

Forget Your Perfect Offering

2026 08 09 Toronto United Mennonite Church

[Exodus 31:1-11, 18](#) - Bezalel and Oholiab, God crafts tablets

[1 Kings 17: 8-16](#) - A widow in Zarepheth feeds Elijah

I think Leonard Cohen puts it best:

*So ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's why we can't have nice things.*

What is the real last line? Ring the bells that still can ring/ forget your perfect offering
/ there is a crack in everything:

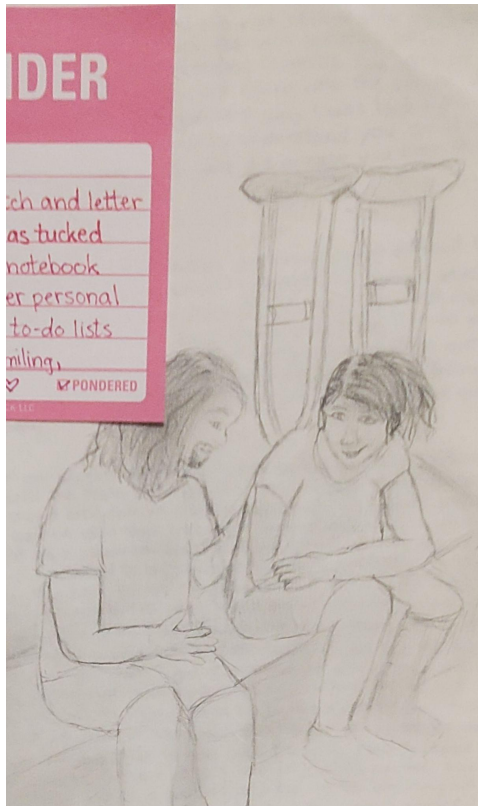
That's how the light gets in

We want more light in this world. We need more goodness, joy, holiness, community, truth, and mercy. As I think about the changes that we need to see in our world, I am tempted to focus on 'my big ideas'. But history is full of big ideas with big problems, and that can be paralyzing. It turns out that we can't make the changes we need without first working through our mistakes. We need to let go of perfection, trusting that God will meet us in our imperfection.

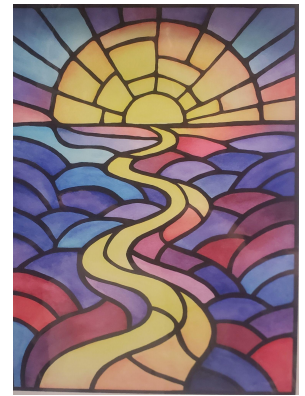
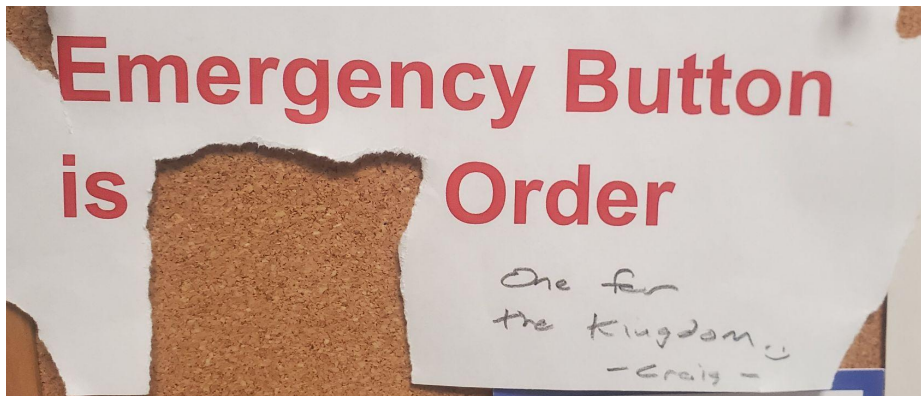
And this is hard for me, because I like to get things right, ideally first time. But it turns out that before you make something good, useful, or beautiful, you have to make something bad, dysfunctional, or ugly. I like to show my work, but I don't like to show my mess. I love to know, but I hate to learn.

But that's how the light gets in. The poet sings that life's failures and imperfections are the very thing that allows grace and glory to shine. This is God's way, to turn brokenness into beauty and failed efforts into gestures of truth.

I wonder - show of hands - how many of you have a piece of artwork on your fridge which was done by a younger friend or relative? I believe it was in their last house move that my parents finally said goodbye to the pink yoghurt pot with streaks of glitter glue that hung on our Christmas tree for many years, which I made in primary school. It has gone now, and the art world did not mourn its loss.



In my office I have artwork given to me by children of this congregation and other friends. There is colouring, sketching, even some freeform blackout poetry, and each one comes with a story. Are these examples of good art? None are breakthroughs in representational art, but all of them are meaningful to me. They remind me of my connections and my calling to serve God's people in this place. So yes, these are good art. And for what it's worth, all of these have better technique than what I sketch in my journal! But it doesn't matter if the work has perfect composition. It matters that art is made honestly and shared boldly. God says to Zechariah 'Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin.'



Art is a process that begins with attention, engages skill, and produces something that can be shared with others. External, internal, external.

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|--------------------|-------------|
| 1. Imagination | 3. Creation |
| 2. Experimentation | 4. Sharing |

You can practice your artistic skills by yourself, and you can make things that only you are interested in, but it doesn't really become art until someone else looks at it, tastes it, tries it. Or in the case of my parents, keep it for thirty-two years and then quietly discard it.

God formed us to engage in this artistic process as we respond to the needs of our world. Our God-given artistic skills and drives are good things in themselves, which do not need a purpose, but which can nevertheless do wonderful things. Earlier we heard two stories from the Bible where God calls people to use their skills and artwork.

The first story is part of a long set of instructions about how to furnish the tabernacle (the special place where God chose to live in the middle of the people). God is not just talking about decoration, but is teaching them how to live. They have been slaves for generations, and now they are free, and they have to learn how to handle the burden of freedom - making their own decisions, taking responsibility for relating well to one another, using their gifts for good. People who have been through

traumatic circumstances sometimes need clear structures that will nurture them through their healing as they recover their power and voice.

As it turns out, God doesn't choose therapists or pastors. God names two crafters, Bezalel and Oholiab to create sacred items. God even says that they have a divine spirit - the Holy Spirit - which guides their work. Their work honours God, and everyone who supports and feeds them honours God. These skills came from the land of slavery, where they were used to make other people rich, comfortable, and glorious. Now, God shows them that their own creative power is holy, meant to help the people to host God.

And this part of scripture ends with God's own finger carving tablets of stone. God is a crafter too, and she imagines, experiments, creates and gives us the vision of a world without slaves or masters, which we are still struggling to engrave.

The second story is about a woman living as a widow, with a single son, and is struggling to survive - in fact, she is fully expecting them both to starve during the drought. But then Elijah appears. It has always seemed strange to me that Elijah asks her for water, and then for food. He is a stranger in Zaraphath, an exile from his own land. But Ginny's sermon from a few weeks ago reminded me that the guest blesses the host. It is an honour to host someone, to feed them and make them comfortable.

In her poem 'Red Brocade', the Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes:

*The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at
your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.*

*That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.*

Elijah knew he could expect a welcome, even if no one knew who he was: especially because people didn't know who he was. And God had promised that he would be fed. But this woman is at the end of her resources. It is impossible for her to feed Elijah. Will she take the bread from her starving son, and give it to a stranger?

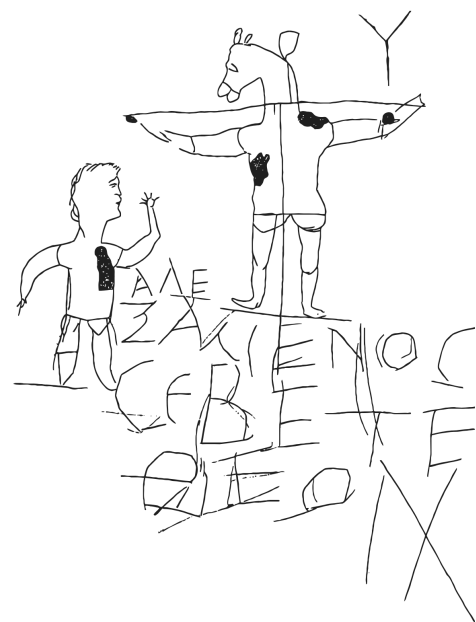
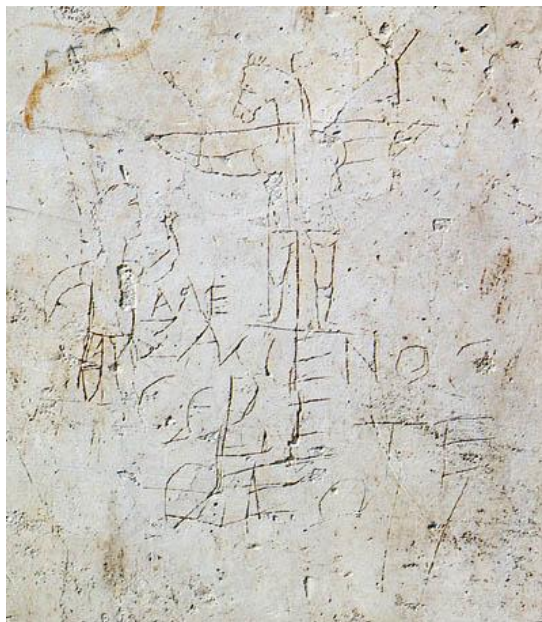
Yes, she will. She is a baker. This is what she does. She feeds and hosts and welcomes. This unnamed woman whose ordinary artform was turning oil and flour into sustaining bread, met a stranger in her greatest despair. And in defiance against drought and poverty and sorrow - she feeds him. Her hands, weak with hunger but strong with memory of long practice, knead the dough as she prepares this last supper. And the prophet brings a miracle with food to sustain them. But she made the first miracle by trusting in her God-given ordinary art to do the same thing she did each day. Bread of Heaven - feed me til I want no more.

Art sustains the community, art saves lives, it forms a culture, it heals from trauma. People sometimes talk as if art is a distraction from real life - mere decoration, a hobby, something that's only real if you can sell it and make money. But art is deeply human. We need to be able to imagine, experiment, create and share beauty. I think that part of what we are doing as church is gathering people around a table to find out what skill and strength we have in our hands and our hearts, to imagine, experiment, create, and share.

In our most sacred story, God is made into a human being, made by another courageous woman who said yes to the preposterous story of a stranger. Jesus grows into a human being who learns to make beautiful and useful things, and who saves us by an act that the world considers useless, and that we struggle to see as beautiful. The cross on which Jesus was killed is a strange and troubling symbol. Sometimes we prefer other symbols: bread and wine promising new life; an empty tomb reminding us of resurrection and hope; the peace table gathering everyone as beloved community. But the cross remains as a crack in our satisfaction, a thorn that keeps us from being too comfortable. Paul writes that 'the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' (1 Cor 1:18)

Both Jews and Christians endured mockery and misrepresentation in the Roman Empire - and to be clear, there were not two distinct groups of Jews and Christians, but thousands of groups across a vast geography, all of them seeking in different ways to respond to the hope of God's promise in a fragmented world. And it is not so different today. And for those who followed Jesus and those who tried to speak for him, the cross was hard to explain. How could the worst punishment of the empire be a sign of healing, hope, and truth?

Did you know that the earliest known depiction of Jesus, and of the cross of Jesus Christ is in a piece of graffiti in Rome, thought to be carved around 200 AD. A man looks up at a crucified person who has the head of a donkey. The text reads something like 'Alexamenos worships [his] god.'



This insulting graffiti is art. Someone was able to imagine it out of cruelty or boredom, they took the time and tools to craft it, and they left it in a place where people would see it, and perhaps would join in mocking Alexamenos and his religion. This is art, and like a lot of art of the cross, it should make us uncomfortable. The cross reminds us that our God chooses to meet us in our sin and failure, not when we

are perfect, but when we are weak, cruel, cowardly and treacherous. It forces us to remember that Jesus came for the sick and poor and the dying, not the wealthy and righteous and beautiful. There is a crack in everything - that's how the light gets in.

In the room close to this insult to Alexamenos and his God, other words are carved into another wall. We can only guess what these carvings mean. We don't know which came first, or what message they intended, or if they are even related at all. The words in the room nearby say something like 'Alexamenos is faithful'

I imagine that the mockery came first. 'Alexamenos worships his God' was probably a crude thought in an idle afternoon. Later, perhaps Alexamenos or one of his friends see it. They come to the room with their chisel, ready to erase the slander. But instead, they go quietly to a nearby room, and add their testimony of truth and dignity: Alexamenos is faithful. They have always mocked Jesus: scorned his ways, ignored his teachings. Even so, Alexamenos is faithful. A few chiselled words; a crack in the wall. That's how the light gets in.

We can use our artistic skills to mock and make fun, to make money, to make yourself famous. We can use our skills to make friends, to make people feel safe, to make something beautiful, to make something right. God can use our skills, but like a true artist, God will also use our failures. God is interested in truth, not perfection, passion, not performance. When you feel out of ideas, out of hope, out of the spotlight, out of food, that's when God's Spirit arises out of your nothingness and God draws us deeper into the fullness of our humanity.

With a small group of friends I have been reading the Pope's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*. While it is widely and correctly understood as being about the use of AI, it is really about honouring human dignity and creativity in a culture which would rather burn down the planet than admit that we need each other.

Pope Leo writes: 'Indeed, precisely because we experience limits — vulnerability, suffering and failure — we can recognize the inviolable dignity of every person [...]. Authentic culture and art preserve this spark, resisting the normalization of evil. [...].'

He writes: 'For an algorithm, an error is a flaw to be corrected; for a person, however, an error can be a catalyst for profound change.'

If you only do things that you know will work, you'll probably make no mistakes. This was true even before AI tools were put into our hands to tell us what we want to hear and generate something seemingly perfect. You can now create a whole world exactly as you like it, pictures, music, stories, all without needing help to develop your skills, all without the annoyance of interacting with temperamental artists. You don't have to share your output with anyone. You don't have to stretch yourself or risk the lessons of failure. We can know without learning.

I would like to invite us instead to gather at the peace table and create something together. The table helps us create something unique and personal in conversation with the others around us. It helps us to use our gifts not as lonely excellence but as shared competence. The table helps us make mistakes, and learn, and laugh. We imagine, experiment, we create, and then we share.

There are plenty of clever people in the world. There are plenty of rich people and strong people and connected people. But are these people able to be part of a true community with the hopeful and foolish, the dreamers and failures, the bankrupt, the sinners and the heartsick? Are rich and powerful people ever strong enough to look at failures, at their failures, and seek God? They can imagine, experiment, create and share, but they can never meet the needs of the world because they cannot sit at the peace table with the likes of us.

When we look long enough at the cross on which Jesus was killed, we glimpse his resurrection and our salvation. Through Jesus we imagine a world without violence

Peter Haresnape

and sin. We experiment living ethical and liberated lives. We create beautiful words and songs and moments and movements. We share the life-giving bread.

Forget your perfect offering.

Bread must be broken before it can be shared.

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

Amen.