

## ICONS OF IDENTITY AND MISSION

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2013

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I am not a connoisseur of stained glass, but I know what I like and what moves me. Or at least I know that I do *not* like it when inspirational stained glass that is supposed to be in its place is not there! It has certainly been a frustrating process getting our large window over the Franklin Street door refurbished. What began as a six-month project has stretched out well beyond two years! But at last the correctly measured mullions are being put in place, and within another month, by the end of May, we should again (I will emphasize “should”!) be inspired and instructed by the witness of this beautiful treasure.

I say, “be inspired and instructed,” because I think of the stained glass windows in our church as icons, as icons of identity and mission. When the church was built in 1925, some eighty years into the ministry of the Chapel of the Cross, it is clear that the subject matter and the composition of the windows were the result of both faithful prayer and careful thought. They reflect the congregation’s sense of who the Chapel of the Cross is and what it is called to do. That identity and mission have not essentially changed over many decades, as I think you will see.

Let us start with our missing window. If you are relatively new and have never seen it, or you cannot remember what it looks like(!), let me remind you. The main scene is the birth of Jesus, with Mary and Joseph and the baby in the center, flanked on the right by shepherds and on the left by wise men. But here Jesus is not lying in a manger, but upright on Mary’s lap, extending his arms in an “orans” or praying (or what the Jr. Choir may call “the Lord be with you”) position. This gesture can be seen as both an embracing of the world and a prefigurement of the crucifixion, shown in our center window in front, which we will get to in a moment. Two important details reinforce this Nativity window’s pointing to Jesus’ death on the cross: one is the crown he already wears as an infant, designating him as not only a king but also as a martyr; the other is the prominence in front of Jesus in the center panel of a lamb – not just one who happened to be brought by the shepherds, but one which speaks of “the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world,” which we see proclaimed in the words around Jesus’ feet in the front window.

Since we are the Chapel of the Cross, we should not be surprised to see the crucifixion in the most prominent place in the church – in the front above the altar. But notice that not much of the cross itself can be seen. Instead the focus is on Jesus himself, already having died, his arms raised

rather than perpendicular, as if in victory. In addition to the words around his feet, declaring the Christian belief that Jesus is the Lamb of God who atones for our sins and we do not but do share in his victory over sin and death, the words in the bottom right hand of the window declare, "It is finished." These words of Jesus from the cross refer not only to his death, but also to the completion of the work of reconciliation his Father gave him to do. "His one oblation of himself once offered... for the sins of the whole world" is indeed finished and cannot be undone. What remains for us his followers is to proclaim that Good News to an uncomprehending world. The windows on either side point to how we at the Chapel of the Cross have been and are and will be called to do that.

The window on the left is the culmination of today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the book in scripture that tells us how the early Christians tried to discern all the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection and how they were to live in the light of that incredible world-changing mystery and witness its truth to others.

As we heard in the reading, even Peter, Jesus' handpicked leader of his disciples, needed to be jolted beyond business as usual in terms of hearing and living out God's Good News. He had a divine vision encouraging him to eat non-kosher food. Not understanding at first that this was a metaphor for the Gentiles, Peter refused three times. But then he received a visit from representatives of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who had also had a vision. As Peter began to respond to God's grace, he went with the visitors and entered Cornelius' house, an act forbidden by Jewish law. Our window shows him speaking with Cornelius and others of his household, saying, as shown in the bottom right hand corner in the King James translation, "God is no respecter of persons;" or as is perhaps clearer in the Revised Standard Version, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality."

That is a powerful statement in any circumstances. "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality." But in the South in the 1920's, thirty or forty years before the upheavals of racial integration, to embed it in stained glass should move us in the depth of our hearts. This scriptural scene – like its companion on the right, is rarely shown in stained glass. It was not chosen by accident. The congregation that in its articles of incorporation in 1842, eight decades earlier, added twelve women's signatures along side of the canonically required twelve men's signatures, chose that divine proclamation for a reason. The congregation that has worshipped in the light of that window for another eight decades has carried on that legacy by standing up for the rights of gay and lesbian people and celebrating liturgically the joy and witness of faithful, lifelong gay unions. Who knows what further understanding of that divine revelation may lead us to in the future? But it is part of our congregation's identity and mission: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality."

The window on the right is a similar scene from the Acts of the Apostles, this time involving Paul. He had gone to Athens, the center of the academic world at that time, and noticed all the Athenians' statues to various Gods, including one, to cover themselves, "to the unknown God." The pedestal in our window has the Greek words, "Agnosko Theo" on it, and the translation "to the unknown God" appears at the top of the window. Undaunted by this polytheism, Paul began to tell them who the unknown God is. "The God who made the world and everything in it ... gives to all men life and breath and everything.... Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being;' as even [Paul notes] some of your poets have said. 'For we are indeed his offspring.'"

The choice of this scriptural scene, also rare in stained glass, was no accident either. Built on the campus of the first secular university in the United States to open its doors, the Chapel of the Cross has as an integral part of its ministry, the challenge and joy of witnessing on that campus to the "Lord of heaven and earth," as it reads in the bottom right hand corner of the window. We are to be, in the title of our building project, "A Light on the Hill," which is Chapel Hill and beyond, and so to let our light shine, individually and collectively that people of all persuasions can see our "good works and glorify [our] father who is in heaven."

It will be wonderful to have all our stained glass back soon to remind us more completely of who we are and what we are called as a parish to do. It will be encouraging once again to have all of them inspire us to live out that mandate out as faithfully as we can. For far from pretty pictures or even beautiful works of art, our treasured stained glass windows are icons of our God-given identity and mission.

Acts: 11:1-18