

Dear Class Member,

Our next lesson hitches a ride on an interview with Christian artist Kelly Latimore about iconography, or the creation of sacred images to provoke growth in how we think about God and how we act out our faith. The use of icons in this way can help us think about where and in whom we see the image of God today, and how we can increasingly reflect God's image in our own lives.

The in-person and Zoom *Wired Word* continue to be for use in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.

*The Present Word* adult class and youth Sunday school classes resume in-person following our Sunday school COVID-19 Safety Guidelines: ([http://www.sprucc.org/docs/Worship/ReOpenPlan\\_SundaySchool\\_201013.pdf](http://www.sprucc.org/docs/Worship/ReOpenPlan_SundaySchool_201013.pdf)) on Sundays at 9:00am on May 9, 16, & 23.

We continue to have 9:00am Tuesday morning Zoom Bible studies with Zion UCC:  
<http://www.sprucc.org/classes/adultstudy-groups.html#ZionUCCBibleStudy>.

Sunday evenings there is a six week series book discussion with Zion UCC of *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges & Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* by Zoom from 6:30-7:30pm on April 18 & 25; May 2 & 9 (no class on May 16); and 6:30-8:00pm on May 23. Info at: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/recent-aupcomingevents.html#PostQuarantine>.



## Iconographer Creates Images to Provoke Spiritual Growth

*The Wired Word* for the Week of May 9, 2021

### In the News

In a recent *Christian Century* interview, iconographer Kelly Latimore described how he thinks about the startling images of Christ and sacred figures he creates in St. Louis, where he lives. Last year, people protesting the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd held up placards of Latimore's icon "Mama," in which a grief-stricken mother Mary holds the body of her son Jesus after the crucifixion -- a contemporary *pietà* in which both figures are black. When people asked Latimore if the dead man was George Floyd or Jesus, the artist answered, "Yes."

Latimore might be an unlikely creator of such an icon. As a preacher's kid growing up in the predominantly white Chicago suburbs, he was accustomed to seeing art that portrayed a Jesus who looked like him. During his college years, Latimore made a point of visiting Chicago neighborhoods, where he says he began to discover "other images of God in people I [hadn't] recognized before."

Some of the figures Latimore incorporates in his icons (people like civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, poet Mary Oliver, singer Mahalia Jackson, and writers Fyodor Dostoevsky and Flannery O'Connor) don't necessarily fit the traditional Catholic description of saints as miracle workers, but for the artist, they are spiritual pathfinders who "point us to live lives of love and compassion and fight against injustice."

"I think it's a miracle that John Lewis crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, got beat over the head, and kept going," Latimore said.

"People are looking for new representations of the *imago Dei* [image of God] in the here and now," Latimore explained. "I'm trying to use icons to help people to see in a different way."

As anti-immigrant, anti-stranger sentiment grew in America in recent years, Latimore created the icon "Refugees: La Sagrada Familia," which portrayed the Holy Family's flight to Egypt as brown-skinned migrants crossing the desert. During his travels, he had encountered some Guatemalan refugees on the move, and their stories broke his heart. He said he "wrote" the icon to demonstrate that these migrants have the image of God within them.

Latimore has received hate mail from people who object to his identification of Jesus with marginalized people of color.

His response?

"God is in plain sight, all around us," Latimore stressed. "What it means to be human and an artist is to be present. Not only to your craft, but also to the world around you. ... we're very quick to judge and assume and speak into things we rarely observe. ... Art can ... force us to pay attention. ... With icons, we're saying, 'These are important images. This is what we are choosing to see.' Hopefully the icon can be something that opens us up to the 'other,' the thing we don't know."

Iconographer Tom Dolphens says icons "should be thought of not as painted but as written because they are, in effect, commentary on -- or depictions of-- scripture."

Vivian Imbruglia believes that her ministry of iconography is to convey the word of God through visual means so people might better understand and practice their faith.

Canadian Catholic artist Timothy Schmalz created the sculpture "Jesus the Homeless," depicting Jesus as an indigent hobo huddling under a blanket on a park bench. Installed at various churches around the world, the sculpture moves some people to tears, and others to anger. Apparently, the figure is so lifelike that one woman called the police about the homeless drunk sleeping outside a church. Only a close examination of the crucifixion wounds on the statue's bare feet shed light on the identity of the figure as Jesus.

Schmalz says he intended the Homeless Jesus sculpture to provoke people to think about what Jesus meant by his statement in Matthew 25: "As you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me." The sculptor says he hopes people will see Christ with and in the most marginalized in our society.

"Icons are called windows of heaven," Imbruglia wrote. "We are looking at the saints. They are looking back at us."

"Art tells our story, and tells others about our belief," wrote Imbruglia's brother, *The Wired Word* team member, Frank Ramirez. "It is very hard to get rid of a wimpy-looking white-bread Jesus once it's hung in a sanctuary, but boy, does it speak volumes about who belongs and who doesn't."

"Some parts of the Christian family have a rich history of incorporating art that speaks volumes about theology, incarnating the word visually and viscerally," Ramirez added.

In Latimore's icon "Mama," Mary focuses her eyes on the viewer, as if asking, "What do you see? Who bears God's image?"

More on this story can be found at these links:

Iconographer Kelly Latimore Sees God in Plain Sight. *Christian Century*

Scriptures Rendered in Paint. *Flatlandkc.org*

Sacred Image Icons. *Vivian Imbruglia, Iconographer*

Statue of a Homeless Jesus Startles a Wealthy Community. *NPR*

Homeless Jesus. *Sculpture by Timothy P. Schmalz*

## The Big Questions

1. Where do you see the image of God most clearly today?
2. Do you think malnourished, sick, poor people read, hear or imagine the biblical narrative the same way people who have never known hunger, illness or poverty do? Why or why not?
3. Draw a picture representing your concept of God. What does your image reveal about how you see and understand God?

4. What similarities and differences do you notice when you compare your drawing with those of others? How can seeing the way others depict God expand your own understanding of God?

5. What limits do icons of God have, whether created by you or by others?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Genesis 1:26-27**

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*

*So God created humankind in his image,*

*in the image of God he created them;*

*male and female he created them. (For context, read 1:26-31.)*

In the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, God speaks about making only humankind in God's image. That language is not used to describe the creation of other species.

Even after the first man and woman sin (Genesis 3), nothing in the biblical text seems to indicate that God's purpose had changed for humankind: God still intended that humans would reflect God's image. But after sin entered the picture, the image of God in humankind became marred or dimmed.

**Questions:** What does the creation of human beings in God's image suggest to you about humankind's nature and potential? Which humans are included in God's image? Which, if any, are excluded, and if so, on what basis are they not included? What does knowing human beings were created in God's image do for your self-esteem? What does it do for how you think of others?

#### **Habakkuk 2:18-20**

*What use is an idol*

*once its maker has shaped it --*

*a cast image, a teacher of lies?*

*For its maker trusts in what has been made,*

*though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!*

*Alas for you who say to the wood, "Wake up!"*

*to silent stone, "Rouse yourself!"*

*Can it teach?*

*See, it is gold and silver plated,*

*and there is no breath in it at all.*

*But the LORD is in his holy temple;*

*let all the earth keep silence before him! (No context needed.)*

In Jeremiah 50:38, the Lord describes Babylon as "a land of images, [whose people] go mad over idols." Elsewhere, Jeremiah, similar to Habakkuk, says that the images of idols are false, without the breath of life in them, and that they put their makers to shame (Jeremiah 10:14).

Habakkuk makes a clear distinction between idols and the Lord.

**Questions:** What is the distinction, if any, between images, idols and icons?

In what sense is an idol "a teacher of lies"? Is it easier to lie with words or with images?

Do you utilize images in your church? If so, how? If not, why not? Is it possible to use images in a way that does not turn them into idols? Explain.

What is the difference between idols and the Lord? Why should "all the earth keep silence before [the LORD]"?

### **Hebrews 1:1-4**

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (For context, read 1:1-14.)*

The book of Hebrews presents Jesus as superior in every way to other beings. God spoke to human beings in many times, places and ways by the prophets, the author of the book writes. Those messages from God were significant, but the last message from God carries more weight because of the identity of the messenger.

That messenger is God's own Son, who is unique in his nature (Son of God), his position (heir of all things who sits at God's right hand on high), his activity (co-creator of the worlds, sustainer of all things and the one who makes purification for sins), his power (creator and sustainer by his word) and his perfection (as the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being). Elsewhere Jesus is called "the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4) and "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

One of the things Jesus inherited was the name "more excellent" than the names of angels, "the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9), the name "by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). That name, Jesus, comes from the Hebrew meaning "God saves" (Matthew 1:21) -- a fitting reminder that the entire Godhead orchestrated and engineered God's salvation. Every time we say the name Jesus, we are declaring that God is the one who saves.

**Questions:** How do you see God's glory reflected in Jesus, and the exact imprint of God's very being in Jesus?

Which New Testament story about Jesus best reflects the nature of God in Jesus? How accurate would your picture of Jesus be if you limited your vision to that one story? In the gospel accounts, did Jesus ever act in ways that seem not to fit with your mental image of him? If so, give an example. What do you learn from that example?

What kind of person is the Jesus you picture in your mind? When we picture Jesus as human, doing ordinary things, does it distract us from his divinity or serve as one path to accepting his divinity? Explain.

### **Romans 12:2**

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect. (For context, read 12:1-3.)*

### **Romans 8:29**

*For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. (For context, read 8:28-30.)*

### **2 Corinthians 3:18**

*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (For context, read 3:7-18.)*

In the words of that American poet Bob Dylan, "You got to serve somebody!" Paul contends that, one way or another, we conform to something or someone. God's purpose for us is that we not conform to the world, but rather be conformed to the image of Jesus by the renewing of our minds.

If Jesus is the image of God, and God's purpose for us is that we be transformed into that same image, then it follows that through Christ, the image of God is restored in us. This is not our doing, but the work the Lord Jesus does and the fruit God's Spirit produces in us.

**Questions:** How have you conformed to the world in the past? In what ways have you already been transformed by the renewing of your mind? What other areas of your life do you envision might be ready for transformation in the next season of your life?

What does it mean to be "Christ-like"? How does a person become Christ-like?

What is the "mirror" in which we see the glory of the Lord reflected? How often do you look at that mirror to see the glory of the Lord? Why does looking at the glory of the Lord have the power to transform us into the image of God? What is the significance of the fact that the transformation takes place "from one degree of glory to another"?

### For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from the introduction to Frederick Buechner and Lee Boltin's book, *The Faces of Jesus*:

*"He had a face ...*

*"Whoever [Jesus] was or was not, whoever he thought he was, whoever he has become in the memories of men since and will go on becoming for as long as men remember him -- exalted, sentimentalized, debunked, made and remade to the measure of each generation's desire, dread, indifference -- he was a man once, whatever else he may have been. And he had a man's face, a human face. ...*

*"You glimpse the mark of his face in the faces of everyone who ever looked toward him or away from him, which means finally of course that you glimpse the mark of him also in your face too. ... The face of Jesus as our face."*

2. Songwriter Lubomir "Brother Lou" Loucky, father of *The Wired Word* team member Joanna Loucky-Ramsey, published his song "Mirror" in 1972. Reflect on the lyrics of the first two verses and refrain:

Was Jesus Christ a real long hair,  
Or was he early bald,  
Or was he dark, or was he fair?  
In his Word I'm not told.  
But Jesus is the Light of Life,  
The Living Bread that fills;  
While Satan, the most Lightless one,  
Just lies and robs and kills!  
*So pick up God's own Mirror quick  
And see for yourself, friend:  
If it be Christ or demon  
That waves to you his hand!*

When Jesus sees a fallen one,  
He lifts her by true love;  
While Satan tramples down the soul,  
Tears down one from above.  
When Jesus meets a leper, then  
He heals him with a touch;  
While Satan sneers, "Get out of here,  
You dirty such and such!"  
*So pick up God's own Mirror quick  
And see for yourself, friend:  
If it be Christ or demon  
That waves to you his hand!*

Jesus and Satan are portrayed in the song as offering two diametrically opposed paths, presenting two radically different choices that determine our destiny. What is the Mirror Brother Lou urges us to pick up? (Hint: One of the biblical texts that inspired Brother Lou in the writing of this song was James 1:19-27.) Who is waving his hand to you when you look into that Mirror? What gestures do you imagine the demon is making with his hand? What gestures do you imagine Jesus is making when he waves his hand? How do you react to the hand you see waving to you in God's Mirror?

3. View this icon created by iconographer Vivian Imbruglia, sister of *The Wired Word* team member Frank Ramirez: [Saint Oscar Romero](#). *Sacred Image Icons*. Ramirez wrote: "I've grown to appreciate Vivian's iconography as the gospel incarnated. When she worked on icons of Oscar Romero with his sainthood, this couldn't help but be a political act because the gospel is hopelessly political, taking the side of the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast, against the rich and powerful. I'm not sure which churches would have wanted to display such an icon, but I can easily imagine which counties in California, where she works, would want nothing to do with such a saint. Each icon comes with baggage, just like us." How might this icon speak to your own life?

4. In ["this clip \("Emojis & Selfies"\)](#) from a 2015 stand-up comedy show, Trevor Noah reflects on images and words we use to communicate. Here's the text from the 3:41-5:01 timestamp:

"We've lost it. We don't know how to communicate anymore. Now we use those emojis for everything. Emoji, emoji, emoji, emoji. No one even uses words. Send a paragraph to your friend, 'Had a great day, did this. It was so funny!' They reply, \*Smiley face emoji\* And did you hear she died? \*Sad face emoji\* That's it? No words?"

"Emojis are basically the cave drawings of 2015. Yeah, we judge cavemen. We think they were primitive because we couldn't find any words in their pictures. Someone's gonna think the same thing of us. The way we look at cavemen and go, 'Oh, look at them, they couldn't write.' 'Oh, the caveman, he was so simple. And he was hunting, and he had a family. Aww. Simple.'

"Someone's gonna see our messages in a thousand years, and be like, 'Oh, look at that. Oh, the people of 2015, simple. Aww.' 'Yeah, look at that. They laughed and they cried. Hmm.' 'Sometimes they laughed until they cried.' 'Some of them were blind in one eye. Yeah.' 'But that didn't stop them from having fun.' \*crazy face emoji\* 'Aww.' 'And there were monkeys that didn't talk.' 'Monkeys that didn't listen.' 'And they were always dancing in red dresses, aww.'

"2015. A simple time.' We don't communicate anymore. We got our emojis. Phones are making us dumb."

What do you think? Are emojis a kind of iconography for us today? And if so, what do these emojis/icons say about us?

5. *The Wired Word* lesson for the week of November 8, 2015, "Stolen Jesus Statue Returned Freshly Painted," described the theft of a \$600 statue of Jesus from the front of a religious gift shop in Monroe, Connecticut. A few days later, the statue was returned, sporting a fresh coat of paint. In that lesson, we considered the human tendency to "remake" or "redress" Jesus to fit our preconceived notions or wishes about him.

The way artists portray God, Jesus, humans, nature, objects and relationships communicates worldviews and theologies. Some medieval paintings of Jesus showed him looking detached from earth with an otherworldly aura of light fanning out behind his head. Other artwork pictures Jesus in a particular culture: as a Renaissance burgher, a tribal African elder, a Chinese sage, etc.

How might such depictions help us better understand who Jesus is? How might they cloud our view of Jesus?

### **Responding to the News**

This might be a good time to ask God to help you identify and tear down any idols you may have erected or allowed in your life, and ask the Spirit to help you focus on Jesus, the image of God, so that your life will increasingly reflect the image of God to others.

### **Prayer**

O God, help us to see in Jesus the image of God perfectly reflecting your glory.

As we fix our eyes on Jesus, heal our blindness that prevents us from seeing the image of God in others and in ourselves.

By your Spirit's transforming power, may we grow increasingly to reflect your character in the way we think, feel and act, so that others may be able to increasingly see more of you when they look at us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.