

July 26th: Have Mercy

Again, welcome to this new summer series—this will be a time of year when we take a break from our more traditional sermon series to explore more creative ways of engaging with God and growing in our faith. This is an opportunity to expand our spiritual journey by deepening our curiosity and trying new things, so I hope that this season will give you a new perspective or fresh insight.

The practice that we are entering into each week is called Visio Divina—which is similar to a practice called Lectio Divina. In that practice, a passage of scripture is read multiple times, each time paying attention to a word or phrase through which God might speak. Visio Divina is similar in the sense that it invites us into prolonged attention and introspection, but the object of our devotion is different. We will hear scripture passages each week that relate to the theme of the day, but our practice will center on a piece of artwork that we will reflect on together. This art will be from a variety of mediums, cultures, and time periods, all with the goal of using our visual sense to learn something new or receive new wisdom.

I will first offer a brief reflection on our piece for today, and then I will invite us to begin our practice. Whether you are new to Visio Divina or you've practiced it before, I will offer some additional instructions and potential questions to consider—but you are welcome to engage in any way that makes sense for you.

With all that in mind, please take a moment to center yourself and pray with me.

Merciful Jesus, your sacrificial death is evidence of how deeply you love us, you gave your life to reconcile all of humanity with our Creator. Through your pain and suffering, we are redeemed, we are made whole. Right now, there are many of us who are all too aware of our fragility and fractures, we see the damage of sin and cruelty in our world. Hold us now, as your mother held you. Be tender

with our broken bodies and minds, and offer us your safe embrace. Remind us that we have received your mercy, and there is nothing that can separate us from your compassion. Amen.

This is a pretty famous piece of art, but if you're not familiar, I'm going to share a little bit about its origins so that we can fully understand the labor and care that went into the final result.

To start, this is unlike other art that we've seen thus far—those were two dimensional paintings and frescos, but this is a sculpture, a three dimensional work that comes alive before our eyes. This might be harder to perceive on screen, as this photo is a two dimensional representation of the actual sculpture, but I promise that if you ever find yourself in St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, being in front of the real thing is a totally different experience.

This is Michelangelo's "Pieta," meaning "pity" or "compassion," sometimes called "Madonna della Pieta," referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus, who cradles him in her lap as he is pulled down from the Cross. Carved in 1499 for the funeral chapel of a French Cardinal and ambassador to Rome, it represents the apex of Italian sculpture during the High Renaissance. When Old St. Peter's Basilica was demolished in 1605, and the new basilica was constructed, this piece was preserved and placed in a new chapel close to the north entrance of the church. After an incident of vandalism in 1972, the statue now remains behind bulletproof glass, kept safe for many more generations of pilgrims and worshippers to enjoy.

But why is this piece of art so impactful? What makes it so captivating?

For one, when you're standing in front of this sculpture, you can see the incredible detail that is etched into every surface of the Carrara marble. It is staggering to see the gentle folds of fabric, the clean lines of fingernails and wrinkled skin, the precision of muscle and bone—it feels so lifelike despite its material. That was Michelangelo's gift—turning stone into living, breathing individuals, making you believe you were in the presence of human beings

instead of art. It also feels otherworldly in some way. The statue appears to shine, even in the shadowed parts. It gleams, the polished surface reflecting light and catching sunbeams from inside the nave of the basilica.

And then, there's the emotion of this moment. In this specific type of scene, there's a swirl of physical and mental realities—the agony of death is juxtaposed with the overwhelming love of a parent. We see Jesus' broken body, and can imagine his immense suffering, but we also see Mary's facial expression and the holy gentleness of her embrace. The contrast between his sacrifice and her devotion combines into this image of deep and meaningful relationship. Despite Jesus' closed eyes, and Mary's slightly bowed head, we can see that there is a special connection between these two figures that goes beyond the human realm, it a connection rooted in their divine beginnings.

As Mary holds her miracle child, she remembers the good news that first brought him into her life. She holds onto the memories of his childhood and early adulthood, the stories that would have been told and retold around the dinner table. She carries with her the pride of witnessing Jesus' ministry, and the sorrow of seeing his brutal and humiliating death. She's been with him every step of the way, even once his life has ended. In this moment, her tender care is the earthly embodiment of God's gracious mercy and care—she is the one who displays God's love for us to see. She is the one who demonstrates grief for justice that has been denied.

Now, to be clear, this is a slightly imaged scene. As we look at our scripture for today, from the Gospel of Matthew, we might notice that nowhere in our text does it explicitly say that Mary acted in this way or that this moment was captured by our biblical authors. In Matthew's version of Jesus' crucifixion, women are present, watching from a distance. Mary the mother of Jesus is joined by Mary Magdalene and the mother of Zebedee's sons. Together, they wait for this awful public spectacle to be over. When Jesus has finally breathed his last breath, we learn that a rich man named Joseph had gone to Pilate, the Governor, and had asked that the body be taken down from the cross and given a proper burial, which would have been unusual. Verses 59 and 60 say

this: “Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away.”

Despite the fact that Michelangelo likely created this sculpture knowing that it wasn't in the Bible, I think it can be extremely powerful for us as we enter into this story. When we meditate on this image, we might also recall moments from Jesus' life and ministry that remind us of our own commitment to faith. We might recall his baptism and remember our own. We might recall his celebration of the Lord's Supper and remember our own experience of bread and wine at the table. We might recall his willingness to be tortured and killed for our sake, and remember ways in which we've fallen short or failed to measure up to our promises. We might recall that he freely gave himself so that we might experience true liberation and healing, and also remember that there are many ways in which we still need forgiveness.

It brings to mind the words of Psalm 51, written by King David, Jesus' anointed ancestor. In that epic poetry, David begs, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.” It might be a great place to start your own reflection, with a sincere and honest plea, “Have compassion on me, Heavenly Father. Hold me close as Mary held Jesus. Wrap me in your tenderness and care.”

Maybe those are words that will guide you this morning.

To prepare, let me frame our practice. In just a few moments, I will invite us into sacred silence and for about 5 minutes, we will engage with this sculpture and this story. As you entered this morning, you might have received a piece of paper with the four stages of Visio Divina, but I will also describe them for you now.

First, I invite you to Gaze at the sculpture on the screen. Look slowly and thoroughly, taking a first glance, noting the colors, movement, textures, people,

expressions and things. This is simply a preliminary step, as you allow your soul to open and interact with the image.

Second, when you are ready, you can enter a time of Reflection. This is a deeper look, meant to engage your imagination. How does this image inform or illuminate your relationship with God? How does it speak to your spiritual journey?

Third, when you've had a chance to reflect, you can start to Respond with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Did it open a new awareness, or spark a conviction? Offer that prayer to God.

And finally, the last step is to Rest. Sit with the sculpture again. Notice how God's presence is with you in this space of relaxation and refreshment. How will you take this sense of peace into the rest of your day?

Remember: Gaze, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. Or simply take these moments to breathe deep before the busy week ahead. It's up to you.

Now, settle into your chair, take a second to push away any distractions, and focus on this encounter. You may begin.

silence

Thank you, my friends. I hope that these moments of spiritual practice have given you a chance to enter this story and view this sculpture in a new way. May you leave this worship service with an experience of God's deep compassion and love for you as you begin a new week.

Amen.