

Finished Product

May 10, 2015

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

Each day when I walk into my office and sit down at my desk I stare across the room and see a painting. Painted by Claude Monet, it is titled, *Wild Poppies at Argenteuil*. It is close to being my favorite painting in all the world – and it is a painting that I am happy to have greet me in the morning because of so many things. Impressionism itself captures me like no other school of painting. Dabs and strokes of color meticulously aligned to form an impression of a scene – as opposed to the hard lines of realism. Life, I believe, is better lived with soft edges not sharp corners. The blue sky and billowy clouds make me think of a bright day. The pastoral scene calms me. The stroll of mothers and their children in the foreground and background slow me. The red poppies remind me of the lilies of the field of which Jesus spoke when he said, "... they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." And then perhaps most of all I love this painting because mother and child remind me of my wife and daughter – the two most important people in my life. (Though when I researched the painting I discovered this was likely mother and son whom he was painting – but for me it's wife and daughter.)

Now this little detail I just mentioned about mother and son or mother and daughter leads me to the point of why I am showing you this painting. When Monet finished this painting sometime in the early 1870's he did just that. He finished it. He stopped working on it. He framed it and in 1874 he exhibited it. He put it on display as one of the inaugural works of the school of impressionism. It was there for the art world either to like or not like – but most certainly not to change. It could end up

either in a scrap heap of history or it could end up in the Musee D'orsay in Paris. Regardless it was a finished work. If that's a little boy in the foreground – then that is a little boy in the foreground and it is not given to me to change it. It is what it is.

This is the amazing thing about art – once it is finished, it is finished. It is not up for edit. It can most certainly be interpreted and reviewed – but it is not to be changed. Any attempt to improve it or change it – eliminates it. It ceases to be what it is. It becomes more about you and not the creator.

Imagine some of the famous paintings of history. Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Imagine suggesting making some changes to her smile to improve it. Or *The Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh. Thinking that maybe we should make those stars smaller so they appear more realistic. Or Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Who is that really? A person, a ghost? Needs more definition. *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, by Johannes Vermeer. Any touch up you might suggest to this? Or *American Gothic* and *Whistler's Mother* – what would we have to tell Grant Wood and James McNeil Whistler about their paintings? And then there is *The Last Supper* again by Da Vinci and, of course, *The Creation of Adam*, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo.

So what would we tell Michelangelo if we had some ideas on the improvement on his painting? What if we thought those fingers should be touching? Or that we didn't like the stereotyping of God as an old man? What if we scaled some scaffolding and took our palette and brush and make some revisions? It would be to take away the whole thing! If we asked his permission Michelangelo would say, "It is finished. There is nothing more to add. It is not yours to change – and it is especially not yours to add to!"

And I suppose the same could be said if you and I looked through this painting to the moment it so artfully depicts – which is that moment we look back to in faith to believe when the earth was without form and void and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep – and God spoke and God created and the earth was formed and life came into being and man and woman were

formed out of the dust of the earth. We look and we see that picture and we can imagine how silly it would be for us to say to the divine artist – the creator of the heavens and the earth – Say, do you mind if I make a few suggestions? Could I just do some touch up? Make a few changes on a few of the creatures? Though the Big Bang has done its bang ... and though the stars and planets and galaxies have been thrown and are being thrown it into the outer limits of the universe ... and though God has looked at it all and called it good and taken his rest – would we dare to say that maybe he’s not through? Would we not expect the grand designer to say – It is finished!?! Framed and finished!

It’s how this whole God thing works right? God does God’s thing quite without our permission or without any need on our part to put on the finishing touches. God creates and we are the creation. We don’t have to explain it or understand it or grasp it or even put our seal of approval on it – it is simply embracing the fact – and accepting the work as finished. And God saw all that he created and God said that it was good. It’s another way of saying finished and done. In the frame and on the wall.

So when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind after Job has wondered out loud about the ways of God – and God says,

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurement – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Good question. It is finished says God out of the whirlwind.

And don’t you wonder if that isn’t a little bit of what Paul the apostle is getting at in his great letter to the Romans? For now the subject changes from creation to new creation and Paul takes us back again to the cross – because for Paul this is the picture. This is the painting that God would draw for us – that while we were yet sinners, at the right time God died for the ungodly. God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. While we were enemies (that is to

say, while we had not interest in anything God had for us) we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son – so having been reconciled we will be saved through him. I suppose it is another way of saying what Jesus had to say on the cross – as he breathed his last, as he stroked his last brush stroke, as he place it all inside its frame – Jesus said, “It is finished.” Nothing here to add.

Reconciliation complete. The work is done. No need to add anything. No more touch ups. No more adjustments. No more additions. Even while we were enemies, even while we were yet sinners – Christ died for us without our permission and without our seal of approval. It was accomplished so as to prove his unconditional love for us.

This is the amazing thing, isn't it – this unconditional love? We didn't have to get good enough to get it to happen. We didn't have to earn frequent flyer points. We didn't have to recite the right incantation. While we were enemies – Christ died for us. Reconciled through the death of his Son.

It's what moves me about this painting of Salvador Dali's *Christ of St. John of the Cross* --- this crucified Christ hovering over the world not unlike the Spirit hovering over the deep – quite beyond our ability to affect it – Christ dies for the world. The lamb of God slain for the sins of the world. Even those fishermen at the bottom getting ready for their night of fishing – almost it seems without really even beholding it – this Christ has died for them. This Christ has died for you. This Christ has died for me. The Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world. Finished and done. Nothing more necessary to complete the picture.

What a shame if we should think we need to add anything to it except of course to boast in our hope. That's what Paul says, boast in your hope. That we get to be the hopeful people because we know that life really does have meaning. That as sure as we are that the stars and planets, the sea and the land, the sun and the moon, the man and the woman came from the hovering Spirit – and as sure as we are that the new creation comes from the Son who hovers over the face of the

deep – the reconciling cross that hangs above the world – then we know that life has meaning. That there is a beginning and an end. That we can hope that whatever should come our way that it all rests inside this framework of the God who loves us enough – that though we were enemies – Christ died for us. Life truly has meaning. God pours His love into us, even in our suffering. This is the suffering that produces endurance. And endurance produces character and character brings us back to hope – because we know that this loving God is pouring his love into us and through us to the world.

It's like that story I've told you before of the mother who had four sons and someone asked her which of the four sons she loved the most. She said, "I love them all the same." The friend pressed, "Come on now, you have to love one of them the most." "No," said the mother. "I love them all the same." Come on now, you can't tell me that you don't love one of them just a little more. "No, no, no," she said. And then she paused. "You know, to be honest, there is one I love the most. The one I love the most is the one who's in the most trouble."

And don't you wonder about that when you think of places like Baltimore and Nepal and Syria and Iraq – places where love and reconciliation are so badly needed. And maybe not even so far away – but our own town, our own families? All those places where the enemies push back against the reconciling love of God – we get to be the people of hope. We get to be the people that know that the God who created it good without our say, has also recreated it, and reconciled it all to himself – and we are the ambassadors of the good news. We get to be the one to announce the new reality. The work is done. The painter is finished. Like that mother's love – there's nothing you can do to change it. For perhaps it is greatest for those who are in the most trouble.

It's what Peter Greave struggled to say in the last pages of his autobiography called *The Second Miracle* wherein he tells the story of his early life and contracting leprosy in India. For years he was left to suffer on his own until by a certain grace he was delivered to England and into the care of a community of Anglican sisters whose mission it was to care exclusively for lepers – people whose disease had no known cure. At risk of their own infection these sisters cared for the women and men

that came to them – humbly and quietly feeding them, bandaging them, comforting them. Greave arrived to the community a bitter man – resentful over his position in life. And it was bitterness he had only to give to those who served him.

It took years for him to see something however that had been staring him in the face. He could not see the compelling force. The compelling spirit. The compelling love that approached him every day in these humble sisters. Until finally one day he found far back off the beaten trail a little chapel. And as he approached the chapel he heard singing. It was the singing of angels. It was the singing of the sisters. These suffering servants. And he slipped into the back of the chapel and there they were worshipping the creator and the reconciler. And on the wall he saw a list of names – the list of those for whom they were praying -- and on the list was his name. His name. They were praying for him. They had always been praying for him. They had always been serving him. They had always been bandaging him. While he was yet so bitter. While he was yet a sinner. While he was yet an enemy. While he was yet a bitter man ... Christ had already died. The work was finished. And all that was left to do was accept it.

“Accepting acceptance,” is what Paul Tillich called it. What about you? Is it time for you again or for the first time – to accept the acceptance. The painting is done. It’s framed. Nothing you can do to change it. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He has loved us. He has forgiven us. He has accepted us. Nothing left for us to do but behold.