

Raleigh Mennonite Church
Church Retreat

I can see them now, the children of summer art camp. We spent as much time as we could outside on those beautiful but hot summer days. We created shadow drawings, traced our outlines on long rolls of paper. We chased each other with sticks and we rolled across the grassy, expansive courtyard.

One day a few children came out with me to create chalk drawings on the concrete. A few noticed the square stonework that created a sidewalk through the grass and past the rosebushes. We began to color each of the smooth-cornered stones a different shade. They spread out, a tic tac of color.

We didn't realize that the cobblestone squares surround the church columbarium. It's the place where the ashes of some of members of the church are entombed, placed in stacked stoned vaults.

In the weeks that followed I couldn't get that image out of my head. These children and their play on the colored squares against the backdrop of the dead. It was disarming. It changed the way I thought about that space. It wasn't desecrating or mischievous. Instead, their art challenged the seriousness we had assigned to that gloomy corner.

This reminds of an old tradition in the church. Each year, a few days before Easter, my facebook feed pops up with requests for jokes from various clergy friends. My friends work at churches that follow an ancient tradition of the Greek Orthodox church. In this tradition the day after Easter was filled with laughter, telling jokes, being silly together, because Easter is a joke on Satan. Easter is a practical joke played on death. The theologian Jurgen Moltman went as far as to say that the Easter hymn found in 1 Corinthians 15 is a hymn of sarcastic laughter:

O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?

When I think back to the kindergartners in art camp, at play around death, I can hear my pastor friends in their pulpits, opening up their Easter sermons with a knock-knock joke.

That's what play offers. It holds up institutions and governments and kings and empires, even

death to ridicule. Play questions the legitimacy of that which we have always assumed has power over us. Coercive power thrives on our willingness to take it seriously, to let it exist without question. And play is that question. Holy play makes space to reform, mold, shape.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is about God remaking space through God's Son, Jesus, taking what was, the powers that were assumed among a people, and making them absurd.

We are in the midst of an incredibly tense scene - a screaming woman, about to be bludgeoned to death by a mob armed with heavy rocks. And Jesus response is to kneel on the ground. He takes his finger and begins to write in the sand.

The weight of the law is heavy. The scribes and Pharisees gather to test that weight, to lay it on Jesus. They assume the law has the power, that all are subjected to the law according to their interpretation. The Mosaic law, this stony force that has been used against women like this. How will Jesus respond?

One choice is the route of legitimacy, to accept the rules of the scribes. Jesus can best them within the boundaries of the law, pull out a complicated rabbinic argument, pull rank. Will he follow the commands of Moses? Will he allow this stoning to take place? Or will he let her go and be labeled a heretic, a law-breaker?

Instead, Jesus chooses to doodle on the ground. It's an utterly disarming image. It doesn't make any sense. The scribes keep questioning him, throw at him their most furtive legal arguments.

And Jesus plays. He refuses to accept the forms of power that are controlling Moses' law. It's a kind of graffiti, a way of looking at an object that commands authority and marking it in a way that opens it up to ridicule, exposing its absurdity.

Graffiti can be a destructive and painful force in our world. Like anything, it has been used for good and it has been used for ill. But in certain situations graffiti is a form of resistance, a way for an oppressed people with no other recourse to playfully and imaginatively make room for the possibility of liberation. These forms of art pop up in places where assumptions about power, powerlessness, and privilege are literally set in stone. Granite monuments tower, a physical sign of those who control political space.

It's been years since I've been in Israel and Palestine, years before the wall.

The wall is a separation barrier and security fence that divides Israel from Palestine. It runs 430 miles along the edge of the Green Line and into the West Bank territory, the line created during the armistice following the 1949 war in Israel/Palestine. For Israelis the wall provides peace of mind, assumedly to protect Israeli citizens from attacks by Palestinians.

The width of the barrier is wide, between 60 and 100 feet. It consists of layers - pyramid-shaped stacks of barbed wire on the two outer fences. But the primary feature is a stark concrete wall, 26 feet high that separates all of the Palestinian side of the West Bank from the state of Israel.

Since 2002 the wall has divided farms and families. It has prevented laboring mothers and heart transplant recipients from getting to the hospital. Because many teachers live outside the Separation Barrier the school system suffers as educators have found it practically impossible to get through the checkpoints in a timely manner. Agricultural production has declined. Access to jobs has declined. Movement through the wall is controlled and policed exclusively by the Israeli Defense Force. After looking at these facts and amassing thousands of human right abuse claims by the UN, in 2014 the International Court of Justice declared the Separation Barrier illegal.

But in the midst of the despair and isolation of the wall, Palestinians and their allies have started to graffiti their side of the wall as an act of resistance.

One of the most prolific images on the wall is Handala, a cartoon created by Naji Al-Ali. Handala is the Arabic word for bitterness. Al-Ali was this age when he was forced to leave Palestine. His cartoon character wears ragged clothes, his back to the viewer, showing the rejection the Palestinian people have experienced during the years of endless conflict. The character, hands behind his back, refusing engagement, has come to symbolize the non-violent resistance movement in Palestine.

Political graffiti like this displays many of the marks of play - it is unauthorized and fragmented and largely anonymous. It doesn't attempt to give a coherent critique or to promote wide-sweeping agendas. Play is for insiders, for those who play.

Political graffiti as play also shows how easily the structures we assumed to be permanent can be marked, transformed, and questioned. We see the silent Jesus, puzzling the wise around him as

he scribbles in the dust. What he writes isn't significant enough to record. It is the act of marking, the reimagining of law and authority that the Gospel of John preserves.

The graffiti artist Banksy is a frequent contributor to the marking of the separation barrier in Palestine. Like Handala, Banksy creates cartoon characters, scenes of other worlds, paints children. These are playful images that are a stark contrast to the gray, monolithic architecture of the wall. One of the most famous of Banksy's work is Balloon Debate. A little girl with pigtails is pulled upwards by a handful of balloons, assumedly over the wall to another world.

The play of graffiti in the West Bank has also invited an international community of participation in acts of struggle, a community that interacts and transforms through play. Graffiti creates relationships not only among artists but in the cooperation that happens between and across images.

A few months after the Banksy marked the wall with Balloon Girl, a Palestinian artist, as far as I know anonymously graffitied the wall again. She tags the wall with a bird covered with a Palestinian flag. The bird holds two additional balloons in its mouth, holding them out to the little girl whose red balloons aren't quite getting her over the wall. The word bubble reads, "Sister You Need More?"

The addition changes the meaning. It plays again. Graffiti images are not owned by anyone. They are a common place for exploration of what liberation looks like. Artists offer stencils; others come after and play with those images.

This is the cry of our church - *semper reformanda* – always reforming. Each new generation is invited to play at church, at faith. We are invited into a graffiti community, one that allows us to look at the images we sketch on the face of power and to see them for what they are, for their absurdity. We are invited to allow others to tag our faith, our theology, our lives, to add on to the picture we've put down, to reinterpret it again. We are invited to see our lives as constantly evolving art, both tenuous and liberated.

"The first thing liberated beings do is to enjoy their freedom and playfully test their newfound opportunities and powers," writes Jurgen Moltmann. "Why are we seeing so little of this?" he asks us. "Have the old Pharisees and the new Zealots with their conservative and revolutionary

legalism scared us away from freedom, from joy and spontaneity? It is unlikely that anything good or just will come about, unless it flows from an abundance of joy and the passion of love.”

Play is something resurrected people do. It’s something that happens when we see that death no longer has the final word, when the rocks held in the clenched fists of the law-keepers have been stripped of their power. Resurrected people looks at wall and governments and empires, we look at death, and we see vapor. We are a people who see a world about to pass away and a new world waiting behind it, like a window in a security wall.

Of course we don’t always live this way. We take things seriously. We afford more seriousness to things that do not deserve it. Money. Privilege. Policing. Politicians. We pour them like concrete, set them up as legitimate, and lasting. We give them our power, play by the rules they set, speak from the narrative they inhabit. We let the scribes and Pharisees tell us how to read the law.

Then Jesus kneels in the dirt. He takes his finger and begins to draw. It isn’t in stone. It will be washed away by the next rain or windstorm. But that is all it takes for a people to see the law in a new way, through the eyes of mercy. Jesus plays in the dust and makes something new.

I imagine we all have something, an institution, a theory, a shame, a politician to whom we grant more power than we should. If you’d like to, you can pick up a piece of paper and think about what art, what graffiti would disarm this assumed power. What would you write in the sand, exposing this absurdity? Put it on your paper, a reminder, that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. Now is the time to play.