



**“THE WALLS DO TALK!” A Homily delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, August 29, 2021**

Have you ever heard the expression, “If these walls could talk?” At St. Paul we don’t have to ever ask that question because our walls do talk! In fact they are rich in wisdom and messages through image and word. In walking around our church I count approximately 75 religious works of art on our church walls, plus several dozen historic photographs. And

then we have our roundel Gethsemane stained glass window high above our sanctuary altar and our beautiful St. Paul Sculpture courtyard, which can be seen at distance from the east aisle of our sanctuary through the arched doorway. Each picture, painting, or sculpted work in our church has something thoughtful, often biblical, to impart.

Our walls weren’t always so rich. Indeed, thirty years ago they were kind of bare—so bare that they would have pleased the most radical of the Protestant iconoclasts or image smashers of the sixteenth-century Reformation proud. However, the Protestant iconoclasts were an extreme group. They were much too rigid, dogmatic, and intolerant for Martin Luther’s taste. Even though Luther made clear that religious art should never become an object of worship or veneration, he believed that sculpture and painting could be an encouragement to the faithful imagination, helping us all better envision gospel stories so that they are all more real to us.

Today, Lutheran churches in Germany offer testimony to Luther’s pragmatism and appreciation for the arts. These Lutheran churches often display a still remarkable array of art—some it a holdover from earlier Catholic days but also displaying art created much later for Protestant life. I have fine examples of this in a booklet and postcards that members Kathy and Gary Peters brought back for me from the Lutheran cathedral at Wartburg, Germany when they visited there several years ago.

I am grateful for Luther’s broad-minded perspective toward art even as he personally stressed the saving power of the Gospel word because today we live in a highly visual culture. Starting in the nineteenth century with technological advances in printing and continuing in the twentieth century with photography, movies, television, and mass media, visual images began to outrun the written word.

Perhaps because a “picture is worth a thousand words” and can be absorbed within seconds, we are getting more impatient with the written word. Keep it short, we’re told, when writing. Texting with its economy of words has become our most popular form of written communication in the day when the image rules and everyone is carrying a camera and posting pictures right and left on Facebook and other media.

In our 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian churches, I do think we need to be careful about not short-circuiting communication by written and printed word. Heaven forbid that we should try to go forward by going back to the day when in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches God's written word was largely ignored in favor of pictorial story-telling, leaving neglected those parts of the human brain that process experience and fresh knowledge more rationally. Sadly, the majority of the church body in those days was left biblically illiterate and uninformed. It became all too easy for those uninformed and misinformed to be manipulated by those who made claims for the Christ and the Church that just weren't true.

Yet to my mind there's no reason why we can't strike a balance between the visual image and our gospel word--and all that we write about it in reflection. Pictures can be pretty. They can be beautiful. Helping us out, they can stir up emotion and our faith. However, there is absolutely no replacement for the Bible and the power of God's word read that was first shared with us from on high in the days of Moses when God entrusted to him the Ten Commandments for the salvation of the people Israel and for us all.

This morning our worship is literally "off the wall." No, not figuratively crazy "off the wall." But, instead, inspired and based on pieces of art work and messaging retrieved from the actual walls of our handsome church. None of these art works would be considered valuable on an auctioneer's block. Over the years they have been mostly assembled by the hands of our own members. Our St. Paulites Jane Dykowski, Shirley Havenstein, and the late Donald Gruenberg helped out. Nevertheless, whatever their limited monetary value all of our framed works hanging across our walls are priceless in the wisdom and testimonies of faith that they offer us. Indeed, in virtually every instance the images we see refer us back to the written word of God, affirming his truth and promises.

Most of the pieces shared in our service this morning display calligraphy or ornamental script from the pen of the talented artist Timothy Botts. As an artist, Botts loved to render the words of cherished Christian hymns. Some time back I prepared hymn histories to go with them. These beautiful, compelling hymn stories will be read. Yet also included in our morning service are a couple of other framed pieces that are worth raising up our renewed attention.

Meanwhile, there is so much more to look at and contemplate on the walls throughout our church building--especially at it reopens with the ebbing of our Covid pandemic. When the opportunity presents itself amid our resumed activities, I hope you will take a better look all around and take inspiration from what you see. Our St. Paul walls really do talk. Look. Read. Listen. And really see all that they can impart and share to stir and help renew and fortify us in faith. **Amen.**