

Jonathan Mayer  
*God is in the Details - Gallery Lecture*  
*at Bethany Lutheran College*  
November 7, 2013

Everyone has at one time or another heard the phrase, “The devil is in the details.” It means that small details can cause serious problems, if overlooked. But it’s likely that the idiom is derived from an earlier saying, “God is in the details.” This variation means that doing one’s work thoroughly and to the best of one’s ability is divine. For a liturgical artist, the phrase has a double meaning, which we will have a chance to explore. This evening I want to talk to you about two things: vocation, and Christian worship. Maybe you are thinking to yourself, “But this is an art lecture; those have nothing to do with being an artist.” They have everything to do with being an artist, and I’m going to explain why.

To those of you who are still students: if you’re anything like me, you’ve probably bought into two big lies about college. The first is that college is all about finding the right career. The second is that finding a career you enjoy will make you happy. Your first thought is probably, “Uh, if I’m not here to find a career, why am I here?” Long story short, God didn’t place you at Bethany in order to make photographers and biologists and business administrators out of you. He placed you at Bethany in order to make better Christians out of you—Christians who may serve their neighbors in the fields of photography and biology and business administration. There is a distinction there, which I will explain shortly. The second statement is a lie because it takes a decidedly materialistic view of life—that the physical stuff and activities of life might inherently hold the secret to happiness. Christians know this not to be the case.

My wife and I have enjoyed reading a book by Gene Edward Veith, Jr., entitled “God at Work.” It’s a terrific book that explains the biblical doctrine of vocation through the writings of Martin Luther. What struck me as especially interesting was the fact that vocation is *not* the one thing that I think I’m supposed to do for the rest of my life. Vocation exists only in the present. And a person has many vocations simultaneously. Besides being an artist, I currently hold the vocations of son, husband, father, brother, employee, and many others. At one time I was a student, at another, a teacher, and another, both. Simply put, vocation is God’s way of serving

your neighbor through you. It is not his way of making you happy by choosing an exciting activity for you to engage in for the rest of your life. For me, this was a life-changing realization. When I discovered that I am only called to serve others with my talents and abilities, a few key facts float to the top: I am called to provide for my family; I am called to use my artistic abilities; but I am not *necessarily* called to make a career as an artist. In other words, whether I make any money at it is completely beside the point.

The materialistic notion of “career” is not in any way synonymous with God’s concept of vocation or calling. A year ago my vocation involved teaching art history at Concordia University, Nebraska. It also involved mopping a bar and cleaning toilets at 4 a.m. It also involved washing combines and farm equipment. (And at the time, I probably would have been embarrassed to tell you that.) And finally, it involved being an artist, once all my other duties had been fulfilled. The lie of the world is that these so-called “bad jobs” are not your calling. Those are for people who don’t have a college degree. Those “bad jobs” are holding you back from the thing you are really supposed to be doing (coincidentally, this is always something you *like* doing). But the fact that you might like playing football obviously does not destine you for the NFL. And so the world sets you up for disappointment. When you graduate and don’t get that career-track job you were really hoping for, you might become depressed and frustrated with your “dead-end” job. You might wonder if God is punishing you. You might even be tempted to think you just need a better degree, with more letters. I know, because I thought that, too.

Now, before you get the wrong idea, I did not come here tonight to discourage you from investing in higher education. I have the highest respect for the education I received here at Bethany. But it’s not because it landed me my “dream job.” It’s because Bethany, more than any other place, trained me to be the best Christian I can be. Even though I didn’t realize it at the time, all those classes that I took (many of which didn’t necessarily count toward my major) were, in some way, equipping me to better serve my neighbor. I guarantee you will not be able to predict how God is going to use your talents and abilities to serve others. Don’t listen to someone who tells you not to embark down this or that career path or major, because you won’t be able to make a living at it. (Art majors probably get that more than anyone.) Because even if that were true, it doesn’t matter in the least. God shapes each individual into a unique tool for his service, through your family, your environment, your abilities, and even your interests, none of which you chose for yourself. Surprisingly, you aren’t responsible for choosing your vocation. And for me,

that is a very humbling realization. But there is an indescribable sense of contentment that results from knowing that you are exactly where God wants you to be—even if it isn't where you thought you wanted to be.

The second thing I promised to talk to you about tonight is Christian worship. What does art have to do with Christian worship? If you had asked me 15 years ago, I would have said, “Practically nothing.” The Lutheran churches that I grew up in had not a single image of Jesus. They were rather plain, uninviting spaces. But because I had never been exposed to anything else, I might have gone on living with the assumption that Christian worship (or at least, Lutheran worship) had always looked like this.

But by God's grace, through my experiences here at Bethany, I learned the history of art in the Christian Church. Something about that subject has grabbed ahold of me and won't let go. I was very privileged to be able to travel through Italy, stepping back in time into some of the most beautiful churches ever built. It was yet another of those life-changing moments, because it helped me to realize the extreme poverty of the worship spaces built in America in the last 60 years or so.

But for me, it wasn't enough to see that a change had happened. I had to find out why it happened (and whether it was a good or a bad change), and if possible, to go about fixing it.

So let's take these issues one at a time. First, why did this change occur? History is a tricky thing, and causes and effects are almost always more complicated than we want to make them. But in my studies, there is one culprit that stands far and above the rest—and that is Modernism. It is generally characterized as a distinct break from traditional forms of art. Modernism, as an artistic movement, began in the early 1900s with Cubism and began to fade out in the late 1970s. Arguably, it never really died. We still find its idioms absorbed into Postmodernism, for instance, abstract expressionism.

Modernism, at its core, was intensely iconoclastic. What iconoclasts of Luther's time had accomplished with mobs and torches, Modernism accomplished with relentless propaganda over the better part of a century. It managed to convince a large portion of Western culture that the only valid form of art was that which was completely original, purely subjective, and unshackled

by tradition in even the most superficial sense. Its validation was found only in itself, so representation and symbolism went the way of the dinosaur.

The reason we can say with a fair amount of certainty that Modernism was a major contributor to the decline of art in Christian worship is because, in many churches, it moved in and set up shop. Modernism boasted of newness, freshness, and originality, and for many churches, this was attractive. What better way to attract young, forward-thinking people? So minimalism, abstraction, and self-expression began to replace traditional ideals of beauty and representation. Even where churches weren't consciously making an effort to be more conspicuously modern, an ingrained sense of utilitarianism began to replace the desire for beautiful spaces of worship.

But a higher standard of artistic beauty was not the only thing sacrificed on the altar of Modernism. The greatest loss was a meaningful vehicle of the gospel. When art became a means only for self-expression, it lost its ability to communicate. This had been the core purpose of art in Christian worship for centuries. Before the modern era, liturgical art had never been a purely decorative pursuit. It had been an attempt to communicate to laymen divine truths in visual terms. This follows well with the biblical concept that worship is intended *for you*. The Word and Sacraments, the “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” all center on that life-giving gospel—that God's only Son paid the ultimate sacrifice on the cross for our sin, and was raised to life on the third day. Every part of true Christian worship resonates with this message, from the hymns and liturgy to the art and architecture. But without an art that can communicate, that gospel message is shorted an effective teaching tool.

So it is maybe not surprising that the switch to a mode of art-making that is concerned solely with self-expression went hand-in-hand with a popular error in Christian worship. The error is the belief that worship is about expressing yourself to God. The Christian contemporary music crowd shows up in even the most conservative of Lutheran church bodies with their, “God, I just want to praise you now”s. We can argue whether the chicken came first or the egg, but a whole mess of factors including Modernism, Vatican II, and Church Growth resulted in the perfect storm. And the liturgical arts have been left in shambles.

So we can now say why the change in Christian worship occurred, and without a shadow of a doubt the change was a negative one. The problem that remains is whether there is any way

to fix it. I have no illusions that it will be an easy patch job. The problem runs deep, and it has lasted several generations already. Because many see the arts in worship as “external matters,” any attempt to remedy the situation can expect to be stone-walled by a plainclothes pastor waving the flag of Christian freedom. But wherever the truth of the gospel is being hidden away in preference for a colorful celebration of human ego, this is not an external matter at all, but a theological one, that cuts to the very heart of Christianity. But with God all things are possible, and I believe there is a solution.

The first step is education. Luther showed that reform doesn’t happen without a massive education effort. He was convinced that true Christian worship flows from true Christian theology. Our pastors need to do a better job of teaching the Lutheran Confessions, instructing on worship, and confronting error. But that isn’t just the responsibility of pastors. Christian theology starts in the home, with parents. If we fail to teach this stuff to our kids, we can’t be shocked when they pick up their theology from Pastor Jeff at Life Bridge Community Church, or their liberal World Religions professor at the state university. When the Word is consistently being taught in its truth and purity in the church and in the home, the liturgical arts will once again be able to flourish. They did so in Luther’s day, and I trust that they will again.

The second step in accomplishing that goal is simply introducing congregations to the art. You can teach and preach until you’re blue in the face, but at a certain point, the people just need to experience it. When I had worshipped in nothing else but whitewashed churches, I could very easily have bought into the misconception that crucifixes are “Catholic,” that art distracts from the Word, and that money is better spent elsewhere. But raise your children to worship in a church that is not ashamed to hang a crucifix, and I think you will find that their worship—and their faith—will be the richer for it. They can see with their eyes that we worship an incarnate God, who “was made man... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” Just because Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed,” does not mean that he wants us to stare at white walls while we worship. On that subject, Luther writes,

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as a reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it before my eyes?

I'm very excited that in the past couple of decades, we have begun to see a liturgical renewal. The black geneva gowns are being replaced again by the alb and stole, and you may even see a chasuble here and there. Altar paintings, which had disappeared for almost 100 years, are becoming not so unheard of. Processional crosses, crucifixes, and Paschal candles, which once had been a common sight in Confessional Lutheran churches, are making a comeback. But this liturgical trickle, as encouraging as it is, is not enough to offset the battering ram of consumerism. Which is why I'm rolling up my sleeves, as well. I think that if you're one of the few people who is in a position to see that there is a problem, it is very likely that God means for you to be part of the solution. For my part, I want to show people that having art that is connected to the tradition of Christian liturgical art does not make it outmoded, pastiche, or unoriginal.

And that is the paradox that Modernist artistic idioms chronically suffer from: if you pursue newness for its own sake, it will elude you. Nothing that is "fresh" can remain so for more than a few years. What you will end up with is a church that goes "out of style" when the prevailing winds of taste change. Instead of having a worship space that holds beauty and meaning for future generations of worshippers, it will have the characteristic of your parents' avocado green refrigerator that hopefully they had the good sense to throw away decades ago. But if an artist is willing to subordinate his style, his feelings, and his personal preferences to the unchanging Word, the end result will be something that is enduring and timeless.

Now, to bring this back full circle—God has given us many and varied gifts. And as unthinkable as it would be for Christians to sit silently in church without using his gift of music to praise him and proclaim his works, so it is equally unthinkable to let his gift in the visual arts fall by the wayside. It is as if for the past 60 years, the Body of Christ has said, "So long as I have eyes and a mouth and feet, I suppose I don't really need hands." Christ hasn't given the authority to his Church to decide which parts of the Body are useful or necessary. But in recent history, it has done just that. It has estranged artists, by failing to employ those artistic gifts in the Church. It has made it very difficult for those of us with artistic vocations to fulfill our callings, and the Church at large has suffered for it.

I am not discouraged, and I'm not bitter. I am just carrying out my calling to the best of my ability. I think with this sort of thing, I have to adopt an "If you build it, they will come" attitude,

trusting the Holy Spirit to accomplish his work. It helps to imagine that I'm a brick layer, and that all I have to do is follow the plan for today. God has the master blueprint, and in a few centuries, this stack of bricks and mortar will be a magnificent cathedral. So if I don't see a glorious renewal of Christian worship and liturgical art within my lifetime, then I will be happy to attend that perfect Divine Service that lasts for all eternity.