

Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 2012 Lent III John 2:13-22 "Form Follows Function"

Form follows function. So wrote the modernist architect Louis Sullivan at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sullivan, whose work largely consisted of tall simple skyscrapers, believed that the shape of the thing should be determined by how it was going to be used. Anything else, anything that was part of the building simply for aesthetic purposes, was superfluous. And so we've got these tall boring office buildings, devoid of elegance, simply matchboxes set on their end, because Sullivan, and other modernist architects through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, decided that the shape of the thing should be determined only by what would be done in it.

There is something in our hearts that fights this notion. We like beautiful design, whether as part of a sculpture or painting, or a stained glass window, or a clever tool. We troop to places like Biltmore in Asheville to see ornament on top of ornament, made with skill and at incredible cost, and we marvel at it. And the bulk of that ornament is extraneous to the function of the thing it decorates.

We here in Richmond seem to have a particular fondness for design that is only marginally related to function...why else would we take such pleasure in Barry Flanagan's "Large Leaping Hare," that gilded rabbit that seems to float across space at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts? Why else would we so love places like Maymont's Japanese Gardens or the children's treehouse at Lewis Ginter? We do like beautiful things, and that is not a bad thing in design.

But I'd submit that Christianity is a faith of form following function, despite the Gothic cathedrals that we have built and the exquisite art and music that have been created to the glory of God.

At its best our faith is a stripped down kind of thing, that takes away the things that distract us from focusing on God, and repositions our field of view toward the divine.

That seems to be what motivates God in giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. The wayward Israelites, wandering around the desert in search of the place where they belong after escaping Egypt, seem to be getting off track. They need a little shaping up, and Moses is exhausted and frustrated trying to do it alone. So God sends him back down from the mountain with a pretty straightforward set of rules designed to turn them away from the things that get them into trouble, and turn them back toward the God who brought them out of Egypt.

It also seems to be what is motivating Jesus in the Gospel of John. In John's version of the story, unlike that of the other Gospels, this event occurs early in Jesus' active ministry. He has just turned water in to wine at the wedding feast at Cana, something of a sneak preview to the disciples of what will follow. He comes to the temple in Jerusalem so that he can celebrate the Passover, and he finds the outer precincts of the temple full of people selling animals for ritual sacrifice and changing Roman coin – forbidden in the Temple – for Temple coinage. It's probably pretty ripe-smelling, given all that livestock in an enclosed area, and it's probably also pretty noisy, with merchants calling out to prospective customers and offering them the best price. Not exactly the holy temple of God, at least in that section of the building.

At first glance, it might seem to us that these merchants are following that dictum “form follows function.” After all, if the law says you need animals to be given for burnt or blood offerings, if you need to get rid of the Roman coin which had a picture of the Roman emperor lauded as a god on it, doesn’t it make sense that you need space dedicated to that function? These merchants are simply helping the worshippers at Herod’s temple to adhere to the law, right? So why does Jesus get so incensed?

And now we turn back to that phrase of “form follows function.” What is the function of the Temple? To be a place where the faithful can worship God. That is the sole function of the Temple. So if form follows function, of course Jesus would remove those extraneous things that distract from the primary function, the worship of God.

So Jesus starts doing the spring cleaning to end all spring cleaning. He goes after the merchants with a whip, driving them out of the temple, overturning the money-changing tables. He is going to clean this place so that it can be a place solely for worship again.

And this is, in fact not too surprising at the time of Passover, when the Israelites would clean their houses from top to bottom, removing the slightest trace of yeast or old food so they could be just the same as their ancestors who left Egypt in such a rush that they didn’t even have time to let the bread rise. Jesus is cleaning his house, just as his mother was probably cleaning out the family home back in Nazareth.

But he does get some pushback from the Jewish leaders, who may have gotten some sort of percentage of the profits those merchants made. They ask him, “what gives you the right to do this thing?” And Jesus responds with a phrase that is so modernist, so stripped down of explanatory ornament, that they don’t know what to make of it: “destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” They are shocked. This is Herod’s great temple. It is enormous and highly decorated and has taken 46 years to build...is he blaspheming? But as I said, they’ve missed out on the point. He isn’t talking about the building. He is talking about himself. He will be destroyed, but he will rise again in three days.

Here’s the remarkable thing about Jesus, about this passage: he is the ultimate embodiment of “form follows function.” What was his function? To bring us back into a relationship of love and worship and praise and respect with God. To do that, he would have to come among us and teach us in a way we human beings could understand. He would have to serve as the one who could redeem us from our brokenness. That function, that mission, required that he take on human form. It required that he should teach us and heal us and then die for us on the cross. Only then would we be saved, and only then would we know how much God loves us.

So let’s take away the artwork with the gorgeous soft-eyed Jesus with the halo around his head. Let’s take away the worry about whether we are doing our worship right, whether somebody else is doing it better. Let’s take away layers of stuff that we have encrusted upon Jesus and the church over the centuries, and take it to its simplest “form follows function” best.”

What does God expect from us? The ten commandments tell us. Love God, and no other gods. Spend some time in prayer and worship with God. Respect God by not using his name to curse others.

Translate the love of God into love and care for others. That is the function of each one of us as people of faith, nothing more, nothing less. And the form is equally clear: pray, worship, share, love. Nothing more, nothing less.

Form follows function in faith as well as architecture. Let us live it.

Amen.