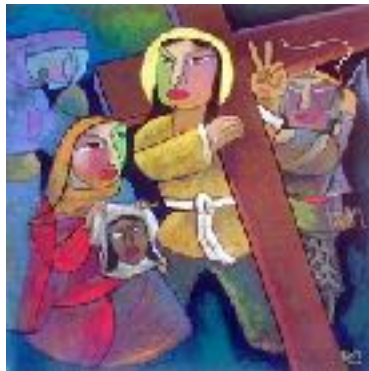


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Three in a Four-Part Series Entitled “Iconic Devotional Art”
“The Cost of Carrying the Cross”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Christian Scripture: Luke 14:25-33
Sunday, 8 September 2019



This morning’s message is inspired by many. It has been a slow cook. Some weeks ago while visiting the Reverend Vander Meulen and his family at Pine Heights, I expressed to them my excitement about this sermon series. His son Allen, recommended to me a Chinese Christian artist named He Qi. Because Allen assisted me with my last sermon series that featured his father, I trusted his wisdom. Then, I was chatting with the General Minister and President of our United Church of Christ denomination, John Dornhauer, about our sermon series, and he shared with me that he has two prints of He Qi in his Cleveland office! He stated, “His work is stunningly beautiful”.¹ That

¹ E-mail from John Dornhauer to Scott Couper, 7 September 2019.

sealed it for me. Next, I consulted Heidi Mario about the painting entitled “Carrying Cross” that feature this week. Heidi wrote back to me and provided some interesting perspectives about the painting that I will share with you this morning. Two days ago on Friday night at the Windham World Affairs Council event, I spoke with a friend whose spirit and intellect I adore: Adam Silver. Adam, who speaks Chinese, taught me the correct pronunciation of the artist, He Qi (*huhr chee*, with a soft barely imperceptible ‘r’).



And finally, I went to Catholic mass yesterday at St. Michael’s and I found the image that inspired the painting, number six in the stations of the cross. During this sermon series, I learned, perhaps before anything else, that our interpretation of art, just like our interpretation of scripture, is inspired by the wonderful people we encounter, the places we visit, and the experiences we savor.

Before we look at the painting “Carrying Cross”, let us learn first of the artist - a bit of his biography best assists us to better understand

his art. “Dr. He Qi was among the many people sent to the countryside during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. As a young man, he escaped hard labor by painting pictures of Chairman Mao Zedong.



During those years, he once found a copy of Renaissance artist Raphael’s “Madonna and Child” in a magazine, and was so moved by it, that he began to paint copies of it at night.”²

While I can only conjecture, He Qi art is what I would consider to be ‘blunt’. If we examine his art, most objects are large and obvious. It is almost as if He Qi wishes to thrust the images and the meanings therein in our faces. His art, including its shapes and colors, is bold. To an artistic neophyte like me, He Qi wishes to declare that no more is he creating art under the cover of night, under the surveillance of communists, nor from the shame or timidity of a minority religion. Few of He Qi’s images include hidden meanings, covert themes, stealthy metaphors, or mystery. Instead, in contrast to his early days creating in the cloak of night, He Qi’s art is a strong, clear, obvious, and un-

² “Overseas Ministries Study Center, “He Qi”, found at <https://www.omsc.org/artist-he-qi>, accessed 7 September 2019.

muffled. Thus, his art is an unashamed proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One commentary of He Qi states, “One can better understand [his art] when it is seen as a reinterpretation of sacred art within an ancient Chinese art idiom. Chinese religious art, being an expression of Buddhism, was historically typified as a tranquil and utopian portrayal of nature, often painted with black ink and water. He Qi is especially influenced by the simple and beautiful artwork of the people in rural China. Within that framework, he seeks to redefine the relationship between people and spirituality with bold colors, embellished shapes, and thick strokes. His work is a blend of Chinese folk art and traditional painting technique with the iconography of the Western Middle Ages and Modern Art.”³



Now, let us examine the painting “Carrying Cross” which I felt blended beautifully with our scriptures this morning. The scene is of

³ “Overseas Ministries Study Center, “He Qi”, found at <https://www.omsc.org/artist-he-qi>, accessed 7 September 2019.

Jesus, being escorted to Golgotha, to his execution. Along the way, he is tortured, dehydrated, exhausted, and, well, suffering. Heidi Mario writes, “The woman with the handkerchief is Saint Veronica, who, legend has it, was so overcome with pity upon seeing Jesus, [...] that she gave him [a] cloth to wipe his face. Miraculously, the image of Jesus’ face became imprinted on the cloth. It became known as Veronica’s Veil.”⁴ Heidi tells me she has actually done a sculpture on this theme herself!



There is another version of the painting, presumably capturing the moment before Jesus’ face is wiped, with no impression yet made upon the cloth. Yet, other similarities remain. For example, the ‘Peace’ sign; or is it a ‘Victory’ sign?

⁴ Heidi Mario, email correspondence to Scott Couper, 5 September 2019.



The soldier to the right is not dressed in the attire of a Roman warrior, but instead in the combat accoutrements similar to that of the famous Terracotta Soldiers. We can see a whip in both and perhaps a dagger or short sword in the other.

On first glance the face of Jesus appears annoyed or angry. Yet, upon closer reflection, I see more a countenance of confidence.

Interesting, the suffering of Jesus is not as much emphasised as it is in most Catholic iconography.



How do our readings today help us reflect on He Qi's painting "Carrying Cross"? Well, our reading from Deuteronomy is all about choice. We have a choice; we have choices.



Deuteronomy is about choice being offered to us by God: “Today I offer you the choice of life and prosperity, or death and destruction” (Deuteronomy 30:15). Then we have much ‘if you do this, then this will be the consequence’ reasoning. Our reading concludes, “I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse” (Deuteronomy 30:19a). The Deuteronomist begs the reader to “choose life and then you and your descendants will live; love the Lord your God [...]” (Deuteronomy 30:19b-20).



Our gospel reading is also about choice. Jesus says choose me or family. Choose your life or choose me. Perhaps the most relevant choice offered to us as we contemplate upon He Qi’s painting is, “Are we willing to carry a cross and follow Jesus or not?” In He Qi’s painting, Jesus chose to carry an actual cross and to be led to

execution for proclaiming a kingdom, other than a Roman one, to which he was accountable and devoted. In the case of Jesus' lesson this morning, the cross is specifically the "parting with *all possessions*" (Luke 14:33).



How many of us are willing to part with *all our possessions*? I will be honest, my faith is not deep enough to answer in the affirmative. So, if we allow the Christian scripture to dialogue with the Hebrew scripture we conclude that since I am unable to part with all my possessions, *then* I am choosing death and curse. This is a difficult confession for a minister of the gospel. I need to move toward a greater 'faith in action'.

Yet, our cross need not *exclusively* be the parting with 'all our possessions'. And our cross need not exclusively be an actual cross and execution as Jesus' was. My cross can be an academic career for the sake of ministry (which is not enough of a forfeiture to warrant being considered much of a cross).



A cross can be the sacrificial caring of an aging parent who lives far away or in our home. A cross can be the decision to abstain from alcohol or drugs - a titanic battle. A cross can be the sacrifice of a single mother for the care of her young children. A cross can be the tithing of ten percent of your income to the church or a shaving from your portfolio to finance an infrastructural project this church would otherwise never be able to afford but is a prerequisite for its long-term survival.



A cross can be changes made in your lifestyle that allow you to better preserve the environment. A cross can be *your sheer exhaustion*, an exhaustion that allows the ministry of this church to otherwise exceed its statistical human and financial capabilities.



If I were to give this cloth to most members of this church, no doubt your faces would be imprinted upon it. If you tithe to this church, if you donate your blood, sweat, and tears at the Welcome Centre, if you offer yourself in two-hour-long Mission Council meetings, if you answer endless e-mails on behalf of Buildings & Grounds, and if you visit the sick and lonely in our church, then your face, the face of Christ, the living Christ, will be imprinted on this cloth.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.