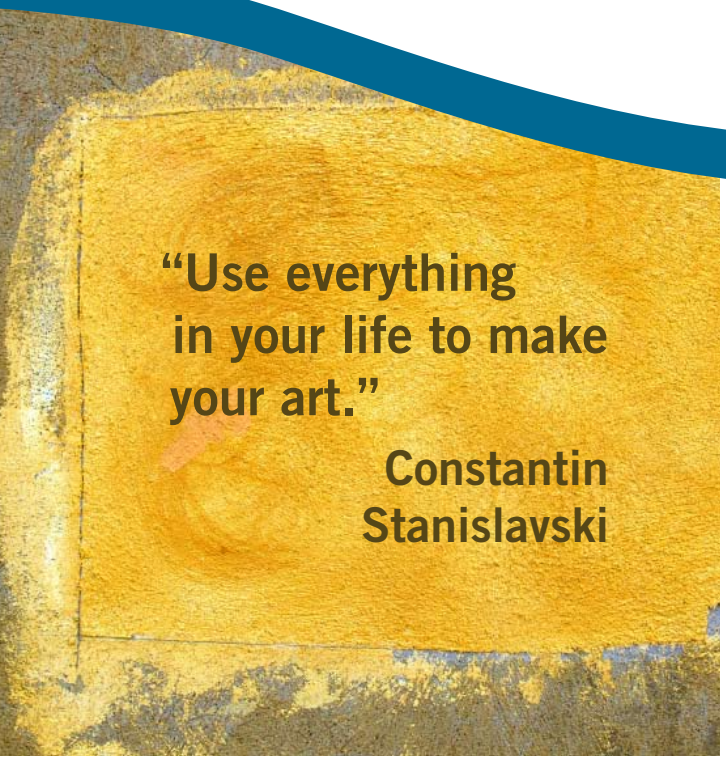
Women of the ELCA

Speaking faith through art

Visually expressing our deepest convictions



The lives of artists. The artist's life.

The theologian Matthew Fox's description of "radical prayer" as "the utterance of your heart" will serve us well in our exploration of how art-making can be a spiritual practice. Centuries of Christian art provide us with a tradition that can help us explore not just our personal relationship with our Creator but a vision for addressing the ethical dilemmas and social justice issues of our time. In drawing on the history of Christian art, we can find a common starting place to build a new, collective vision for our lives together.

We will discuss the lives of two religious artists in particular and how they were able to communicate the social and theological issues of their time through their art.

God be in my head,
and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes,
and in my looking;
God be in my mouth,
and in my speaking;
God be in my heart;
and in my thinking,
God be at my end,
and at my departing.

—from the Book of Hours (1514)

How to Use This Resource

This resource is intended for small group use, though it can also be used for personal reflection. Allow two hours for study and discussion. Participants will each need a pen and a copy of this program, preferably in color.

The goal is to examine the lives and work of two Christian artists from different centuries and different traditions. Lucas Cranach was a painter, propagandist, printer and illustrator active during the Reformation. Sister Corita Kent was a nun and artist who used her artistic gifts to make beautiful and powerful art that communicated her deep commitment to the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s.

Lucas Cranach

Lucas Cranach was born in Germany in 1472. He trained with his father, also an artist, and worked in his studio. He completed his training when he was 28 years old and then worked in Nuremburg, Coburg and Vienna. In 1508, while working in Wittenberg, Cranach became closely acquainted with Martin Luther and his theology. Cranach owned a share in a printing press where Luther's September Bible was printed and provided the woodcut illustrations.

It was Cranach who first introduced Martin Luther to Katharina von Bora, and his portraits of the couple were so popular that replicas of them were in constant demand.[1]

One of the best examples of Cranach's work as a propagandist is a pamphlet he published called the *Passional of Christ and the Antichrist.* Pamphlets and broadsheets were a primary means of spreading the theology of the Reformation. Early modern Europe was a predominantly oral culture in which only a small percentage of the population were able to read and write. The historian Robert Scribner argues in his book *For the Sake of Simple Folk* that this culture created three types of literacy: reading, listening and looking.[2] By illustrating theological texts, Reformation ideas spread more quickly.

Passional of Christ and the Antichrist

On each page of the pamphlet there are two images telling two different versions of stories from the life of Christ. A woodcut of Christ being whipped by Roman soldiers is paired with one of the Pope looking on as priests sell indulgences. In the page reproduced below, Christ is kissing the feet of his disciples while princes and priests kiss the feet of the Pope.

1 Proske, Mirela, Lucas Cranach the Elder (Munich: Prestel, 2007)

2 Robert Scribner, For the Sake of Simple Folk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 3.

Scribner argues that during the Reformation, all three forms of literacy (reading, writing and looking) had equal weight; that looking was as important as reading.

Do you think that that is true today? Or do you think images really are worth a thousand words?

In our own visual culture, we are bombarded with images, from tabloid magazines at the grocery store to photographs of war on the front pages of our newspapers. How do these types of images inform your understanding of what it means to be Christian?

What kinds of images would you like to see in your church? How would you like the church to respond to images in the media?

Lutheran propaganda depicting the pope as the antichrist created a dangerous history of Protestants demonizing Catholics and Catholicism. Artists like Lucas Cranach fostered civil unrest that often resulted in violence by using these images.

Do you see images being used in negative ways in the church? In positive ways?

Law and Grace

The images we have discussed so far were polemical illustrations of Lutheran theology meant for mass distribution. The work we turn to now is an oil painting created by Cranach shortly before his death, called *Law and Grace*.

The goal of the pamphlet *Passional of Christ and the Antichrist* was to communicate Lutheran theology through political propaganda. *Law and Grace* is what was called a *Lehrbild*, or teaching picture, and many

artists (like another prominent Reformation painter, Hans Holbein) copied its depiction of the Lutheran concept of justification by faith.[3]

Unlike some of the Reformers, Martin Luther did not believe that images corrupted the church but that they were a means of clarifying the gospel. Some art historians believe that Luther himself had a hand in designing *Law and Grace*.

This painting is divided by the Tree of Knowledge. The tree withers on the side of Law and thrives on the side of Grace. The Law half shows Adam and Eve tempted in the background on the far left, with Christ enthroned in heaven above. In the foreground, Moses and the prophets stand as Adam's prosecutors. Moses points at Adam, and Adam runs with his hands in the air to hell, with the devil and Death chasing him. His eyes are not on his judge, Christ, but on Death.

On the side of Grace, Christ is crucified on the cross. There is also a depiction of a scene from the Exodus story. Directly to the left of the Tree of Knowledge is a scene of the Israelites being saved from the plague of snakes. In the background on the far right, directly opposite Adam and Eve on the other half, the pregnant Virgin Mary stands over Christ's tomb. Christ on the cross is in the middle and takes up most of the Grace half of the painting. Next to the Tree of Knowledge, across from Moses and the prophets, stand John the Baptist and a man (meant to represent mankind) with his arms raised. John the Baptist points to Christ just as Moses points to Adam. The man standing next to John is showered with the blood of Christ, symbolizing its atoning power.

How does this painting help you to visualize Luther's theology of justification by faith?

Do you remember looking at any images during Sunday School or confirmation class that helped you understand Lutheran theology or what it means to be a Lutheran?

What would you draw or paint if you were asked to illustrate what Grace means to you? What about Law?

Sister Corita Kent

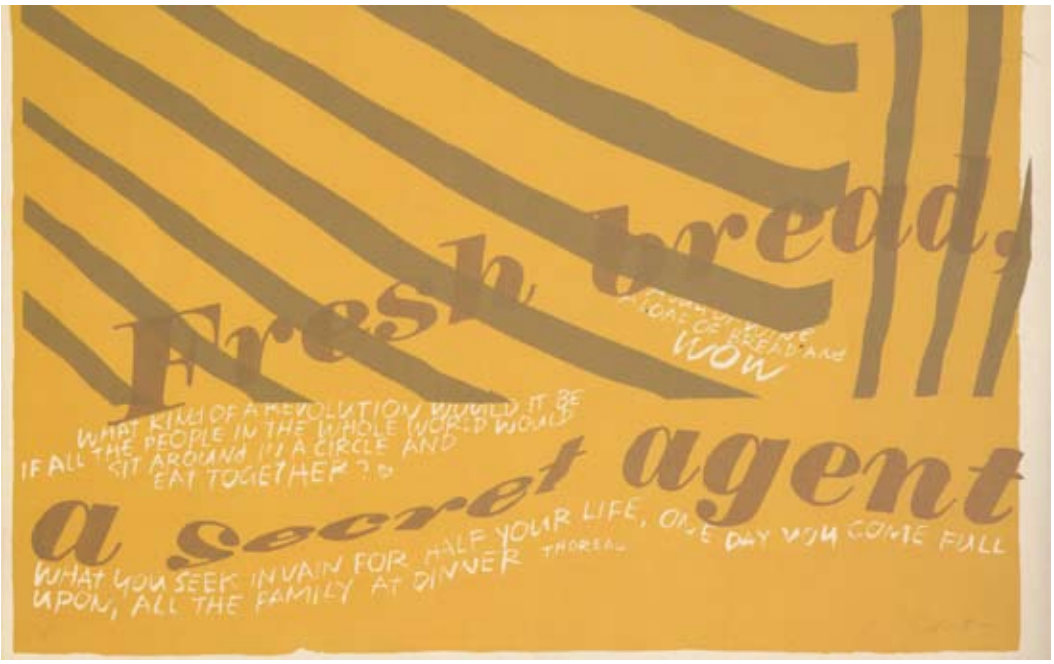
Born in 1918 in Fort Dodge, Iowa, Frances Elizabeth Kent became Sister Corita Kent when she joined the Roman Catholic order of Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles.[4]

The Kent family was Irish, and Roman Catholicism was a central part of her upbringing. Of the six children in the family, three chose to enter religious orders: Corita, her sister Ruth and her brother Mark. In 1941, Corita received a bachelor's degree from Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. She earned a master's degree in art history from the University of Southern California in 1951. Two years earlier, Corita had begun teaching art at Immaculate Heart College and taught there for 20 years. From 1964 to 1968 she was the chair of the art department.

She was a contemporary and colleague of some of the greatest artists and designers working at the time: Buckminster Fuller, Ray and Charles Eames and Alfred Hitchcock. She brought them into her classroom at Immaculate Heart College to help inspire her students as they worked to create colorful and creative worship environments.

3 Proske, 73

4 Julie Ault. Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita (London: Four Corners, 2006), 11.



fresh bread
Corita, serigraph, 1967
Reprinted with permission from the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

fresh bread

The piece printed above, *fresh bread,* is a classic example of Sister Corita's style. It combines printed text, bright colors, shapes and her own handwriting. Like Andy Warhol and other pop artists, Sister Corita looked to billboard advertising and commercial packaging for inspiration.

These two quotations are written in Sister Corita's handwriting and are from unidentified authors:

A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and WOW.

What kind of revolution would it be if all the people in the whole world would sit around in a circle and eat together?

The third quotation, also in Sister Corita's handwriting, is from Henry David Thoreau:

What you seek in vain for half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner.

What do you think this piece says about Holy Communion?

What do you think Corita's art says about her theology?

Sister Corita uses the phrase "Fresh bread, a secret agent" to describe Holy Communion. If you were limited to only a few words, how would you describe it?

Are you ever inspired by something otherwise banal, like supermarket billboards or advertising?

if I

In Sister Corita's 1969 silkscreen print, *if I*, she printed the words "Black is beautiful. Crucifixion. Redemption. Resurrection of the Spirit" above a photograph of Coretta Scott King at Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's funeral. Sister Corita's handwriting fills in the spaces between the type and the photograph.

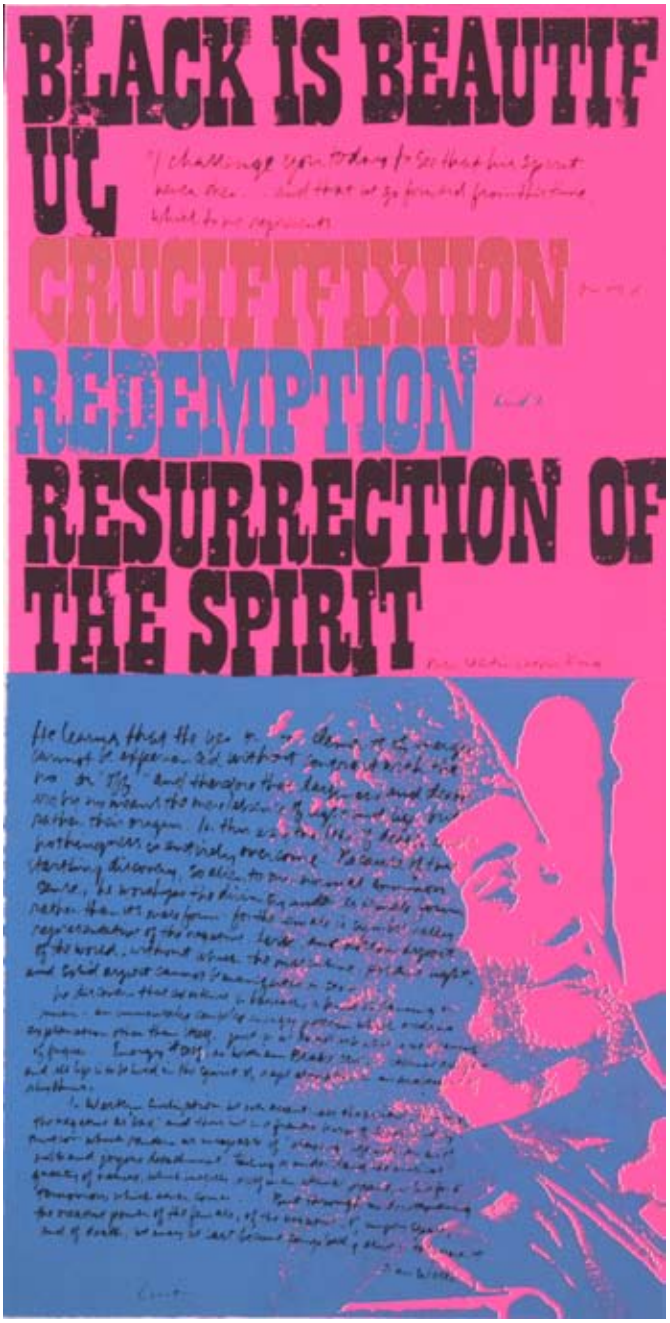
Corita has written out in her own script Coretta Scott King's words at her husband's funeral:

I challenge you today to see that his spirit never dies… and that we go forward from this time, which to me represents crucifixion on to a redemption and the resurrection of the Spirit.

The bold type combines Coretta Scott King's words with this passage from the Song of Solomon: *I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.*[5]

Many images of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King are embedded in our minds. What about Coretta Scott King? When you think of her, are there words and images that come to your mind? Do you think the texts and image used by Sister Corita capture Coretta Scott King in some way?

Is there a passage from the Bible other than the quotation from Song of Solomon that you would pair with a photograph of Coretta Scott King?



if I

Corita, serigraph, 1969

Reprinted with permission from the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

5 Song of Solomon 1:5, NRSV

Concluding thoughts

Lucas Cranach and Sister Corita both used text and images to communicate their theology within their own context, responding to the issues of their time and place.

Given how different the historic times and artistic periods Lucas Cranach and Sister Corita lived in were, what similarities in content and style do you see in their works? What differences?

What photographs or drawings do you think are emblematic of our time? What words or texts?

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