Resonant Images:

A Theology of Justice for Artists and Creatives

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In 2008 I travelled to Uganda with a group from my church. We spent two weeks there working on a house at an orphanage near the town of Lira in Northern Uganda. Most of the kids there had been orphaned either by AIDs, or by fighting between the army of Uganda and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army. Over the course of those two weeks I took about 3000 photos. More than showing stereotypically poor, starving African children, the photos and stories I brought back were filled with children who, despite their situation, were filled with joy. To this day when I look at the photos I cannot help but recall those stories. Their faith and joy in the light of so much pain and suffering changed my life. It changed my art too.

The Hardingfele is a Norwegian musical instrument that resembles a violin but has eight strings instead of four. The strings are arranged with one set of four strings directly on top of the other. Even though the instrument has eight strings, only the top four are played. The lower strings vibrate when certain notes are played on the strings above. This happens because of a principle called sympathetic resonance. The lower strings respond to the upper strings. The same thing happens to us when we experience a particularly moving piece of art—we respond to it. We resonate with it. When I show people my photos from Uganda resonate they with them. As artists of faith, we should be creating works that resonate with the heartstrings of our audience, presenting them a justice centered vision of the Kingdom of God.

Artistic mediums and styles are as varied as the people who identify themselves as artists. While artists create the culture we live in, we also exist as the lens through which popular culture is interpreted and critiqued. We inform and describe the human experience, struggling to articulate the good and the bad. When asked why he writes, author and

professor Roger Rosenblatt responded, “We write to make suffering endurable, evil intelligible, justice desirable and love possible” (Rosenblatt, 2011). We are also the voices helping form and mold our cultural and social values. Artists have a curious position as progenitors of and hostages to culture. Artists may be celebrated or reviled, recognized or ignored, encouraged or ridiculed, but they are rarely silent. While the artists who enjoy the most commercial and popular success are usually those who affirm the predominant culture, it is often the artists running counter to culture who make the most exciting, compelling and lasting work.

Cultural norms, specifically cultural values, are the commonly held truths of a group of people. As those norms change, as the underlying truths shift, so do the actions of people in society—what may have been acceptable or unacceptable five or ten years ago may now be entirely permissible, or a big faux pas. For Christian artists however, the source of ultimate Truth lies outside of culture. Art forces us to engage with the world around us and question worldly truth in light of God’s Truth. In his work *Modern art and the death of culture*, Hans Rookmaaker wrote:

> All our work is ultimately directed by our answer to the question of who or what our God is, and where for us the ultimate source of all reality and life lies. So our resulting ‘culture’ can never be something separate from our ‘faith’ (1970, p. 36).

As we live and work in the prevailing popular culture, we are also called to be a source of light, a voice speaking the Truth we believe to that culture.

For nearly 1600 years from the time Constantine legitimized the church to the early 20th century, “Christian art” was nearly synonymous with popular culture. Works ranging from early iconography, to the great cathedrals of Europe, to the frescos of Renaissance

Italy, to classical compositions like Handel's Messiah, through to literary works like the *Lord of the rings* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* stand out not just as examples of great Christian art but some of the highest artistic achievements of humanity. However, over the last 100 years the language of the church and the language of popular culture outside of the church have grown increasingly divergent.

Artists wanting to remain inside of the church have found their work criticized for its piety and irrelevance by a popular culture that has increasingly marginalized the role of God. Conversely, the church has criticized artists operating in the popular culture for the vulgarity of their art, for not being Christian enough. It is a difficult tight rope Christian artists must walk between the sacrifice of their artistic integrity and the compromise of their faith. By placing these demands on artists we hinder their ability to play the role God has for them in church and culture. The church can recover its position as a patron of great art, but it must support the artists in its midst first and allow them to create art that is not always "safe".

In a broken and fallen world, Christian artists have a unique role to play as modern day prophets. Not unlike the prophets of the Old Testament, artists function as a vessel giving voice and form to God's desire for relationship with humanity. Time and again in the Bible we see the relationship narrative, from God's calling Israel as a nation set apart—an example to all others—to the Great Commission, Jesus' command to the disciples to bring the Good News to all nations. It is in this desire for relationship we find the roots of justice and the revelation of the nature of the Kingdom of God. Because God loves his creation so much, he longs to see it restored to the justice and relationship he intended. By creating true and genuine art, art that draws people into a relationship, we invite our audience into the Kingdom of God.

Artists have often been told what they can and cannot create by members and leaders of the church. But these non-artists, however well intentioned they may be, are skewed in their understanding of the role of art in the church. My goal here is not to attempt a definitive statement on what is art and what is not art, but rather to foster and build on the existing discussion of the role of artists in the church and culture. Because artists more carefully walk the line of being in the world but not of the world, we have a unique ability to speak God's Truth both to the church and to culture. This is our calling as artists and Christians: As our faith informs our art, so should our art reflect a justice-centered vision of the Kingdom of God.

Definition of Terms

Before diving into the heart of the argument, a few terms need working definitions. Several of these terms may be controversial, and several certainly deserve further exploration and discussion, but if I do not provide at least a cursory explanation of what the terms mean to me, at least for the sake of this paper, it will be far too easy to get sidetracked from the main point. The first of these terms is what I will call "True Art."

By True Art I mean exemplary art all artists, Christian or otherwise, should be striving to create. True Art is communal and narrative. True Art is made in community, by a community, or for a community—rarely is it generated in a vacuum. Artists living in community with others often find inspiration in the creative efforts of those around them. Communities of people, when united behind a shared artistic vision, can create this art as a collective. Finally, communities also possess the ability to support artists and commission their work, allowing or encouraging artists to create art specifically for that community. These communities can take many forms. Some may be churches, others local art galleries or venues, and others still may be artist-in-residency programs.

True Art is also narrative. It calls us into a conversation with each other and with God. Art for art's sake rather than art that attempts to engage the audience is rarely good art. Art becomes inaccessible when the artist is intentionally obtuse or tries to confuse or deceive the viewer. This is not to say that art should be so simplistic or so watered down as to be palatable for the largest audience possible, but True Art speaks to the human experience. In speaking to the human experience, art must be relatable and grounded in some sense of reality even while it takes us to another place metaphorically, theologically, or philosophically. True Art requires the audience to question their understanding of the world, requires them to examine their relationships with others and requires them to examine their relationship with God. Even an artistic work questioning the existence of God draws both the believer and the non-believer into a conversation about faith and Truth. The unique opportunity of Christian artists is to create art pointing not to a utopian or humanist ideal, but to the Truth and justice of Jesus, to a transformative encounter with the Kingdom of God.

I want to avoid as much as possible getting caught up on the questions of what is art and who is an artist in this paper. However, I do say that this theology of justice is not just for artists but also for creatives. So, what is a "creative?" Even though we sometimes debate about "what is art?", the general forms art takes are relatively familiar. Most people easily identify painters, actors, singers, poets, and photographers as artists. But what about chefs? What about knitters? What about people who are really good at creating innovative, outside-the-box solutions to analytical problems?

Although what these people do is not "art" in the strict sense, much of this paper will resonate with them. There are artistic and creative aspects to the way they think and what they produce. Similarly, I have already used the term "Christian artist" in several places. This

imperfect moniker carries much baggage. Yet any alternative for referring to artists of faith would require some degree of semantic gymnastics. By "Christian artist" I simply mean people who indentify themselves as Christians and who practice some form of art.[1]

The term "social justice" has also come to take on many different meanings. Tragically these are often highly politicized. Even devoid of its "social" qualifier, justice is still a term up for interpretation. Is justice punishment for crimes, or restoration for the community? Referring to some justice as social and inferring that other justice is not is a misnomer. Justice is inherently social—whether referring to free health care or to tough immigration law. Where we often get caught up is in the argument behind what kind of justice is good versus what is bad. This argument often misses the point. In the Kingdom of God, all things are restored to relationship in the love, justice and righteousness of God.

When I use the term "justice" in this paper I will use author Daniel Groody's definition. Groody wrote, "God's justice …is not principally about vengeance or retribution but about restoring people to right relationship with God, themselves, others and the environment" (2007, p. 27). Groody also makes a distinction between internal and external components of justice. Internal justice is the vertical relationship between God and ourselves; external justice is the horizontal relationships between ourselves and the rest of creation. Groody wrote, "Because justice is about relationship, there can be no harmony if there is no justice, and there can be no justice if there is no right relationship" (2007, p. 27). Only when the vertical and horizontal relationships are in harmony do we experience the right relationship God intends.

What does this right relationship look like? Author Eileen Flannigan, writing of Quaker

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[1]: I have since settled on the term "artist of faith"

views on environmental issues, defined living in right relationship as, “radically changing both our individual behavior and social structures so that our way of life honors all of God's creation” (Flannigan, 2010). I will argue the meta-narrative of the Bible is God’s desire for relationship with humanity—that the experience in the Garden of Eden and the coming Kingdom of God is one of people living in right relationship.

Before digging into the question of what the Bible says about justice though, we should look at whether it is even possible for art to do justice.

Art and Justice

No matter what its form, true art draws people into a conversation about something deeper. True art challenges individuals and communities to rethink their understanding of the world as they know it, and to consider instead the world from a different perspective. This art does not have to be explicitly justice themed, but some of the most powerful examples are.

First though, there is admittedly a narrow line between art that clearly features and struggles with justice themes and art that functions as political propaganda. All artists have to figure out for themselves how exactly to include justice themes in their own work and how overt that inclusion is. For some artists, their work will inherently be focused on issues of justice. But for other artists, because of political oppression or personal suffering or simply because of a call God has placed on their heart, the mere act of creation will be an expression of justice. Songwriter T. Bone Burnett once said in an interview with the LA Weekly, “If Jesus is the Light of the World, there are two kinds of songs you can write. You can write songs about the light, or you can write songs about what you can see from the light” (Turner, 2001, p. 51). So rather than try to give a set of rules or a formula to follow, we should look at some examples of artists who have done this work.

The first example is not just a justice themed work of art, but also one of the most famous pieces of art from the twentieth century. Pablo Picasso painted his masterpiece *Guernica* in 1937 in response to the bombing of the eponymous town by the forces of Francisco Franco. The bombing of Guernica was intended to serve as a warning to the Spanish Republicans of the power of the Fascist Franco and his German allies. It demonstrated their willingness to bomb civilian targets in order to intimidate and demoralize their opposition. In his distinct style, Picasso paints figures twisted and broken by the attack, bodies crushed by debris as buildings crumble. Though the piece depicts a specific historical event it remains to this day a powerful statement on the destructive force we are all too willing to use against each other.

Guernica stands as a powerful example of a painting which seeks justice, but what about other forms of art? The film *Hotel Rwanda* is based on the true story of Paul Rusesabagina, a Rwandan hotel manager who saved the lives of almost 1,300 people during the 1994 genocide that took the lives of over 800,000 Rwandans. Another film, *Schindler's List*, based on the story of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saves the lives of over 1,000 Polish-Jews during World War II by employing them in his factories, preventing their transfer to a concentration camp. Justice themes are found in works of pure fiction as well. The films of Wes Anderson often examine dysfunction and forgiveness in broken families. Sophia Copella's film Lost in Translation looks at the effects of loneliness and isolation.

The 2007 documentary *War/Dance* is about a group of children from Northern Uganda who compete in a national song and dance competition. Many of the children lost family members to the long war fought between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army of Joseph Kony. The Academy Award winning 2004 documentary *Born into*

Brothels followed filmmaker Zana Briski as she taught photography to a group of young children living in Kolkata's red light district, Sonagachi. The 2008 documentary *Call + Response* was put together by musician Justin Dillon and spread awareness of human trafficking while featuring music from acts as diverse as Moby, Talib Kweli, Nickel Creek and Switchfoot.

Photographer James Nachtwey specializes in documenting the lives and struggles of people in conflict zones. While much of his past work focuses on wars and civil conflict, he also does large volumes of work focusing simply on the lives of the poor and disenfranchised. Nachtwey was the focus of a 2001 Academy Award nominated documentary *War Photographer*. In his 2007 talk at the TED Conference Nachtwey said, "I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated" (Nachtwey, 2007). His documentary photography has helped tell the stories of those who otherwise would not have a voice. Nachtwey is just one of many documentary photographers who do this type of work. The power of documentary photography has increased as the Internet and mass media technology allow near instantaneous sharing of images from around the planet. More recently Nachtwey has worked on documenting the story of those fighting antibiotic resistant tuberculosis.

The theater troupe Belarus Free Theater, in response to their increasingly critical plays about the government of Belarus and its treatment of its citizens, were recently forced to sneak out of their country. Currently they are touring America with their play "Being Harold Pinter." It was written by the eponymous playwright and tells the story of increasingly brutal political oppression in Belarus. The 2009 play Ruined was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for

Drama. It tells of the stories and struggles of women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Personal memoirs form a powerful record of the experiences of those who have suffered injustice. Elie Wiesel wrote *Night* about his experience as a child in Nazi concentration camps. Ishmael Beah tells his story of being a child soldier in Sierra Leone in *Long way gone*. Certainly journalists reporting on stories of injustice, whether in short form articles or long form books, also do justice. Nicholas Kristof, a columnist for the New York Times, often writes and reports on issues related to human rights and human trafficking.

When artists are weaving themes of justice through their art they are telling great stories. It is through this telling of great stories that artists help us to imagine a more just world. Pastor Mark Labberton wrote this kind of worship—and by implication art—help us have an "imagination for justice" (Labberton, 2007). The connection between an imagined world of justice and actual world peace may seem idealistic, but it is important. We have the culture that we as artists create. We can choose to create works that are empty and glorify temporal, material achievements, or we can create works that speak to the human soul and call us to something more.

Art and Faith

In the beginning God created. Importantly, he didn't do it all at once. God took his time, paused after each stage of creation and saw that his creation was good. We see God as a creative, delighting in his creation. Among everything he made, God uniquely created humanity in his image. Being created in the "Imago Dei", we have our own inherent desire to create. Just as God intentionally created humanity for relationship, our creative intentions should reflect God's. True art is communal and narrative. It is created in or for community with the purpose of drawing the audience into a conversation.

Most artists I know rightfully harbor suspicion of anyone who tries to tell them what, or how, they should create. A long history of manipulation and sanitation of the arts in the church has sadly hurt many artists. An artist friend once shared with me frustration about her "arts friendly" church and the creative control retained by the senior pastor. She felt art was being kept "safe" so as not to offend anyone, and as a result, she felt restricted in her ability to worship through her art. Just as artists create for the community, the community needs to support them. Artists are no more or less important than any other part of the church, but we are unique. We see clearly in Ephesians 4:11 God has different roles for different people, none any better or more important than any other, but all working toward the same goal. So how do artists work toward building up the body of Christ as it is written in Ephesians?

Art plays several roles in the church, but perhaps the most obvious is in our worship experience. Art enriches our worship experience. For a long time this art was religious iconography, images of saints or of Christ himself that helped parishioners and viewers reflect on specific aspects of faith—maybe service to others, or maybe the grace we experience in forgiveness of sin—but the specific theme of each icon varied. This expression remains in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

Since the Reformation, however, Western Protestantism has largely viewed worship through art and iconography as suspect, with the possible exception of hymns. The protestant church has harbored suspicion of overtly spiritual art and artists for fear they become idols which distract from the worship of God alone. These suspicions led to a withdrawal from popular art culture by Christians in Europe and America. Rookmaaker wrote that in post-Reformation Europe, "…the fact that most Christians did not take part in the arts and the general trends of culture to any extent allowed [some art] to become completely

secular, and in the long run even contrary to Christianity" (1970, p. 31). This created the tragic sanitization of the "art" we find in our churches today. Labberton wrote, "It is a telling cultural indictment that the church today is one of the last places people expect to see acts of imagination" (Labberton, 2007). If the church wishes to engage with mainstream culture, it must first reconcile its relationship with art and artists.

The work of reconciliation between artists and the church does not solely belong to the church however. Inside of the church, artists need to be aware of their audience. Artists usually give at least passing thought to their audience to begin with. But because of the rocky relationship between artists and the church, both sides tend to be hypersensitive—sometimes almost seeming to look for opportunities to take offense. While artists need to push the audience in some areas—since they are likely accustomed to safe or comfortable art and theology—artists need to avoid setting themselves up to offend. Often, attempts at "edginess" come across instead as provocative, if not profane. And with a sad predictability, all too often the artist's response when receiving criticism is to claim, "You just don't get it!" and walk away. This needs to stop. Artists need to shepherd their church audience through their work. They also need to stand by both their successes and their failures.

Churches must be careful as they incorporate art to not adopt merely the appearance of being an "artistic" church or a church "friendly to artists". Pastor Dan Kimball wrote, "We have to be careful that we don't become so 'seeker friendly' that we lose the holy distinctiveness of the church" (2007, p.216). The term "seeker friendly" refers to the efforts of some churches to make their services more accessible to people coming to church for the first time by referencing styles and formats from popular culture. So churches have musical worship more reflective of a rock concert, or some go so far as to drop any resemblance of liturgy because it requires some prerequisite knowledge of texts such as the Lord's Prayer or

Apostles Creed. But, when used properly, incorporating art into the Sunday service or the life of the church actually serves as an instructional guide and introduction into the liturgy of the church.

Not just "seeker sensitive" churches misuse art in the context of worship though. Professor Robin Jensen wrote:

> I worry that too often art is perceived as a kind of 'extra' offering, meant for those of us who can appreciate it or want to be involved, rather than something essential to the shaping of faith and religious experience (Jensen, 2004, p. 2).

This view of art as an "extra offering" misses an opportunity to engage with the church audience and can even discourage artists from attempting to create meaningful art for the community. When an artist steps out in faith and creates a particular work, trusting their church is an "arts-friendly" community, they expect it to be received as a piece of art to be engaged and wrestled with. But when they are instead greeted with coldness or confusion, false praise (i.e. "oh, that's nice.") or, even worse, rejection, it damages the relationship between the two.

While recognizing not every piece will be appropriate for Sunday morning, churches need to celebrate the artistic talents in their community. Artists will need support and encouragement as they try to explore new themes and flex the creative muscles of the church that have long been dormant. Creating art can be a strange and messy process. Some congregations are much further along when it comes to the kind of art they will find fruitful in their worship. But if given the chance, the church will find an excited and eager resource in the artistic community. Much of the greatest art in history has dealt with

questions of Truth and the human experience, certainly areas of interest for the church and people of faith!

At the other end of the spectrum of concern from art that distracts from the worship experience is the worship of art itself. We see throughout the Bible many examples of people making idols out of just about everything imaginable, so art can certainly function as an idol. However, thinking of art as inherently distracting from God is incorrect. By being suspicious of the intent of the artist and the use of their art, we have forced art to serve church culture rather than allowing it to be a free expression of worship. Crouch wrote:

> … our attitude toward art ultimately has a great deal to do with our attitude toward worship. … If we ultimately have a utilitarian attitude toward art, if we require it to justify itself in terms of its usefulness to our ends, it is very likely that we will end up with the same attitude toward worship, and ultimately toward God. (Crouch, 2010, p. 40)

Having a perverse view of art is no less harmful than having a perverse view of any other part of creation, or even God. Art is part of Creation and thus can be used to the glory of God. Put another way, author Philip Graham Ryken wrote, "…when we settle for trivial expressions of the truth in worship and art, we ourselves are diminished, we suffer a loss of transcendence" (2006, pg 15). Churches should not fear they much choose between the avoidance of idolatry and a loss of transcendence. A spiritually grounded and healthy community should be rich in both faith and art.

A third place also exists between the church and popular culture for Christian art. Modern, contemporary Christian art is produced in mass quantities, existing in its own sub-genre overlapping both church and popular culture. There are markets for every kind of

Christian product imaginable as well. From Precious Moments, to Christian Tupperware parties there is no corner of craft or the art market that does not have its own fenced-off Christian sub-culture. Christian music sales alone are in the hundreds of millions of dollars each year. However, much of this "Christian" art follows a carefully scripted formula for what is and is not acceptable. Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) for example is often described as the only genre of music where the words and lyrics themselves, not the style or sound, define the boundaries of the genre.

Christian recording artists to often find it difficult to "breakout." Even if sales figures are strong, rarely do Christian musicians or bands cross from the CCM market to the mainstream of the music world. It is not a problem with the message or that the musicians are not talented enough, it is that the delivery is uninspired and the lyrical content is boring—it does not engage the listener. Author Dick Staub quotes musician Derek Webb:

> Christian artists don't seem to be focused anymore on making great art. That's our main problem, not what our message is, not what we are trying to communicate, not how we are breaking down these barriers, but the fact that we are failing to make good engaging art is our main problem… Our industry, the way it is set up, who the gatekeepers are, it doesn't encourage making unique art… We have a radio genre that is on the whole pretty uninteresting, and it's pretty bland artistically (Staub, 2006).

The church and contemporary Christian culture, for fear of having their theological orthodoxy questioned, have pressed out any controversy from "Christian art." The result is we have made Christian art—and by extension being a Christian—safe. It has become so sanitized it is largely irrelevant to mainstream, popular culture. It exists instead in its own

cultural pocket, safe from the threat of contamination by the fallen world outside. Little is required of us by the God spoken of in most churches on Sunday mornings or seen in our art. When was the last time you turned on a Christian radio station and heard a song challenging you to reconsider your concept being neighborly? How often when we think of Jesus do we picture the Brad Pitt-esque, "Norwegian" Jesus of our youth Sunday School classes?

Speaking in reference to worship, Labberton wrote, "Within the church, safe worship impoverishes our imagination by failing to stimulate an impassioned imagination for the kingdom of God" (Labberton, 2007). In the last 100 years the vast majority of Christian art has been devoid increasingly of Truth. This is the fundamental flaw in Thomas Kinkade's work. His art does not lack in skill or technique, but it tries to sell a vision of the world that does not, indeed cannot, exist—a world without sin. "Christian" art has become about utopian values of comfort and purity, imagining a theocentric world free from suffering and inconvenience, rather than reflecting the real and often painful experiences of the human journey.

One of the more strange consequences of this sanitized art, is Christians attempting to find faith and Christian values in mainstream art. While non-Christian artists are certainly capable of expressing Truth, even Biblical Truth, a certain degree of theological contortion is often required as pastors and youth leaders aim for "hipness". Youth groups will hold screenings of The Matrix and sermons will feature illustrations from Gladiator. Debates will rage online about whether or not Bono is a Christian and churches use Sigur Ros or Coldplay songs as part of their worship service. Crouch refers to this as "culture copying." It is a passive stance in which Christians wait for popular mainstream culture to deliver examples of heroes and themes the church can grasp onto. He wrote:

> Cultural copying, too, is a good gesture [but] a poor posture. … Like the critics, we become passive, waiting to see what interesting cultural good will be served up next for our imitation and appropriation. In fast-changing cultural domains those whose posture is imitation will find themselves constantly slightly behind the times… (Crouch, 2008, p. 94).

A hunger exists both in the church and in culture for meaningful art people can connect with; they want to engage art that helps them make sense of their life experience.

One of the founding documents of the Stuckist art movement out of the United Kingdom is the Remodernist Manifesto. Started as a response to the lack of grounding in the Post-modern art movement, the authors of the manifest declare, “The making of true art is man's desire to communicate with himself, his fellows and his God” (Childish, 2000) When the church is not producing great art, we will be left with the scraps of mainstream culture. We cannot wait for the culture to come on its own back to God.

Can a church functioning as a patron of the arts make a difference in popular culture outside the church? Absolutely. In fact, it is imperative that we do so! Stephen Johnson, in his book Emergence, argues that people take cues for how they should act from the people around them. He makes this point by writing about the swarm logic of ant colonies. Ants look at what their immediate neighbors are doing (foraging, building the nest, etc.) and adjust their behavior accordingly (Johnson, 2002, p. 74). People look at how those around them act and what the culture defines as “cool.” Then they alter their behavior accordingly. Though a cliché phrase, the best strategy for changing the culture of a city is to “be the change you wish to see in the world.” Actions, not words, lead to change. Over time, by

infiltrating the culture and transforming people and their worldview, by injecting Christ and a vision for justice back into the culture, change will inevitably happen on its own accord.

Sadly there is no switch we can flip to have great art in the church overnight. The road to creating great art is long and requires much work and grace along the way. Artists must be allowed to experiment and fail as they labor toward creating truly great and meaningful works. The church should hold artists to a high standard, but they should also be gracious when they fall short. Author Merlin Mann wrote, "'Spend less time fantasizing about 'success' and way more time making really cool mistakes'"(Mann, 2010). Just as God created he longs to see us engage in creative works. When we are being creative we are living in the image of God. It is not easy. There is a long way to go before art and artists are playing the role in the church God has called us to. But one poem at a time, one photograph at a time, one painting at a time, one show at a time the church will get there.

Faith and Justice

The central narrative of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the relationship between God and Creation. In the Garden, God and humanity lived in perfect communion with each other—life as God intended. However, in the Fall, the relationship was severed. God desires a relationship with his creation and is moving through time to the eventual restoration of that relationship in the completion of His Kingdom. The nature of the Kingdom of God is justice—the restoration of relationships—between people and God, between people and each other, and between people and creation.

The term "justice" conjures different images for different people, especially depending on the context. Often though, we find ourselves thinking of it in terms of the punishment and restitution of the criminal justice system. Yet the idea of justice as a political or economic "right order" capable of being enacted into law is not what God calls us

to as Christians, nor is it what he called the Israelites to either. Author Robert Linthicum wrote:

> …Old Testament concern for the oppressed, exploited, and marginalized was not merely a matter of cold calculation of obligation and duty; it was to be acted on out of a heart of genuine compassion and sensitivity. It was not enough to create just systems; the nation had to long for justice and love those who were victims of injustice (1991, pg. 92).

God's desire for justice, even in the giving of the law, is not about rule following. God desired to see the nation of Israel gripped by the spirit and vision of justice.

The idea behind a "right order" society is by finding the proper way of doing government, of structuring society, and codifying it in our laws we will achieve the ideal, utopian society. The focus is placed on building the right system rather than the wholistic development or restoration of people and their relationships. Unfortunately, this has lead to a reality in which religion, politics and social will are often at odds. God however gave us a model for what a rightly ordered society looks like.

Ancient Israel after being lead up out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land was to live as a people set apart, to be an example to the rest of the world of an entire nation living in relationship with God. God was to be the King over Israel and He would protect them and provide for them in return for their devotion. God gave the Ten Commandments and the Deuteronomic code as instructions for how to live in a just society and be the example he called them to be (Deuteronomy 4:5-7).

The problem with this model is our efforts to enforce it; we have made ourselves judge and jury. That is not really the point of the law—that is, keeping the law itself is not

what prospers Israel. It is the relationship with God through adherence to the law, and doing so with a justice-seeking heart, which is why God prospers and protects Israel. God wanted the people of Israel to be gripped by this vision of justice and live their lives accordingly. As long as this relationship between the people and God was in right order, as long as Israel worshiped God alone and followed the law, prosperity flowed freely from Heaven. Crouch wrote:

> Just as Babel was the cultural embodiment of independence from God, so Israel will be the embodiment of dependence *on* God. … In the midst of the nations, Israel will be a sign that it is possible to be a nation whose key characteristic is the trust in the world's invisible Maker (Crouch, 2008, p. 126).

Israel was to exist as an example to the world of the just kingdom God desired to establish. But when Israel turned away from God and broke the law, or manipulated the law for their own benefit, the relationship was severed and God removed his prosperity and protection until Israel turned back to Him. Eventually, God would wipe away the old covenant and in the ultimate act of justice sacrifice His Son, so the entirety of creation might be restored to relationship with Him.

For a period of several hundred years between the Old and New Testaments God was silent. But during this time, rather than a falling away from God, the religious fervor of Israel only grew—they eagerly expected the coming Messiah and the restoration of the earthly Kingdom of Israel. In Luke 4 Jesus stands up in the temple in Nazareth and reads from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's

favor" (vs 18-19). With this proclamation of coming justice, the Son of God announces the start and purpose of his mission.

Jesus' ministry was at its heart about reconciliation, restoration and relationship. He stands as the ultimate proof of God's love for creation and desire for restored relationships. Time and again, in both parables and actions, Jesus challenges and then redefines our understanding of justice and wholeness. Healing of disease was not simply an act of physical restoration. Often emotional, spiritual and social restoration took place at the same time; the woman at the well, the many lepers and physically disabled people He heals, and the parable of the Good Samaritan are all examples.

One of the most profound examples of this redefinition of justice in the New Testament is the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the story, the rich man's son rejects his father and what he sees as a boring and sheltered life on the family farm so he can chase after a life of wealth and excess. After squandering his inheritance, the son shamefully and humbly crawls back to the father, hoping to be hired back as a farm hand. Instead of being chastised and turned away for his foolishness, his father welcomes him with open arms and rejoicing. But the young man's older brother wants to see "justice" done. He wants his younger brother to face the consequences of his actions, complaining that his father is rewarding the young man's foolishness.

The father's response turns on its head our understanding of justice. We often like to think of ourselves as the young, repentant son being welcomed back with open arms. But as often as not, we act more like the older son, proud of our obedience and loyalty to our father and bitter about the blessings he freely gives. Part of us wants the story to end with the father relegating his foolish son to the role of field hand. Then we could point to the story as a cautionary tale and praise holy living as the path to goodness and God. But this is not the

justice God wants for us. The father affirms his older son's righteousness and obedience but reminds him that his brother's return is a cause for celebration. Restoration is a cause for celebration. Justice is not about punishment or restitution. Justice is the restored relationship between father and son, between God the Father and His child creation. There is justice in God's grace.

When Jesus ascends after his resurrection and leaves the disciples with the Great Commission, he charges them to carry on his message of restoration and hope. We see right away in the early chapters of Acts that one of the primary concerns of the early church was care for the widows and other needy members of the community. Even the great early church fathers living generations after Christ still encouraged and reminded Christians to care for the poor. Groody wrote:

> They [the church fathers] perceptively name some of the indicting and liberating truths about human life that all people in every generation face as we seek to understand the challenge of living in responsible relationship with God, others, and Creation (2007, p. 88-89).

Justice in the Kingdom of God is people living in right relationship with each other and with God. In the light of this justice-centered kingdom we as artists create art for our community, calling people into the narrative of relationship, restoration and justice.

Art, Faith and Justice: The Artist as Prophet

Labberton describes the failure of the church to be caught up in the pursuit of justice as a "…failure of imagination, an inability to see and be gripped by a vision of a world of justice." (Labberton, 2007). He goes on to write about reading the Bible with a "majority culture" mindset. "We read the Bible simply looking for some encouragement to go on about

our lives, with all the security and prerogatives we already have, and add a little Jesus on top" (Labberton, 2007). The "majority" western culture we live in has become the lens through which we read the Gospel. The church, especially in the West has become about "me"—about God loving *me*, about God saving *me*, about Jesus dying for *me*.

Those things are all true, but we have forgotten that our faith is about more than the personal, individual relationship we have with God. Christ calls us to care for the widows, orphans and aliens. We are called to be in solidarity with the oppressed. We have lost our imagination for a world where God calls us to seek justice for these groups.

Artists can impact the church and culture by working to restore this imagination for justice we have lost. Greg Wolfe, editor of Image Journal, wrote, "Like the biblical prophet, the artist is often an outsider, one who stands apart and delivers a challenge to the community" (Wolfe, 1997). When Christian artists are functioning as prophets, we are calling the church back to the role God intended—back to Jesus in Luke 4 when he reads the scrolls and announces the beginning of his ministry. Professor James Empereur (1987) wrote:

> … We are drawn into a confrontation and now have the possibility for transformation. There is a death to our old understandings and the emergence of a new awareness. Like the parables of Jesus Christ we are shocked into new understanding. [Art] as parable refers to the way it promotes imaginative living, the kind of living which is presupposed by a justice-oriented spirituality. Such a spirituality creates the proper context for the transformation of the world. This is the way that art does justice.

If the church expects to be a transformative influence in the world, artists play an essential role.

Some artists may be concerned with what incorporating justice themes into their work might look like, and rightfully so. It is easy for art to be overcome by its message and descend into realm of propaganda. Robin Jensen makes a distinction between propaganda and what she calls “prophetic art.” Jensen wrote:

> We have to be careful, however, to discern the difference between prophetic art and propaganda, which, depending on the viewer’s ideology, might amount to the same thing. Any “message art” can be superficial and sloganeering… the difference between propaganda and prophecy is that the latter opens up a conversation and refrains from prescribing a single response. The goal of the prophet is to call forth personal transformation, not to sell a particular product or idea (Jensen, 2004).

Art that does justice is about the relationship between the artist, the work and the audience. The artist does not demand a specific response from the audience; they simply call the audience to react. Art that pushes the audience to a predetermined course of action is propaganda. Justice, remember, is a relationship. R.G. Collingwood wrote, "The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts" (Turner, 2001, p. 77). As artists create works that are justice themed, they will sometimes challenge the worldview and accepted norms of some people. Artists may receive push back from the audience. It would be easy to write off these criticisms as irrelevant because clearly the artist has been inspired by God to create these works! This is the absolute wrong attitude for the artist!

While artists should not back down from claiming divine inspiration, they should also humbly submit their works to the audience and be willing to shepherd people through the

work. As Collingwood wrote, we should be calling out truths people already have deep in their own hearts. We cannot, in the words of David Taylor, drop an "art bomb" that offends or confuses them, then feel proud of what we have done in the "name of Christ" as we run away (Taylor, 2009). Far too much of the damage in the relationship between the church and artists has come from artists who, when facing rejection or criticism, have created increasingly provocative art. They measured their impact by outrage. The tragic result is that it only becomes more difficult for artists operating inside the church to encourage those around them to engage with meaningful and profound art that challenges their paradigms. While the prophets did at times take extreme action in reminding Israel of its divine appointment, it was always for a purpose. Prophets did not seek spectacle for spectacle's sake.

Finally, incorporating justice themes into their work does not necessitate artists completely scrapping their current work or style. Just as prophets all have their own messages, voice and style, so artists can retain their style and voice when creating prophetic art. Looking through the Old Testament, even though all prophets spoke only the words God told them to, they all had their own distinct styles and messages. Some were heavily focused on justice and calling Israel back to God. Some were more focused on giving encouragement to Israel while they were in exile. Some wrote using apocalyptic imagery while others used poetry and song. There was no one "right style" for a prophet to use. Greg Wolfe wrote, "The prophets of old employed many of the same tricks used by writers and artists: lofty rhetoric, apocalyptic imagery, biting satire, lyrical evocations of better times, and subversive irony." (Wolfe, 1997). This is our calling as artists: To create works, inspired by faith, calling people to right relationship with each other and God.

Conclusion

Since I started writing this thesis, it has taken me places spiritually and artistically I never thought it would. I thought I set out to write a compartmentalized theology of justice for Christian artists. I thought of this the same way I had every other persuasive essay or blog post I have ever written. What I ended up with though is a personal statement of faith, one rooted in justice and a passion for the expression of that faith through art. This is my personal theology. I have never wrestled so long and hard with questions about my faith and my art as I have during the course of writing this document. The idea of giving form to the loose, post-modern, metaphysical, a-systematic theology I have operated under in the last five years scared me.

Basing faith in flowery language and vague imagery temps us because it is easy. Like a seedpod blowing in the breeze we can just go wherever the wind takes us. If it changes direction, if our faith community changes direction, we just go along with the flow. But this leads to tragically shallow faith. Yes, it is easy to talk about how all we need is Christ's love or God's grace. But at best, it leaves us with a simple faith. Conversely, systematic theologies, catechisms, even some tracts do contain Truth in them and often are supported by the Bible, but they do not form the complete picture. When we boil faith down to a pocket sized formula it is easy to remember and protect (and throw at other people like grenades), but it loses its meaning. We are robbed of the relationship God desires with us. We can have faith without understanding.[1]

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[1]: I just started reading James K. A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom* and like what he says about knowing vs understanding.

We have a God and a Savior who want desperately to be in relationship with us. Yet, here we sit as Christians fighting with people outside of the church and even with each other about who is “right.” Fighting about what kind of art is “Christian” and good. About what rules our artists have to follow to be “safe.” We are so good at setting up walls and hurling stones. We blast each other on TV, we do it on the Internet, we do it in our churches and our small groups. We have grown so concerned with being right we have truth but not meaning.

Verses become weapons for assailing the reason and logic of our enemies. We march proudly from victory to victory leaving a path of destruction in our wake. And we can do it; we can “win” all of the battles along the way. But one day we will look back and realize they were all Pyrrhic victories that left us alone in our church fortresses of solitude. We have forgotten the heart of our gospel is a life lived in relationship as an example of the Kingdom. Some people are called to justice work in Africa or Southeast Asia or in prisons or homeless shelters. But many more are called to do justice in a suburb of Boise, in a neighborhood north of Seattle, in a coffee shop in DC, in a pub in Atlanta, in a hair salon in Milwaukee, and so on. Justice begins where our life and the Kingdom of God intersect.

I am not an art scholar, nor am I a theologian. I am a writer and photographer and these things have resonated with me as I have sought to create the best art I can. To be the artist God created me to be. Whether or not you identify yourself as an artist, all can benefit from exploring the intersection of justice and art in their life. Spend time with people who are different from you. Spend time with people who are overlooked and disenfranchised. Maybe this means taking a trip to Africa. Maybe it means spending time at a local food bank or homeless shelter. Maybe it means showing your art at a new venue or to a new audience.

Listen and look for what God is teaching so you can in turn give voice to his tugging on your heart.

I want to close with a commission. In his book Crow and Weasel author Barry Lopez writes, “Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.” This is our calling as artists and Christians: To tell stories with our art that reflect a justice-centered vision of the Kingdom of God.

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