

The Curve and the Curse **(#2 in the “Masterpieces” Lenten series)**

*For we know that the law is spiritual;
but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.
I do not understand my own actions . . .
I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,
but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind,
making me captive to the law of sin . . .*
(Romans 7:14-15a, 22-23)

“Incurvatus in se”
(St. Augustine on the human condition, “*Curved inward upon oneself*”)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the First Sunday in Lent, **March 10, 2019**
(Volume 02 Number 34)
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

We began what I’m calling the *Masterpieces* Lenten series last Sunday with *The Creation of Adam*, the most famous of Michelangelo’s paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. God’s reach is powerful, the muscles of his right arm well-defined and pulsing with energy. Adam reciprocates yearningly, almost sleepily, the muscles of his left arm lacking tautness. This reach of each for the other creates a gap between their extended index fingers, and in that gap we found a *Thin Place* to close out our Epiphany series, a *Thin Place* of humankind’s closeness to God, a sense that we were not created for this world alone.

As we view the entire Sistine Chapel ceiling, the full biblical story of our first parents’ fall into sin is exposed, the gap of nearness to God becoming a great gulf as Michelangelo portrays the expulsion from Eden’s Paradise. These forty days of Lent invite us to reflect upon the distance between who we are and who we were created to be.

I called that first sermon, *Creation*. This morning we’ll view two more of Michelangelo’s *Masterpieces*, which I’ll call the *Curve* and the *Curse*.

Only ten days after the unveiling of the finished Sistine Chapel ceiling, the 69 year old Pope Julius II fell ill with a high fever. He lingered for a few months before he died on February 21, 1513. You may recall from last week how Michelangelo had not wanted the job, considering himself a sculptor, not a painter.

He was happy when the work was finished, but even in death Pope Julius was not finished with him. He had tied up the artist from beyond the grave, setting aside in his will the sum of 10,000 gold ducati (a hefty sum in today’s money) for Michelangelo to complete his tomb, originally conceived as an ornate mausoleum with 40 statues to be completed by Michelangelo over a seven

year span. Though Michelangelo succeeded in having that commission greatly reduced in scope, it was a frustrating time for him. By far its most magnificent sculpture is one of the two masterpieces we consider today – *Moses the Lawgiver* -- now installed at Rome’s Church of San Pietro in Vincoli (St. Peter in Chains). Let’s look at it closely.

Despite being a seated figure, Michelangelo’s Moses is one of smoldering power. Note how his left leg is drawn back, toes only touching the ground, like a sprinter anchoring his foot at the starting block. Impending action is obvious.

His eyes are perhaps the most powerful element of this *Masterpiece*. Moses seems riveted by something outside our field of vision, something we can’t see. He is carrying the tablets of the law, down from the mountain after 40 days, marked by his near encounter with God by two knobby horns on his head, a famous feature drawn from Jerome’s translation of the Vulgate.



Moses descended from the mountain to find that his brother Aaron had allowed the Hebrews to gather their gold and fashion an idol in contradiction to the first two of the ten commands in his hand. No wonder Moses’ eyes register the danger! We can measure this in the rigidity of Moses, his left arm with veins throbbing and muscles tensed, as if holding back from action. Here is Moses at the very moment of truth.

His eyes are ablaze. His right hand, while resting on a tablet of the Torah, tugs at strands of his beard as if contemplating what he should do. One of his early biographers, Giorgio Vasari, who was a toddler of 3 years old when Moses was unveiled, is amazed by the river of hair in the marble beard, “*as if the iron chisel of Michelangelo has become a brush.*” Moses’ left hand clutches at his stomach, as if holding himself back from his own anger. For 504 years *Moses the Lawgiver* has glared upon worshipers, tourists, and students of art. In 1913 Sigmund Freud famously spent three weeks with the statue, studying human emotion in the face of this Moses framed by copious hair and protruding horns.

Moses is a conduit of the law which increases our awareness of the gap between God and his people. That’s why I’ve called this *Masterpiece* of Michelangelo, the *Curse*, as did the Apostle Paul Galatians: “*God has redeemed us from the Curse of the Law, having become a Curse for us, as it is written, Cursed are those who hang on a tree.*”

Our second *Masterpiece* is one of Michelangelo’s earliest sculptures, *Bacchus*, the Roman God of Wine. Michelangelo was only 21 when he started on *Bacchus* in 1496, having arrived in

Rome from home in Florence, no longer a mere youth blessed with raw talent and high ambition. He was an experienced sculptor with a handful of private commissions from prominent clients to his credit. Bacchus now resides in Florence at the *Palazzo del Popolo* (*Palace of the People*).

A prominent cardinal commissioned the sculpture of Bacchus to place in his garden. Though the cardinal rejected it, expecting something more conventional, today Bacchus is widely recognized as the first great *Masterpiece* of Michelangelo, setting him up for his next great work which would follow in but three years, the *Pieta*.

Bacchus seems to have sampled too freely of his own invention, lurching unsteadily on his feet, his balance precariously maintained. He's raising his cup to his slack lips as his head lolls uncertainly on his neck, his boyish features rendered stupid with drink and his eyes are heavy with sleep.

Contrasted with *Moses the Lawgiver*, Bacchus has no rigid musculature, but is soft and unheroic, every muscle relaxed, limbs in a lethargic, languid ballet of sensuousness, in love with his liquid creation. Bacchus is curved, so unlike Moses with his angles of attack evident, recognizing that he has come to a moment of truth. The only moment of truth for Bacchus, as is always true with human addiction, is in the next fix, the next taste



In Bacchus we find complacency and listlessness. Bacchus is not the master of the intoxicating grape, but is mastered by it. Everything about his pose, from the bent right leg to the subtle twist of the torso to the forward lean of the neck, re-enforces the message of one who, curved, has succumbed to the flesh.

Which brings me to the Latin phrase I've offered you as a way to get at our text in Romans 7, *incurvatus in se* (*Curved in upon oneself*). Luther used the phrase, but he was quoting St. Augustine, who described humankind as *Homo incurvatus in se* (*Man, curved in upon himself*). Note how Paul ends the chapter:

*So, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God,
(There's Moses the Lawgiver)
But with my flesh, I am a slave to the law of sin.
(Behold, Bacchus!)*

Paul writes, "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" In other words, we are God's *Masterpiece!*

I want to conclude with a beautiful poem titled, "*The Old Violin: The Touch of the Master's Hand*" written by Myra Brooks Welch in 1921. I thought it especially appropriate today since we have this morning heard the beautiful violins and other stringed instruments accompanying our Chancel Choir.

The Old Violin
(The Touch of the Master's Hand)

'Twas battered and scarred,
And the auctioneer thought it
hardly worth his while
To waste his time on the old violin,
but he held it up with a smile.
"What am I bid, good people", he cried,
"Who starts the bidding for me?"
"One dollar, one dollar, Do I hear two?"
"Two dollars, who makes it three?"
"Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three,"

But, no,
From the room far back a gray bearded man
Came forward and picked up the bow,
Then wiping the dust from the old violin
And tightening up the strings,
He played a melody, pure and sweet
As sweet as the angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said "What now am I bid for this old violin?"
As he held it aloft with its' bow.
"One thousand, one thousand, Do I hear two?"
"Two thousand, Who makes it three?"
"Three thousand once, three thousand twice,
Going and gone", said he.

The audience cheered,
But some of them cried,
"We just don't understand."
"What changed its' worth?"
Swift came the reply.
"The Touch of the Masters Hand."

"And many a man with life out of tune
All battered and scarred with sin
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd
Much like that old violin.

A mess of pottage, a glass of wine,
A game, and he travels on.
He is going once, he is going twice,
He is going and almost gone.

But the Master comes,
And the foolish crowd never can quite understand,
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the touch of the Masters' Hand.