

When in Doubt...Create!
By Rev. Dr. Katy E. Valentine
First Christian Church of Chico, CA
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The sanctuary was covered in crafts, knitted items, paintings, wood carvings, stained glass and more made by community members. Beautifully done!

Sermon

Look around at all the different beautiful creations around us. They are each one created by someone from this community or friends of our community.

Art has power. It has the power to tell a story. It has the power to let us encounter the holy in new ways. Even something as simple as small, knitted square, weaves a story all on its own.

Katy held up a small prayer square, a three inch by four inch knitted square with a cross in the middle..

A few months ago, my colleague Rev. Gwynn gave me a prayer square when I saw her in Berkeley. They are these small knitted squares with a cross in the middle that come in a plastic bag with a prayer and a little information about the church on them. She gives them away to people, and doesn't always know where they end up. It is like a prayer shawl but for your pocket – a tangible way to know that someone loves you and is praying for you. She gave it to me and I took it happily. Later that day I went to visit my friend Adele. Adele was 85 at the time, and she had started playing the harp at age 83, and I got to know her in a harp circle. Adele came to my ordination, by which I was very touched, and shortly thereafter was diagnosed with cancer. She was struggling with chemo when I visited her. I knew right away that the prayer square was not for me but for her. I gave it to her and her face lit up; she loved it. She had this small tangible evidence of my care for her before her death just a few short weeks later.

These prayer squares are being made now by members of our Region. We are knitting and crocheting them in time for our women's Spring Renewal event on March 11, and I hope that this is a ministry that will continue in the life of FCC afterwards.

Art shapes one of the most well-known stories of the Hebrew Bible. The first words of the Old Testament are a poem where God creates order out of chaos.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The second word in this verse is “barah,” which we translate as “create.” It means to shape, or create, to fashion by cutting. God did not “make” in this instance – another word – but created with a poetic flair. God doesn't just slap things down and call it a day – God lovingly fashions the heavens above and the earth below. For those of you who create things with your hands – like all the beauty that surrounds us today in the sanctuary – then this passage supports you in your creative work. For those of you who work with words, consider this. Genesis 1 probably developed as a poem meant for liturgy for a population who learned by ear, not by reading. For instance, if the leader says:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said,

(people) **'Let there be light'**; and

there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

(people) **And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.**

This repetition continues for the duration of the creation story, making it easy for people to learn in a poetic form.

We can hardly speak about the creation of the universe without speaking about the earth around here this week. I know the earth has done a number on us in recent days. In our week of mandatory evacuations, we've been on precarious watch about how the earth may literally fall down, sending water rushing down into the flood plains. We who were in drought for so long prayed for rain are now in crisis due not only to nature but also to human made structures. And our community has poured out over the past week offering services, places to sleep. We have been housing Red Cross volunteers and staff members right here at this church to sleep, and donations and supplies from other Disciples churches have been coming in to us. Some of you have staffed our tables early hours and late at night to welcome guests. Thank you for all of your work. We do have a lot of costs that have accrued from having utilities running 24/7, so your mindful giving as you are able is most appreciated.

But now that the potential tragedy is on hold, people have returned to their homes, what do we do? It's not enough to have just the basics – we are also called to have beauty and artistry in our lives. When we create, we become creators *with* God. And when we do that, some pretty neat things can happen. The act of creating itself has the potential to become a prayerful and meditative space.

Whether we participate in acts of creation through arts and crafts, or whether we enjoy looking at those that are created others, Genesis 1 reminds us that they are not frivolous. The act of creating beauty in the world with art, crafts, music, words or any other means is a holy act. Using any kind of art in our own spiritual journey is a holy act. We don't *worship* them, but we use them in our worship.

So let's try this by experience. Everyone has a coloring sheet and crayons in front of you. I invite you to color the page for one minute with no other purpose than to fill in space on the page. Pipe cleaners are available for you, too, if you'd prefer to sculpt something instead.

Invite everyone into the coloring pages for one minute.

You are invited to continue to use the crayon and paper and pipe cleaners at your disposal throughout the worship service. I will not be offended if you do. At the end of our one minute of coloring, some pretty neat things likely happened to you. While creating just a little bit of art, it is likely that your mind was able to set aside preoccupations and worries – allowing your spirit to come in and have a seat. Your right brain and left brain began to speak to each other. It even helps with depression and negative thoughts when done regularly. This kind of creation allows us to pray with our hands and all of our senses. Every stitch you see up on the altar this morning is prayerful. These art forms can become part of our prayer life – they will speak to us when we don't have words to speak. If coloring isn't your thing, there's a million other forms that are available to you.

Do any of our crafts people and artists have experiences that are prayerful while they create?

Last year we hosted a portion of the training for Trans Awareness Week, which we will do again in late March again this year. We also hosted Trans Day of Remembrance in November. In between all that time, you all agreed to ordain me. From that ordination offering, half of it was set aside to help fund some kind of ministry in cooperation with the gender and sexual minority community. I wasn't sure what it would be, but it was there. As we were planning for Trans Day of Remembrance this year, we knew we wanted to continue a group going that was social, specifically for people who are either trans or allied with the trans community. The bright idea that we came to was a group called "Coffee and Creativity" – the idea is that we will come together with fair trade coffee and make art together. That will be debuting sometime in April as well – because we know that art is healing and transformative, and the ordination offering will help supply this group at the beginning stages.

We have mentioned that this has been a very full and emotional week in the life of our Chico community, including our particular community of faith. We've held a memorial, we've hosted people helping others in tragedy, and we've experienced loss. Sometimes when we are in doubt about what to do next, we can always pick up a crayon and create. This is participating in part of our divine nature – doing what God did first.

Notice that at no point today have I suggested that your art forms need to be museum worthy, right? It's the act of creating that is significant, not necessarily the result. If you're a perfectionist, then that might be hard – so you'll find what works for you. For some people it's cooking or gardening, for others it's paint, and for others it's music, and for others it's being able to sit in beautiful nature and appreciate God's artistry around us.