

We are God's Artistry

Ephesians 2:1-10

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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Dr. Brent Beasley

For several weeks now you have been seeing in various church publications the phrase “Fulfilling the Vision.” This is the theme that we are going to focus on for this month of September.

By “fulfilling the vision” we mean fulfilling God’s vision for each one of us individually and fulfilling God’s vision for our church together.

Starting next Sunday we are going to do something a little different. For three Sundays (Sept. 14, 21, and 28) almost all of our adults will meet in the fellowship hall for one huge Sunday School class. The teachers for these three weeks will be Joe Livesay and Carmen Anderson. The focus of the classes will be on helping us to discover three things about ourselves: our spiritual gifts, our personal style, and our God-given passion.

When we think about being engaged in service and ministry and being involved in the life of our church—when you think about what you can and should be doing with your life, it really is those three things about yourself that you need to take a look at.

- What are my spiritual gifts?
- What is my personal style? That means, What energizes me? How am I organized? How do I like to operate?
- What is my passion?

At the end of this month-long emphasis, you will be given the opportunity to plug in to one or more of the different ministry areas of our church—in other words, an opportunity to express your gifts, style, and passion.

There is a scripture from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that we’ve been using to speak to this theme. It is this: *For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life* (Ephesians 2:10).

Now, that is a great verse for what we are talking about this month. But for this sermon today I wanted

to look more deeply at it and see just what Paul is saying. You know, it's no good to just pull one verse out of the Bible out of context to make it fit what you want it to say.

So I've been taking a closer look at this passage from the second chapter of Ephesians. One thing to know is that Paul was writing to people in the ancient city of Ephesus, a place not only known for its great business, but also for the fact that there were a lot of artists who worked there and made statues out of silver and gold which were dedicated to pagan gods.

The translation I have been reading says, *We are what he has made us*. More literally, though, what Paul says to these people who are surrounded by art and artists, *We are his workmanship* or maybe best, *We are his artistry*. Then when you put that with the rest of the verse, it really starts to come alive. *We are God's artistry, created for good works, which God prepared to be our way of life*.

We are God's artistry. That is true.

Now, the verses at the beginning of Ephesians 2 are not so positive. They talk about our sin, living among the passions of the flesh, that type of thing. And that's true, too. If we're going to be honest, then we have to say that if we are God's artistry, then that art has been deeply scarred and damaged by sin and failure and other kinds of ugliness.

Just like on occasion some crazy person has gone into a museum and slashed or marked on some priceless work of art, we have marred and destroyed in many ways God's masterpiece. There is an ugliness, an imperfectness, that has marred the artistry of God. No doubt.

But as Christians we believe that God's supreme artistry is not to take perfect materials and make out of those perfect materials a perfect work of art but the real artistry of God is that God takes flawed materials and makes out of those flawed materials something beautiful. Gordon MacDonald tells a story. He doesn't offer any names, but he swears it's true. It happened in England, down in the south of England along the Atlantic Ocean.

There was an English pub one evening filled with people, and outside there was a raging storm, and the worse the storm got the more people came in for shelter and, of course, they got to drinking and eating.

It was pretty wild that night. In the midst of all the melee of people moving around and laughing and gesturing, there was a waitress who came along with a tray, holding it high with pints of ale, I suppose, and cups of coffee and tea, and someone didn't see her coming and in the crowd they jostled her rather dramatically and the tea and the coffee and the ale went flying and, unfortunately, some of it splashed all over a newly painted wall, and in a nanosecond the wall was all splotted with all of that brown liquid running down.

The proprietor of the pub was instantly angry because he had just painted the wall, and now it looked awful. And all the crowd became silent to see how he would act and, of course, the humiliated waitress stood there wondering what would happen next, and in that silence, suddenly from the corner of the tavern or the

pub, a man spoke out. He said, *If you will permit me, perhaps I can do something about that.*

And he stepped forward and he opened up a little case that he was carrying with him. Quickly people saw that in the case were a lot of small artist's brushes and paints, and they stood aside and the man went to work on this wall that was so stained with all of this wet that was now there. He began to sketch with charcoal and then with paint and other things that an artist would do and -- you can tell that I am not an artist -- but I can only imagine what must have happened.

And as the moments went by the crowd grew more and more still and more and more quiet. And when the man was through, forty-five or fifty minutes later, they suddenly saw a wall, which had been made ugly with all these blotches, now it was a beautiful thing to behold and the blotches had been turned into something that was absolutely magnificent.

And when the man was through, he stepped back and he looked and everyone with him. It was almost as if all gasped together in the beauty of what they were seeing, and then the man who was the artist took a

piece of charcoal in the lower left-hand corner, he signed his name, quickly wrapped up the tools of his artistry, and went out the door into the storm.

And when the people looked at the name, they suddenly realized they had been watching one of England's great artists at work, and they had seen him take something that was ugly to behold and turn it into something absolutely beautiful.

[Gordon McDonald, Gordon MacDonald, 30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1994]

This is what Paul is talking about when he says in our scripture passage that even though there is sin and failure and brokenness, in verse 8 he says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.* Then he follows that with our verse that we've been focusing on: *We are God's artistry, created for good works, which God prepared to be our way of life.*

This is the basic story of what God does for individuals. Take that which is broken and make out of it something beautiful.

And so we have this task of finding our place in the artistry of God here. I say to people all the time that good things are happening at this church and that this is a great time to be a part. And we do have a vision for the future. We have this hope that in 2012 when we are celebrating our 50th anniversary as a church any observer would be able to describe our church this way:

1. People at Second are really growing in the grace of God through worship and discipleship.
2. This church is demonstrating a real passion for those in need in our city and beyond.
3. There are an increasing number of new individuals and families being incorporated into the life of the church.
4. All of this is being done faithful to the unique identity and personality that characterizes this church. It's not that we're sacrificing who we are as a church to accomplish any of these other goals.

I think that is a God-inspired vision for our church. And my greatest hope for our church is that anybody who looked at us would see how that description is fully and dynamically happening here. And that's how this thing of "Fulfilling the Vision" moves from

being just about me or just about you to being about us—being about God’s work through all of us together.

This is not just about isolated individuals. It is about what God does with people together. When we exercise our gifts and our personal style and our passion, it is the way all of those different gifts and style and passions come together in the community of believers that is truly the work of art—not just individually.

We are God’s artistry. We—together—are God’s artistry. Just imagine what could be... if all of us were fully exercising our gifts and passions, in concert, like symphony. Or like words in a profound poem—individual words coming together to say something powerful.

I read an article in the most recent *Christian Century* magazine called “The Poetry of Sheep” by Peter Marty [*September 9, 2008*]. It seems that a writer in rural northeastern England, Valerie Laws, received a public arts council grant of 2,000 pounds (about \$4,000) to create a living poem with living sheep.

She spray-painted a single word on the back of every sheep on this farm. As the sheep wander around, the words take on a new poetic form every time they come to rest. It’s like some kind of organic haiku. The only way to read the poetry created by these sheep, in case you were wondering, is from a raised platform just outside the pen.

We’re talking about being God’s artistry. Think about it this way. God is writing poetry with us. You can’t write a poem with one word. It takes a whole flock. At least half the time, we seem like a jumbled mess. Sometimes we bump into each other. Sometimes we fight over our place. Sometimes key words are missing.

But always God is calling and gently nudging us to be the unexplainably rich poem we are capable of being.

This year, when we talk about how we can all serve in our church, we are trying to get beyond the “should” and “ought.” We’re talking about the complete biblical community that God intends us to be. We’re talking about how we can identify and express our

own unique contributions as integral parts of the whole body of Christ.

Each one of us is needed in our church—not because there are slots and committees to fill, but because in and through each one of us God’s grace and purpose are expressed in beautiful ways. In other words, you are a key word in the poem God is trying to write. You are a key piece of God’s artistry.

I’ve given two images for us today so far: a beautiful painting created out of what was a mess and a poem created from a variety of different words coming together. Now I want to offer a third image.

I performed a wedding here a few weeks ago. When I was preparing for that wedding, I was trying to think of an image or illustration to help me talk about marriage. I looked to these stained glass windows for inspiration.

I don’t know much about art, but if you asked me to describe the stained glass windows here in our sanctuary, I would say they are like a mosaic. That’s the word I would use—mosaic. A mosaic is a design

made by putting together small pieces of variously colored materials to form a picture or pattern.

These three windows are a geometric design, highlighted by triangles that symbolize the trinity (triangles have 3 sides). The blue and white symbolize the birth of Christ. The red and gold symbolize the crucifixion of Christ. And the green and gold symbolize the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Take the windows apart, and it would be just a pile of random shapes and colors. Put them together, and it tells a particular story; and it just so happens to be beautiful.

That’s what I said at this wedding; and I said that a successful marriage, like a mosaic, is not one in which two half-persons come together to make a complete person. It is instead a relationship in which two whole persons come together and form something that is richer and deeper and better together. A mosaic is beautiful because pieces that are different come together.

And traditional language in wedding ceremonies says that a marriage symbolizes the mystery of the union between Christ and his church.

Like a marriage, a church is not a place in which incomplete persons come to make a complete person. It's a place where whole persons, each one God's workmanship, come together and form something richer, deeper, better, and more beautiful together.

I imagine a work of art here at Second: People growing in their faith. Living out a passion for those in need. Being true to our beliefs and identity and personality. And new people seeing that and being attracted to it being brought into this fellowship.

I love this image of a mosaic. As followers of Jesus, we do believe, don't we, that our broken and fragmented humanity can become a work of beauty under the artful hands of God.

We are God's artistry, created for good works, which God prepared to be our way of life.