes it depends upon the wood he has on hand. But he likes to work with wood with good durability, because his carvings are mostly going to be for outdoors.

He makes the first cuts into the wood – the rough cuts – with hand saws and chain saws, and then uses smaller tools like chisels and axes to whittle it down. He says, “you remove a few strategic chunks, many, many chips and work your way carefully around and around the sculpture, always keeping the big picture in mind.”

Because, he cautioned, “focusing on one spot or detail can make you lose sight of the big picture. That's when you carve too deep and remove wood that should have remained. And you can't put it back!”

Interestingly, when I asked “What happens if you make a mistake?” this was his reply. “Mistakes can either create firewood or serendipity. Some mistakes can be creatively used to enhance the carving, others are just face-in-the-palm disasters.”

I loved that line – “Mistakes can either create firewood or serendipity.”

He told me about one that turned out to be serendipitous. An eagle on top of the totem pole was supposed to be a fisherman, but rotten wood necessitated a change. He ended up lopping off that end of the log and fashioning the eagle parts separately, then assembled them as he would a small decoy. He said, “It ended up pushing me to do something much more dramatic than I'd planned.”

Oh my gosh, the more Bart told me, the more I saw what a beautiful metaphor woodcarving is for God. Without a doubt, it brings to mind immediately the story of creation, some of which we read earlier. How God had a master plan, and even when mistakes arose, like sin in the Garden of Eden, God didn't throw all of creation away, but brought something, carved something more, something good out of it.

And most assuredly, everything that makes woodcarving so unique and special, crops up all over the place in the Gospel story we heard read just a few minutes ago – the story of the woman at the well. Let's look at it again more closely.

You'll remember that Jesus was traveling with his disciples in Samaria and it was nigh unto noon and very, very hot. Jesus stopped and sat down by a well – Jacob's well, while his disciples went into the city to buy food. Suddenly along comes a woman, a Samaritan woman, and Jesus does something shocking. He asks her to give him a drink.

Why was that shocking? Well, for a number of reasons. In that day and age, it was not acceptable for a man and a woman to be alone, unless they were married. But more than that, he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. And the Jews and the Samaritan people were enemies. One preacher said what Jesus asked was akin to a black person in the 1960's south asking to drink from a "whites only" fountain. It was that daring and risky.

The Samaritan woman actually called Jesus on it. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" But Jesus didn't go there, instead, he said, "Oh, if you knew the gift that I'm offering you, a gift from God, you would have living water."

Well, that intrigued her, so she kept talking to him, and he to her. He talked to her about a different kind of water, a water that would quench not just physical thirst, but spiritual thirst, a water that would flow forth and fill her with life – abundant life, faithful life, grace-filled life, eternal life.

So compelling were his words that she begged him for that water, that she might never be thirsty again. And you would think that might be that, but no, the conversation went on. Because Jesus asked her to go and get her husband. She told him she didn't have a husband, which he already knew because his reply to her was, "You're right in saying that, for you have had four husbands and the one you have now is not your husband." Right away, she knew he was a prophet – how else would he know all about her?

Notice please, that Jesus doesn't then berate her or condemn her or put her down, he simply continues to tell her about God and the life available to her. Slowly, her eyes are opened and she realizes who it is that is speaking to her – it must be the Messiah himself. And the story concludes by saying that many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, because of the change he wrought in her life.

Oh friends, all along the way in this Gospel story, I see images of a wood carver – in some interesting ways. First – in the length of the conversation Jesus had with the Samaritan woman. Do you know that it is one of the longest conversations Jesus has with anyone in all of the Gospels? I mean, look, it's the better part of forty verses of scripture.

Which means, Jesus took his time with her. He cared for her so deeply that he tenderly and carefully walked her on the path she needed to travel. Much like a carver, he let things develop and unfold, each thing in its own time. Instead of turning away from her as any decent, law-abiding man would have done in that time, he sat and gave her his care and attention for a long period of time – as much time as she needed to believe that she was worth having the living water that he offered.

Which leads me to the other image of a woodcarver that is so present in this story – and it is that much like a woodcarver can look at a piece of wood and see, if you will, what’s inside, what’s waiting to come out – so too did Jesus with this dear woman. She didn’t understand how precious she was. Jesus saw more in her than she saw in herself. Perhaps she had started to believe what others believed about her – that she was unworthy, that she was cursed, that life would always be a struggle.

You heard her story – she had had four husbands and was now living with a man who was not her husband. Which meant she had had a rough life. (Many times you may have heard her described as a loose woman because of those details, but it could have been that all four of her husbands had died, and that the man she was with now was a brother of her last husband, because the custom was for a brother of a deceased man to take on the care of his widow.)

Whatever the reason, surely this woman found herself on the outside looking in at times. People either looked on her with pity, or disapproval. Hers was a hard life, an unforgiving life, and it would take a while for her to be able to believe that she was worthy of more.

But Jesus saw more, he knew she was worthy of more and he wanted her to see more for herself as well, and the good news is, that finally, she did. Through this long, patient conversation Jesus helped her see a better future for herself, a future made possible because of his living water, water that would give her life – real life, full life.

It’s almost like the woodcarving Bart talked about – first you make big cuts, then smaller more delicate cuts trying to bring out the figure that’s meant to be. Through this long, precious conversation Jesus made those carving cuts, if you will, big ones and small ones – made to carve out that precious future God intended for this woman.

Imagine what it’s like when a woodcarver makes the final cut and stands back and looks at a completed figure. It must be incredible to see what has come to life out of a piece of wood. Then imagine, how much more precious it is, when Jesus

steps back and sees new life coming forth from this woman, becoming all that she was meant to be in the eyes of God.

Dear friends, I hope you realize that this is not just one woman's story, this is our story. For all of us are created by God, but so often, we forget that we are his precious children. We sin and fall short, life beats us up or we beat ourselves up and believe what others say about us that might be negative, that we are not all that God created us to be.

That happened to another woman, whose story I'll finish with today. Her name is very familiar to most people – Maya Angelou – and actually, this story some of you may have heard before. But it's worth rehearing – for her experience was not unlike the woman at the well.

Hear Maya's words: "One day, the teacher Frederick Wilkerson asked me to read to him. I was twenty-four, very erudite, very worldly. He asked that I read from *Lessons in Truth*, a section which ended with these words: 'God loves me.' I read the piece and closed the book, and the teacher said, 'Read it again.' I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read, 'God loves me.' He said, 'Again.' After about the seventh repetition I began to sense that there might be truth in the statement; that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things, I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything. For what could stand against me with God . . . " (*Spiritual Literacy*, "Relationships," p. 466)

My friends, these stories today – the Samaritan woman's story and Maya Angelou's story reminds us that the Lord looks upon us, as a woodcarver looks at that uncarved wood, and says "It's what's inside you that counts. I see more in you than you see in yourself. And if you will just sit with me, spend time with me, talk with me and listen for me to speak to your soul, I will fill you with living water that will restore you and make you into the beautiful child of God he created you to be. I will make something beautiful with your life, if you'll come to me and let me make you whole."

Friends, may you and I have the courage of that woman at the well to sit a while with Jesus and talk with him, and let his living water flow through us that we may be carved into the children of God we were created to be, and live the abundant life Jesus came to give us. May it be so.

Amen.

