

Meeting Jesus on the Way

“The Good News of God’s grace is for all, regardless of age, abilities, physical and mental health, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, education, income or strength of faith. There is nothing we do, have done or will do that can separate us from God. God makes no exceptions, nor do we.”

Christ Lutheran Church

In the spring of 2022, Christ Lutheran Church council members approached fiber artist Jacqueline Bryant Campbell with a concept for new sanctuary artwork. “How do we represent Jesus? In a contemporary crowd, what would Jesus look like?”

Using that as a start, Ms. Bryant Campbell proposed two panels comprising fifteen people, representing Jesus, 11 disciples, and the three women most closely associated with Jesus’ ministry. These people would need to reflect diversity of gender identity, ethnicity, hair color, eye color, age, and physical ability.

Each of the fifteen figures was assembled and quilted individually, before arranging them onto their respective panels and quilting all of the layers together. This allowed the artist to spend time with each one, responding to what the subject seemed to want rather than forcing them into her conception of them. Some of them came together in a matter of hours. Some took multiple complete remakes. People who saw this work as it was in progress would say, “Oh that looks like some I know.” And that is kind of the point. We sing “what a friend we have in Jesus,” but what does that look like? If Jesus is your friend, wouldn’t it make sense to find him in our friends?

Each person in this work has some characteristic that is unique to them: there is only one blond, one person wearing glasses, one senior woman. While some of the people are definitively one ethnicity or another, and others are open to the viewer’s interpretation, let’s remember the song we learned as children which goes: “Jesus loves the little children/All of the children in the world/Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.”

In addition to markers of physical ability — seen in the man using a wheelchair and the man wearing glasses — the Council also requested representation of immigrant status. This is shown through the backpack held on the lap of the woman in green. The gender identity of the person in black boots is left ambiguous deliberately; God loves them no matter how they identify. The artist hopes that in this work viewers might find a welcome and bits of themselves reflected back at them.

Ms. Bryant Campbell’s grandfather used to recite James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation.” A line from that beloved poem inspired the colors used in this artwork. Johnson wrote: “And God smiled

again, and the rainbow appeared, and curled itself around his shoulder.” Reds are near the bottom, working their way up through the rainbow to violet at the top.

The artist hopes that in this work viewers might find a welcome and bits of themselves reflected back at them. Additionally, this artwork is an invitation to consider how we conceptualize Jesus. If God made us in His image, then each of us is a reflection of God, just as the human Jesus was. And if that is the case, any of these people could be the child of God.