

# Brick by Brick, Sunday by Sunday: Creating God, Creating Still

by

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## BACKGROUND

*“Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours, God creates something new out of them . . . Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and will never be the same again either.”*

Frederick Buechner  
Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC

To be a Christian is to be open to God’s creative power. To let that power work in us and through us, for our sake and for the sake of the world.

It’s what Mary did when she let the Word become flesh through her flesh. It’s what Joseph did when he let go of his old understandings of righteousness, religion, marriage, and even the natural order of things to take Mary as his wife and the child as his own beloved son.

Throughout his life, Jesus let that power work through him, creating new possibilities in the lives of those who came to him for healing and hope. Through his teachings and his actions, he created new understandings of who God is and how God works in this world. Reaching across lines of race, gender, class or ethnicity, he created new ways of being the community of faith.

To be a Christian is to trust in the God of all creation, the God who every twenty-four hours, as Frederick Buechner writes, creates “something that in all eternity never was before and never will again.”

To be a person of faith is also to give *ourselves* to that creative process.

Centuries after Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the artists and architects of the Italian peninsula did just that. For three hundred years, in the midst of wars, conflicts, plagues, and famines, the hill towns of Italy and especially the city-state of Florence, gave birth to a new burst of creativity in all areas of life—literature, art, science, politics, architecture, and the Christian faith. We call it the Renaissance—a re-birth, a new birth.

Renaissance painters explored the new techniques of perspective and landscape to draw the viewer into the scene and set it in historic time. They experimented with new media, like oil on canvas. They pushed the envelope, and tried the patience of popes and priests, to portray the human form in all its glory.

In sculpture, Donatello, Michelangelo, and others rediscovered how the Romans and Greeks had created freestanding statues. They chiseled, hammered, and carved into marble to create human images in stone that pulsed with life.

Architects like Brunelleschi experimented with new designs to create new kinds of sacred spaces with domes and vaults. They even invented new machines to build those new designs.

The Renaissance artists didn’t limit themselves to one discipline. None of them were only painters or solely sculptors, poets, or even scientists. Instead they gave full rein to all their skills and imagination. Leonardo da Vinci painted frescoes and oils, sculpted an enormous horse in bronze and invented flying machines. Giotto adorned the walls of churches and built bell towers. Michelangelo set his chisel to marble, his brush to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and his plumb line to the dome of St. Peter’s. Small wonder one historian has called the Renaissance the “rebirth of genius.”

For three months in the fall of 2003, thanks to a sabbatical grant from the Lilly Endowment, I immersed myself in that Renaissance world of creative genius. I lived in Florence, soaking up the art and architecture of the city (as well as the pasta, red wine, and olive oil). I also spent time hiking in and around Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis, who “re-formed” the Christian church of his day, 300 years before Martin Luther. And I re-read *The Divine Comedy*, Dante’s poetic journey of his own soul—not that of a saint or martyr—written in his own language, not the Latin of the church.

As I wrote in my application for the fellowship, my goal was to explore the Christian faith at a time when “Christians’ openness to new learning and new ways of seeing, writing,

and experiencing God’s presence reshaped the Church and transformed the experience of the individual believer.”

My original proposal had been to do that exploration in two distinct settings. I intended to precede the time in Italy with a study tour of the ancient Christian churches in Turkey. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Asia Minor, far from its birthplace in Palestine, Christianity encountered all manner of new ideas, spiritual practices, and architectural and artistic challenges. However, the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003 made the congregation anxious about my traveling in an Arab country at that time.

So I cancelled those plans and instead included a two-week sojourn to Austria to sing with the Berkshire Choral Festival in Salzburg (which included performing a church concert in Mondsee and singing for the High Mass in the Salzburg Cathedral). I still want to explore Christianity’s roots in Turkey, but the change of plans actually worked well. The study in Austria was an opportunity to explore Christianity’s expression in music—“singing the faith” —through another transitional time, from the late Renaissance motets to the High Baroque of Mozart and Schubert.

The change in plans also allowed me to dig in more deeply in Florence and other parts of northern Italy. I wanted to understand how the people of that time, as Christians and citizens, understood their lives, especially their faith. What did being a person of faith mean to them? Where did that creative genius come from? Where did they find the courage—and the persistence—to keep creating new ways of seeing the Christian faith and new spaces in which to experience it?

Such questions have been important to me throughout my ministry, especially in my role as pastor for the United Church of Santa Fe. For the sixteen years before the 2003 sabbatical and the five since then, I have been helping create a new church in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I came to United in 1987 from a congregation in Connecticut that had just celebrated its 330<sup>th</sup> birthday. United had just turned seven. The Connecticut congregation had 700 members, a six-person staff, and a half-million dollar endowment. United had 90 members, no secretary or even Sunday morning pianist, and a half-million dollar debt. In Connecticut, there were over 300 United Church of Christ congregations, including one just down the street from where I was serving. In New Mexico, there were six, and the closest one was 60 miles away.

Between 1987 and 2003, the congregation had grown to 400 members and friends. Given the high turnover in Santa Fe due to people moving, we’d actually developed three congregations over those 16 years. We’d also paid off the loans and undertaken three building projects. During that same time, I helped start Habitat for Humanity in Santa Fe, serving as President when it was still an all-volunteer effort. I’d also been a founder of the Santa Fe Youth Commission and Ministerial Alliance; and served in leadership roles in both the Southwest Conference and national United Church of Christ.

Creating new ministries, developing new experiences of community, and even building buildings had been a part of my ministry before coming to Santa Fe. In the previous pastorate in Connecticut, we had done a two-year building renovation and capital drive. I'd also been a co-leader for a major Cambodian refugee resettlement effort, in addition to the regular pastoral, worship, and youth ministry responsibilities of an associate minister.

Along with worship leadership and pastoral care, I believe the opportunity to *build* the church—be it by building the community, building the structure, or creating new opportunities for learning or service—is one of the true joys of pastoral ministry. For me, the central call of pastoral ministry is to build hope and build faith. As pastors I think we're given the chance to do that in all kinds of ways. Like those Renaissance masters, we who lead congregations must work in a variety of disciplines, from preaching to fundraising, pastoral care to program development.

I also know that, for all its joys and possibilities, such work can be draining and exhausting at times. That was certainly true for me in the years leading up to the sabbatical.

In the midst of United's building expansion, we'd had several very difficult deaths as the founding generation of the church was passing away. In addition, two central lay leaders of the next generation had died unexpectedly. In a church the size of United, such deaths not only plunge the family and friends into deep grief, but they also leave a hole in the heart of the congregation and very big shoes to fill in the leadership of the church.

Moreover, even as we were expanding the church's Sanctuary, my own life seemed to be shrinking. My mother died after a 2-year battle with cancer, followed by her only sister two years later. In addition, a significant personal relationship ended, not of my own choosing.

Finally, the events of September 11, 2001 had impacted United as it did other congregations around the country. Not only did we deal with the shock of the initial attacks, but also with the aftermath of ongoing fear, paralysis, and polarization of issues and people.

By 2003, I was tired and in need of new vision. Like Dante, I was mid-way in my life's journey, and like him, it seemed more and more that I had lost my way in a dark wood.

If the truth be known, I was feeling pretty impotent in my work. With the deaths in the congregation and other people moving, as well as the changes in both lay and staff leadership, I felt like my ministry had been reduced to crisis response and administrative

trivia. On a more global level, I was disheartened by our nation’s response to September 11 and especially the buildup to war with Iraq.

I felt like Sisyphus, endlessly rolling a rock up a hill only to have it slide back down. I kept trying to be a good pastor, listening, reaching out to new people and caring for ongoing members. As I said to a good friend, “I keep walking into the darkness of people’s lives, but they keep dying or moving way.”

Similarly, like other pastors, I had spoken out, preached, and written op-ed pieces against going to war with Iraq. I had hoped our nation could have a more creative response, such as the Marshall Plan, in dealing with the threat of terrorism. By the fall of 2002, it was clear that war was the only option being considered.

I value pastoral ministry, and I certainly know how God is present in both deep pastoral care and prophetic witness. But I needed to be reminded of other ways of experiencing God’s presence. I needed to be reminded that creating something new—be it a sermon or a sanctuary, a building or a Bible class—was a primary way I had known God in my life and in the life of the church.

Most of all, I needed to sit in churches I hadn’t built. And I needed to hear the stories of the people who built them and adorned them with the most incredible art ever created.

That’s why I went to Florence. It wasn’t exactly the “room with a view,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning, romantic poet experience I thought I might have. My first clue was discovering that the apartment I’d rented looked out over motorcycle parking lot. My second clue was the next morning when the sound of those *motorinis* and *vespas* ricocheted off the stone walls like the start of the Indianapolis 500. As I pulled the pillow over my head, I wondered which ring of Dante’s *Inferno* was reserved for vespa riders. I also wondered if the Lilly people would let me move to some place quiet, like Tahiti.

But I stayed in Florence, because even in the midst of stone, traffic, and noise—and its crazy history of family feuds, Guelphs, Ghibellines, Medicis, Botticello, and the Bonfire of the Vanities—was all that creativity and the stories of the people who gave birth to it.

One such story is that of the Dome of the Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral in the heart of Florence. It’s the biggest freestanding dome in the world, constructed primarily of brick and mortar. It was designed by a goldsmith and watchmaker named Filippo Brunelleschi.

In the early part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Florence decided to build a cathedral to replace an old church in the center of town. The area already had both a bell tower and a baptistery, adorned inside with mosaics of gold and every color of the rainbow. The old church didn’t match the elegance.

The city leaders designated the leading architect of the time, Arnolfo di Cambio, to design the cathedral. They wanted a building that would surpass any Gothic structure of their rivals in Milan, Germany, and France. Di Cambio didn't disappoint. He designed a cathedral with a nave that could accommodate 10,000 people. The end of the nave was to be covered with a dome, bigger than any dome ever built, including the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. But it couldn't have a central support. Nor could it use the “flying buttresses” of the Northern Gothic style.

The only problem was di Cambio didn't have a clue as to how to construct such a dome. In his writings, he acknowledged that it would be left to another architect and generation to figure it out.

For a hundred years, the cathedral remained incomplete. The Florentines still held services in the nave, even when the rain poured through the makeshift roof. But di Cambio's vision remained just that—a vision.

In 1419, the city leaders announced a competition to complete the dome. Architects from all over northern Italy submitted their answers to the problem of the freestanding structure. One architect even suggested building the dome around a huge pile of dirt in which gold Florins were hidden. When the dome was finished, the good citizens of Florence would be invited to come find the coins by hauling away the dirt. He didn't win the competition.

Instead the prize went to Filippo Brunelleschi, who had never designed anything close to that big. In fact, several years before, Brunelleschi had lost out to Lorenzo Ghiberti in a competition to design the gold doors of the baptistery. In defeat he'd left Florence and spent over a decade in Rome, exploring the old ruins of the empire, including the dome of the Pantheon, that no one else paid attention to.

Using both the wisdom of the ancients and his own imagination, Brunelleschi succeeded in not only designing, but building the biggest dome in the world.

In our time of the Astrodome, the Bank One Dome, and all kinds of big structures, one could ask what's the big deal about building such a dome? One, it was made entirely of brick, which presented the challenge of how to get a curve or half-sphere from a rectangular shape. Brunelleschi solved that problem with a new and unique herringbone pattern in bricklaying. Two, the construction was done entirely with human and animal labor. Three, Brunelleschi had to design not only the building itself but the hoists to lift millions of tons of brick, marble, and mortar to the top and a cooling system to wet the pulley ropes so they wouldn't catch on fire. He even put a kitchen up on the scaffolding since the workmen were used to having a hot lunch and he didn't want them wasting time climbing down and up again in the middle of the day.

But the greatest challenge was constructing a dome that big that wouldn't implode in on itself. Brunelleschi met that challenge by essentially building a dome within a dome. To do so, he had to have eight different crews building up the sides of the dome, circle by circle, at the same time (and praying to high heaven they would all meet in the middle at the top).

A true Renaissance person, Brunelleschi, the watchmaker-turned-architect, also relied on the poet Dante Alighieri for his inspiration. A hundred years before, Dante had envisioned the architecture of his *Paradiso* as “di giro in giro,” circle by circle. Dante's heavenly vision became Brunelleschi's reality.

It took sixteen years to complete the Dome. During that time, Florence went to war with neighboring Lucca. To help his fellow citizens, Brunelleschi designed a dam to flood the enemy camp. Unfortunately, it accidentally broke and flooded the Florentine army instead. Brunelleschi also built a monstrous boat to haul marble from the quarry to Florence. Unfortunately, the boat ran aground and sank with its entire load and a third of the architect's wealth. A year later, Brunelleschi was thrown into prison for failing to pay his dues to the Mason's Guild.

In the midst of such turmoil and failure, the Dome was built. It still stands six hundred years later. During the three months I lived in Florence, I walked around the cathedral almost every day. I never ceased to marvel at the Dome's design and construction, especially the hundreds of thousands of bricks that form it, each one laid in place by a human hand six centuries ago. During those same six centuries, the community of faith inside the Cathedral was being built Sunday by Sunday, year by year, just like any church.

Twice I climbed inside the Dome's 463 steps to the lantern on top, 40 stories above ground. It's probably the closest experience I'll have to circling up Dante's Mountain of Purgatory, at least in this life. But the view from the top over the hills and plains of Tuscany was like standing just this side of Paradise.

From Arnolfo di Cambi's designing the Cathedral without knowing how it would be finished to Brunelleschi's incorporation of Dante's heavenly architecture to his willingness to stake everything on a design no one thought possible, the cathedral's Dome is a tangible sign of the interweaving of the power of creativity and the Christian faith. If, as the Letter to the Hebrews affirms, faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” what better example than Brunelleschi's Dome?

To build the Dome, both Brunelleschi and the people of Florence had to be open to new visions and new possibilities. Both the architect who built the dome and the people who gathered for worship inside it had to have the persistence and patience to turn those dreams into realities.

The story of the Dome is a story of people who were willing to take risks, face defeat and failure, and keep dreaming and creating.

What it is not is a story of what often poses as the essence of Christianity—and particularly pastoral ministry—namely the ability to be nice, to make everyone happy, and to meet everybody’s needs.

The Renaissance artists seldom worried about such things. Indeed they competed with one another, often in rather caustic ways. When Brunelleschi designed his ill-begotten *Il Baldone*, the boat to transport marble, one of his rivals denigrated it as a “water bird” and its creator as a “miserable beast and imbecile.” Brunelleschi in turn ridiculed his rival as a “ridiculous-looking beast” who didn’t have the intellect to understand the architect’s innovative designs.

Brunelleschi wasn’t the only irascible artist. Michelangelo sometimes wrote—and distributed—sonnets castigating his fellow artists and deriding their skills and vision. Da Vinci wrote backwards in mirror images to keep his rivals from stealing his ideas.

For these artists, Christianity wasn’t simply about being a good person, a nice person, or even a particularly moral person. It was about being a **creative** person.

Yes, sometimes the motive for that creativity was human rivalry and competition. In the middle of the Dome construction, Brunelleschi carved a powerful wooden crucifix for the church of Santa Maria Novella. Why? Because his rival Ghiberti (who had beat him in the baptistery door competition) had done one in bronze that Brunelleschi thought was ugly. He wanted to show Ghiberti—and all of Florence—how a crucifix should really look.

The result was a work of art and devotion that continues to inspire, despite its less-than-pure beginnings. One day I sat in front of Brunelleschi’s crucifix for a good hour, drawn to the humanity of Jesus that the competitive little watchmaker had drawn forth from a piece of wood.

They pushed the limits, these Renaissance artists and architects. Sometimes they succeeded, sometimes they failed. Leonardo da Vinci decided to try a new fresco formula for his “Last Supper,” that started flaking off the wall of the Milan convent before the paint was barely dry. Michelangelo left behind as many unfinished sculptures as finished ones. Brunelleschi had to make a hundred mid-course corrections in the building of the dome, and faced as many failures as successes.

For those of us called to create churches and build ministries, their record of achievement and defeat is good to keep in mind.

The Renaissance masters lost commissions and competitions, their projects often failed, their works sometimes crumbled before they were completed. Still they created. Still they persevered. They kept painting, writing, and building, because that’s what it meant to be a human being and that’s how they experienced God’s power in human life. By doing what the Creator did—creating something new.

Whether the churches we serve are 20 years old or 200, a thousand members or 50, we are called to do the same. At the heart of every ministry is the commission to create something new in this old world, be it new hope or a new community, a new building or a new possibility in someone’s life.

Staying open to God’s creative power. Perseverance. Patience. A willingness to take risks and to fail, or succeed. Those were all lessons relearned in my sabbatical immersion in the Renaissance. They are all lessons I need for the work of parish ministry.

And there was one lesson more. I suspect that even when Brunelleschi, Dante, Michelangelo, and the others finished their church, poem, or sculpture, there was always the sense that the work was incomplete or imperfect. As artists, they knew that neither paint, brick, marble nor words could never fully express what they were striving for or what they had experienced in the mystery and power of God.

That’s the paradox of creation, whether of a painting or a pastoral ministry. The more we give ourselves to the work of creation, the closer we come to the Creator. But the more we give ourselves to the work, the more we realize how far we truly are from that Creator.

In that realization, we who seek to create congregations and ministries are in good company with a great cloud of witnesses that surround us. At the height of Paradise and the end of his divine journey, Dante wrote “*Here my exalted vision lost its power.*” Losing the power of our vision is always a risk in creation.

But Dante didn’t stop there. He concluded his poem and his journey with this affirmation:

*But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving  
with an even motion, were turning with  
the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.*

Whether as a poet, architect, or pastor, to know the “Love that moves the sun and all the other stars” is, I believe, worth the risk of creation. And it’s worth giving one’s life to.