

“Arches and Windows and Doors...Oh My!”

May 7, 2017

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1 Peter 2: 1-10

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What a joy it is to look forward to a birthday! Not my birthday or your birthday, but the birthday of First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. And we'll celebrate that birthday on June 4, 2017. Just a few weeks away.

Let me tell you what we have planned . . . First of all, Christoph Bull will play a wonderful thirty-minute concert beginning at 10:30 AM. And then we'll have a festival worship service at 11:00 AM that will open up with the Japanese Taiko Drummers, and then a full procession of choir and guests. It's going to be fantastic!

After our service, we'll head to the Forecourt for a party, including an array of LA food trucks. We will also have city officials here, because the city is renaming our street out here – “Congregational Square!” How's that! At 2PM we'll enjoy a choral concert featuring our Chancel Choir, Jonathan Talberg and other musical guests.

It's going to be a spectacular morning. But I'm counting on you to reach out to friends and family and fellow church members to make this a day of great celebration. There is no reason we cannot fill our church on that Sunday.

Now, to help us prepare for our birthday, I want to talk about an important part of the life of this congregation, namely, the art and architecture of this building. For many of us, when you think about a “congregational” church, you think of the little New England meeting house on the village green in the middle of town. Small. Simple. Painted white. Perhaps one steeple reaching into the sky.

I love that kind of church building. The gift of it is that the simplicity of the space becomes a nest for the complexity of our lives. But that's not what you find at First Congregational Church of Los Angeles . . .

This building is a Gothic Cathedral. It's based upon other models of churches in France and England, and while some are more ornate than others, simplicity is not what you find here. Keep in mind that Gothic architecture had a purpose, and its purpose was to communicate the presence of God through every single detail of the building.

This kind of architecture came into being when most of the population was illiterate and leading dreary lives. Yet on Sunday, when they attended church, their world was enlarged. Remember that. Gothic architecture was created to make the world bigger. Faith should always make the world bigger.

Even before walking into a building like this, you see the magnificence of the structure itself. It soars into the sky, a reminder that God is not some miniscule concept. God is great. God is pervasive. God is above all and in all and through all. The building itself becomes a destination.

You see this especially in the countryside of France or England, where you can see the Cathedral far out on the horizon. But you see it here, too, especially when you're driving up 6th Street from downtown. When this church was built, this was the suburbs! Imagine that.

And then you walk inside, through doorways that are impressive and over-sized. It's a reminder that the welcome of God is profound. Gothic doors are massive. But the doors are not intended to keep people out. They are intended to open wide so all of God's children can walk in.

Our doors are especially beautiful, because the veneer is made of copper, and each door has an engraving of the story of Jesus. Notice them on your way out today. Touch them. A few weeks ago a woman came by the church and wanted to see the doors. She wanted to see the doors because her father created them.

Her family still has a studio in Quebec, and the woman's sister does engravings just like her father did. They do the engravings by hand on the back side of the copper, which means they basically engrave backwards, so when the copper is mounted on the door, you can see the artistic depiction of various religious stories. I love the doors of this sanctuary, and I also love the doors we have on Shatto Chapel.

And then when you walk into the Nave of this building, the sanctuary, it's like there is a string attached to you chin. God tugs on it, and your head snaps upward like a puppet, looking upward, looking beyond yourself to something lofty and inspiring and huge. That's the beauty of this architecture . . . it reminds you of the transcendence of God. Yes, God is close, but as I like to say to people, God is that presence of mystery that dwells deeply within us, but which is always a step beyond us.

And then there are the arches that line the sides of the Nave . . . and the point of a medieval arch is to show you both motion and stability. It's not merely decoration. Arches appear to be in perpetual motion . . . one end rising upward, peaking, dropping downward, and then back upward, peaking, dropping downward. They remind us of the perpetual working of God.

Some see God, as Thomas Jefferson did, as this great Being that started it all, and then walked away. That's Deism. I don't see God like that. I see God as this force, this energy, this radiating invitation to life, always inviting us, beckoning us, pulling us toward greater and greater intensity of beauty.

God is within us, always saying something like, "Come on, now. You can do this. You can become the person you want to be. Be the person I created you to be. Let go of

everything that is hurting you. Let's embrace something new and good and creative." God doesn't make us do anything! But like an arch that is always working inside the architecture of a Gothic Cathedral, God is forever working inside us for transformation.

This week a dear friend in this church walked through a tragedy with a family. That family lost a twenty-year old daughter. She asked me in an email on Sunday night: "Where is God?" I don't really know what to say except this: God is the arch inside our lives that is always rising and peaking and falling and rising and peaking and falling again. Forever working and holding us up.

God says I love you. I know you are heartbroken. I know you are. I am heartbroken too. But I will keep working in you. And I'll bring you comfort and joy and peace and help. And if you want to cry, we'll cry. And if you want to be depressed, then I'll be depressed with you. And if you want to be angry, go ahead, I understand. Be angry.

We'll get through this together. That's the arch of the divine presence that is forever working within us. When we see these great arches, they remind us of the greatness of God's activity inside the human family.

And of course there are the windows . . . think about it for a minute . . . this church was built in the heart of the Great Depression. That's a remarkable fact! Not fake news. That's a fact. The cornerstone reads 1932. The entire building was built for \$800,000. What a bargain!

Yet they could not afford stained glass windows while they were building it, so there was only clear glass in the openings. But in the 1940s, as America recovered from the Depression, people came forward and sponsored window after window. Judson Studios created these windows, and they are now a fourth generation family business here in Los Angeles, and they are still making and repairing windows.

But remember why the Gothic architecture used stained glass. People lived very hard lives. Dark and dreary lives. Most could not read. But if they came to church, they could see the story of the Christian faith in the windows. Just as we are dazzled by what our iPhones can do, people during medieval times were dazzled Sunday after Sunday as they gazed upon the windows. The windows were entertaining. They brought color and drama and storytelling into the lives of the people.

Our windows tell a story too. The magnificent rose window in the West Gallery, where you see the largest organ pipes, presents us with the Christ that has blossomed like a rose. I like that. Just as the poet Rilke spoke of the spiritual life as "ripening," we see the Christ that has blossomed into the flower of God in the world. We see the stories of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, but we also see modern stories in our windows.

There is a picture in one of our windows of Robert Millikan, the great physicist from Cal Tech. Also Louis Pasteur. Abraham Lincoln. Mahatma Gandhi. Thomas Edison.

Wilbur and Orville Wright. Winston Churchill. Woodrow Wilson. These figures are important, because they highlight a central commitment of this church, namely, that we take the best of contemporary learning and incorporate it into our faith. Faith needs science. Faith needs history and literature and psychology and political decision-making and statesmanship and technology.

Of course the windows have shortcomings. There are no women of note in these windows. There is really no person of color in these windows. There is, so far as I know, no gay person in these windows. Like all church buildings, our windows are dated, and at times, politically incorrect.

Oh, how I wish we could have the MLK window or the Caesar Chavez window or the John Coltrane window or the Neil Armstrong window or the Sandra Day O'Connor or the Ruth Bader Ginsburg window or the Bill Gates or Steve Jobs window or the Barack Obama window or the Sally Ride window or the Emily Dickinson window or the Harvey Milk window . . . you get my point.

Faith is always evolving and faith is always changing. It's why we call it a journey. And to be sure, in our 150th year as a church, we are declaring to the city of Los Angeles that we are a journey church. A journey church! And we're here ready to be the progressive, open, vibrant Protestant Cathedral of Los Angeles! That's who we are today as a church.

Yet I think about something else regarding these windows, and it's that different colors of light come through the windows. Reds. Yellows. Blues. Greens. Jewel like colors dance in the sunlight. But there is only one source of light. That source is the sun that shines on all of us. Black. White. Brown. Christian. Muslim. Buddhist. Atheist. Agnostic.

One source of light. I believe God's light shines through many kinds of windows. God's light comes through Hindu windows, and Buddhist windows, and Muslim windows, and of course Christian windows. I think God's light shines through the windows of science. And psychology. And physics. And medicine. And literature. And poetry. And art. And music. And dance. And biology.

Many different windows, but one source of light. That's reason for humility. That's reason for celebration. It is the magnificence of that which we name God / Life and Source, but it comes to us through the particulars of the world, and all of it, all of it, all of it is so beautiful.

I want to say one more thing . . . and maybe this is the most important thing to say . . . arches and windows and doors . . . are wonderful. I love them. I carry the burden every single day of trying to take care of this building. But without you . . . without your smiles and joy and singing, without your giving and leadership and volunteering, without your prayers and hugs and handshakes, this building is nothing.

I don't want a museum. I want a church. I don't want a mausoleum. I want a church. Years ago I came to this church for one reason . . . I thought something good should and could happen inside this beautiful building. We have a long way to go. But friends, we have come a long way, too. You – you the people – you bring the life of God into this building every Sunday. Nothing gives me more joy. Nothing gives me more purpose in life. And so I thank you. I love you. And let's keep showing up and loving one another. Amen.