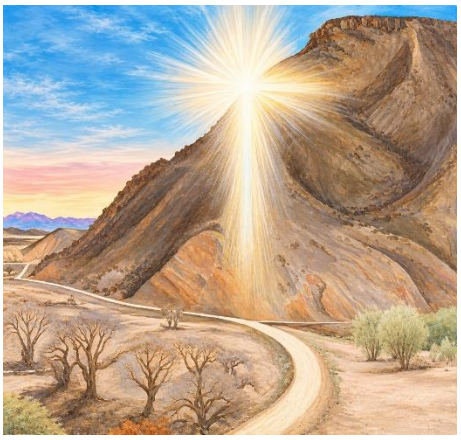


So, completely random fact, but today also happens to be the birthday of one of America's most…interesting and talented artists in Georgia O'Keeffe. Born on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, oddly enough, she eventually studied at the Art Institute of Chicago before making it big in New York, starting off with colorful flowers and the big city skylines. But when she hit a rough spot in her personal life, she ended up traveling to New Mexico, where the breath-taking beauty of the natural world began to tremendously influence her work, so much so that she ended up moving altogether to the great southwest, remaining there until her death a few decades ago.

However, the reason why her 96-year life story should still resonate with the church today, is that she was born to a Catholic father and an Episcopalian mother, but it is believed that O'Keeffe never joined any form of organized religion. Some would say that should come as no surprise for the more modern artists, but it may just be that her connection to the church, or lack thereof, is becoming more the standard tale than not. And, just in case you haven't noticed, we as the church are still trying to figure out what to do with that reality.

And yet, there was this one painting from O'Keeffe that came to life a few years after she moved to New Mexico. She called it "Easter Sunrise," with a winding road going around a large mesa, and the light in the shape of a cross piercing through. As the story so goes with O'Keeffe, she didn't give up on the church entirely. She held onto this curiosity, even fascination, with the spiritual ambiance she had experienced at times with the Catholic church; maybe with the help from her father, maybe not. But it is believed she would venture twenty miles from her home to attend Easter and Christmas Eve mass at Christ in the Desert Monastery. And, as her career spanned for most of the 20th century, for some reason, there would be a fair amount of crosses painted along the way. Something was going on there. Perhaps O'Keeffe's story, of God's holy interaction in her life, is more the Gospel reality than we as the church may like to consider.

It will come before us, yet again, in just over a month. Three worships will be had in this space in a single evening to somewhat accommodate those we see twice a year, if that.
Of course, for those of us who try to venture to sanctuaries a few more times than that, we will wonder in the deep silence of our heart, or perhaps in our whispering small talks with our pew neighbors, or perhaps not bothering with the volume of the conversation at all; we will wonder why they are not like us, and what can we do to finally win them over. Maybe if we do better at the technology or the music or the hospitality extended to strangers as if they were angels as Scripture suggests, maybe then they will venture into our sanctuaries and fellowship halls and Sunday school classrooms.

But I have this feeling that the Gospel text we just heard has something more for the church to wonder about, especially as we join with so many faith communities who take the harvest season for their own stewardship invitations: to encourage their congregations to discern how they will share their tangible and intangible talents to hopefully multiply ministry, and perhaps some dollars and members, too, if we're being honest. But the problem is the parable seems to have absolutely nothing to do with organized religion operation, not even the first century equivalent. It's about benefiting the master, a benefit that isn't about giving more power or prestige to God. For some reason, the Divine does not seem overly interested in such things. So, maybe as the story so goes with the Gospel of Matthew, it is about bringing people into the

awareness that this Messiah has come for them, too: to minister to those who feel as if they cannot fit in, those who wonder if they're too far gone, those who don't know if they have anything to offer to the world at all, even those who come twice a year, if that, to a sanctuary. And maybe in our present-day trading of talents, it isn't so much about offering plates leading to interest earned at the local bank. Maybe we're supposed to offer hope for someone to feel joy for the first time in a long while on their rugged life journey. Maybe we're supposed to offer love so that someone might believe they are worth loving. Maybe we're supposed to offer the joy of the master that gets magnified on that other holiday of the Resurrection to reel someone into the possibility that they just might have something to offer to impact this world that God still so cherishes.

So, no, Georgia O'Keeffe was not much of a church goer. But her impact can still be felt at museums in her native Santa Fe and Chicago and New York and Washington D.C., and even here in Cleveland. And, again, something was going on there, almost as if a breath-taking light could pierce through it all, even when some other part of the human landscape attempted to block it altogether. Unfortunately, sometimes the church does its fair share of not seeing the light of Christ to break through from the children of God we least expect. Nevertheless, time and time again, the light of Christ will more than manage to break through anyway. Lest we forget, sometimes the "outsiders" in first century Galilee got their fair share of holy attention from the supposed outsider in the carpenter's son. And it just might be that he's still there among them today, too. But for the tangible and the intangible talents that God has blessed us with, the Gospel story still cries out to us as its own precious work of Divine art: that we may know the joy that Jesus has over us, and that it will reach us no matter where our journey of life takes us now and for all eternity. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!