

Rome

21 July 2008

Dear Friends,

Late last week, the five of us slipped into the Galleria dell' Accademia in Florence. Turning a corner, looking beyond several of Michelangelo's *Prisoners*, we caught our first glimpse of the artist's stunning *David*! Five hundred years old now, *David* bears witness to Michelangelo's courage, his confidence, his faith.

While we'd all seen pictures, nothing prepared us for the real thing. *David* is poised for action, yet contemplative, relaxed, at peace with himself. He's concerned, attentive, aware of his responsibility. There's integrity, balance in Michelangelo's "Renaissance man" – balance that seems to honor the human heart as well as the flesh. Indeed, *David* seems to insist on the unity of one with the other.

If you've seen the piece, you'll remember that *David*'s right hand is huge, ribbed with life-like veins. Biblical legend, of course, would have him preparing to slay the more powerful Goliath. In Michelangelo's own time, Florence was surrounded by neighboring bully states; in part, *David* represented Florence in her courage and pluck. Still, the hand is not a fist. *David* is capable of so much more than violence.

Circling the towering piece, I couldn't help wondering about that hand today. Sure, we can throw stones, program 'smart'

bombs, build walls. But doesn't it also suggest the amazing creativity, the amazing good we can do with our hands? Michelangelo – painter, sculptor, architect, man – used his own right hand to such glory and beauty and inspired purpose. Five hundred years later, we're still lining up to sit in wonder. I think of the Muslim man who painted the icon I bought in Jerusalem last month. I think of Cheryl Anderson raising her hand to direct the Chancel Choir, Stan Poplin pulling his bow across the strings of a bass. And a healing circle of friends. And communion shared in the jail. We are capable of such magic, such mystery, such love – with our hands, with our fingers, with the choices we make.



Figure 1 - Cellist in Cinque Terra, Northern Italy

Michelangelo seems to have known that, seems to have delighted in it. In his Renaissance, God was no longer a sky-bound despot, a jealous and judgmental emperor. Instead, *David* celebrates God's partnership with human loving, with human creativity, with human responsibility. God is with us! God is in *David's* hand; and *David* is in God's!



I've just finished a marvelous novel by the Canadian author, Steven Galloway. It's called *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, and it tells the story of a brokenhearted

cellist who watches 22 killed in a savage shelling of an outdoor market during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992.

His response – all he can imagine doing – is to sit in that same market 22 days in a row and play Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor in honor of the dead. Galloway describes three other Sarajevans and their skepticism: what good could a musician possibly do in a city so irretrievably lost? Still, one by one, they are touched by his grief, by his commitment, by his adagio. No wizardry. Just pure grief, intense longing, and beauty.

A young woman named Arrow watches his last performance, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day. Galloway describes the moment:

*...it could all have been stopped. It was possible. The men on the hills didn't have to be murderers. The men in the city didn't have to lower themselves to fight their attackers. She didn't have to be filled with hatred. The music demanded that she remember this, that she know to a certainty that the world still held the capacity for goodness. The notes were proof of that.*

*Arrow closed her eyes, and when she opened them the music was over. In the street, the cellist sat on his stool for a very long time. He was crying. His head leaned forward and a few strands of inky hair fell across his brow. One hand moved to cover his face while the other cradled the body of the cello. After a while he stood up, and he walked over to the pile of flowers that had been steadily growing since the day*

*the mortar fell. He looked at it for a while, and then  
dropped his bow into the pile.*

It turns out that Arrow is a resistance sniper. The cellist's vulnerability changes her forever. "She didn't have to be filled with hatred." As righteous as she felt at first, defending her city, whistling bullets into the dark hills, violence soon turned her heart against itself. She began to hate. Hate crowded out beauty and grace and joy.

But the cellist's adagio resurrects whatever she'd lost. Pain. Hope. Soul. In the end, as he lays down his bow, she lays down her rifle, forever. No longer an Arrow. "My name is Alisa," she says. Finishing Steven Galloway's story last night, I couldn't help remembering Michelangelo's *David*. We are capable of such magic, such mystery, such love – with our hands, with our fingers, with the choices we make. Faith.



You're saying farewell to Shannon this week, and to Heather next month. I hope you'll recognize their choices, the amazing creativity of their lives and ministries among us. Just as the cellist's music affects, emboldens the young woman in Galloway's story, Shannon's work encourages so many of you. And Heather's opens windows of possibility.

It's so important that we celebrate, that we remember, that we honor our "capacity for goodness." Honor every ounce of it, every bit of it: all the love you've experienced with Shannon and with Heather and with friends at FCC.

I hope you'll recognize, as well, that you've been good to them. Your love, your choices, your kindness have made a profound impression on Shannon's life, and on Heather's. They'll never be the same for the years they've spent among you, learning from you, challenged by you, growing with you. Love works both ways. Ministry works both ways as well. Within the body of Christ, we feed and challenge and inspire one another! Thank God for that.



Figure 2 - "Christ Bearing the Cross" by Michelangelo in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome

While I'm not there among you this week, I'll be there in spirit. I, too, am so thankful to have had these years of partnership and friendship with Heather and with Shannon. They've changed my experience of ministry and deepened my sense of Christian faith. May your farewells be rich and deep and honest. We are capable of such goodness, such beauty, such sadness.



There's a smaller work, in the Galleria dell' Accademia, one that sits just to the right of *David*. It's easy to miss, in the awesome corridor leading to *David*, but something would be lost without it. Scholars question whether this *Pieta from Palestrina* is indeed Michelangelo's work; but that doesn't

seem to matter. There, Mary holds her son's slumping, dying body, as beautiful as *David's*, but lifeless now.

Next to the towering, alert *David*, this *Pieta* seems lost. The former is so alive, so tense, so ready for life. The latter is sad, riddled by grief and loss, tangled in the cords of death. But there's something that ties the two together, something that strangely links them. It's Mary's hand. In death, Jesus is held, truly and tenderly held. Mary's hand is every bit as powerful as *David's*, every bit as human and kind. The *Pieta from Palestrina* insists on strength as compassion, courage as tenderness, creativity as touch. Again, God is not distant, vicious, abstract. God is in Mary's hand; and she is in God's.



Figure 3 - Campo dei Fiori in Rome

Like *David*, Mary is attentive, present, alert to all that's happening and to the suffering of her kin. Her hand is the embodiment of that attentive spirit: able to hold Jesus in his last tortured moments, employing skin and bone as sacraments of all that's holy and wise and good. Faith.

So when you join hands around the communion table and squeeze a little harder during prayers, remember Mary and David and all the others whose hands bear witness to grace

and mercy. When you sit down at a piano and play a cherished hymn or favorite tune, remember all those whose hands make music and beauty live and hope flower. When you kneel in the garden and pull tomatoes off the vine, remember Jesus who tends our lives like a gardener, pruning here and there, breathing life into new shoots and blessing the earth our home. Faith. We are capable of such magic, such mystery, such love – with our hands, with our fingers, with the choices we make.



Less than a month now and I'll return to you and to our life together in Santa Cruz. I know that we, too, are capable of magic, mystery, love. By the light of grace, in the spirit of Christ, we breathe new life into our neighborhoods and families. We bless the earth. We invest in peace. I'm grateful for the creativity and compassion of our community. And I look forward to the new challenges we'll face and the new joy we'll share together.

Between now and then, I have a last week of silence, a chance to reflect on the new friends I've met, the experiences of this spring and summer, the books read and music heard. I look forward to that week, and I imagine that Michelangelo's *David* and this other work, the *Pieta from Palestrina*, will join me somehow. What grace, what tenderness, what power is in our hands!

Love to you all, and the blessings of friendship!

In Christ,

Dave Grishaw-Jones