

“The Real and the Artificial, Part III: The Work of Our Hands”
August 30, 2026

Exodus 31:1-11
Isaiah 40:18-20

I’m exploring the real and the artificial in my sermons on these late-summer Sundays—as in various ways we encounter and think about the real and the artificial in our lives and in the world. I didn’t have a title for this third sermon in the series when the bulletin was printed on Friday. I realized on Saturday, however that it was staring at me all week in the last lines of this morning’s Psalm: “The Work of Our Hands.”

Let’s think about that work.

On the first two Sundays, I emphasized the real, encouraging you, as scripture does, to “let love be genuine,” to “take hold of the life that is really life.” As I thought about this in the past week, I worried that you might think, “He says ‘artificial’ like it’s a bad thing.”

But it isn’t—at least not always.

Yes, sometimes “artificial” can mean “imitation,” “sham.” We worry about artificial sweeteners, artificial coloring in our food.

Artificial also means simply “made by human beings instead of naturally occurring.” And that’s not necessarily bad. Sometimes the artificial can help us to see something deeper, something more real.

Dolly Parton helps us with this, as she helped us with so much.

Revealing something of the human effort that went into being Dolly, she said: “I am a self-made woman, and I have the doctor bills to prove it,” adding, “I’m no natural beauty. If I’m gonna have any looks at all, I’m gonna have to create them.”

Of course, for some time, she let us in on the act, like when she told us: “I’m not offended by all of the dumb blonde jokes because I know I’m not dumb ... and I also know that I’m not blonde.”

The artificial was a way into the real.

So, perhaps most apropos to the concerns of these sermons, she said: “I love being artificial. I think there’s a little magic in the fact that I’m so totally real, but look so artificial at the same time.”

Or as the title of the op-ed in yesterday’s *New York Times* put it: “Dolly Parton Was So Fake She Was Real.”

We do well, then, to remember that most of what we do is, well, artificial: human made instead of naturally occurring.

In this way, we are co-creators with God in this world. Even a garden or a farm filled with natural beauty is in some sense, artificial. You know the old story about the person coming upon a wondrously impressive farm, telling the farmer, “God sure has blessed you with a beautiful farm.”

The farmer replied: “Yes, God has, and I’m grateful. But you should have seen this place when only God was taking care of it.”

Some very human work is required. We do that work in many different ways and we are co-creators with God.

This is the ancient memory that we heard in the account from Exodus this morning.

As the Hebrew people wander in the wilderness, God instructs Moses on building a tabernacle—a portable sanctuary that will be the dwelling place of God in that wilderness. This sacred space is described in great detail over several chapters.

It will be built—as all things are—not by the hand of God, but by human hands. Exodus is largely about Moses, but it is significant that this book remembers the names of two skilled artisans: Bezael and Oholiab. These two are given “ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft.” Their great talent reveals that the very spirit of God rests upon them.

And not just on them alone. In speaking to Moses, God adds: “I have given skill to all the skillful”—women as well as men—“so that they may make all that I have commanded you.”

Commenting on this, Walter Brueggemann tells us: “This text explicitly states what is everywhere assumed in God’s address to Moses: Creating a home for holiness is *human* work. That human effort is powered and driven by the spirit of God.” Artistry is a creative act and *this act, this work* is a new creation, arising from human effort—human ability, intelligence, and knowledge.

What we see here is the deep “connection between genuinely creative art and the power of God’s Spirit.” We are reminded that creativity is a gift from God—a gift each of us exercises in one way or another.¹

Recall that the Book of Exodus is a story of moving: from slavery in Egypt to a perilous freedom in the wilderness; from service to Pharaoh to service to God. In all of this, the worship of God is central. Worship is the desire of the Hebrew people while enslaved. It is the way in which God will be present with them through trial and temptation. This worship would be facilitated by human creativity.

This continues today. We come before God in this sanctuary. And we do so surrounded by human creation. We are surrounded by wood shaped into pulpit and table and font and pew. We hear music played on human-made instruments and sing songs written by women and men over many centuries. In a lot of older Congregational Churches in New England, such as the one I served in Connecticut, there are no stained-glass windows. Instead, worshippers look out on the natural world through clear panes of glass. Here the work of Tiffany and others inspire our worship and give us a different perspective.

But human creativity and creation extend far beyond this sanctuary. God does indeed give “skill to all the skillful”—that is, to each and every one of us. We are made in the very image of God, with the ability to create, to bring new things into being.

By faith, we see that each person has something unique to offer this congregation. If you are visiting here for the first time today, or have begun worshipping here in recent weeks, you too, bring gifts to this place and we are grateful.

Beyond that, each one of us has something unique to offer the wider world. A desire to advocate for others, skill at organizing, a passion for justice, the ability to cook a meal. If I might speak to the many people worshipping with us online, some of whom, because of distance, have never worshipped with us in person—along with the rest of us here in this room, you have those kinds of gifts—abilities to be used for the good of others. Wherever you use them, near or far, you make a positive difference in the world and in some way, you even extend the ministry and mission of this congregation.

We are—all of us—makers: artisans, musicians, writers, scientists, healers, teachers. We make businesses, families, communities, a congregation.

It helps if, every now and then, each one of us thinks a little more intentionally about what we have received and about how we might better use those skills not only for our own delight but also for the well-being of others. This is such a time.

It helps to have a sane estimate of our capabilities—neither an inflated sense of what we can do nor a self-deprecating attitude that disparages our abilities.

Madeliene L’Engle told us: “God is constantly creating—in us, through us, and with us—and to co-create with God is our human calling.”

This, then, is the good news, that comes to us this morning. We are co-creators with God. Using the skills that God gives to each of us, we make things—all sorts of things. They are artificial. Yes, they are artificial, made by human beings. And they are gateways to the real.

When we are at our best, we might even say that such creations are “inspired.”

Except...

Except, of course, we are not always at our best.

And so, the good news of this day also comes with a word of caution. The works of our hands, of our minds, of our hearts are flawed. As much as scripture points us toward the celebration of our skills and all that we create, it also gives us a warning.

Isaiah speaks of artisans, skilled craftspeople using the gifts they have to cast an idol, to overlay it with gold, and cast silver chains for it. The prophet is clear that this idol that is created with great skill is not God, but many lack this awareness.

And lest we think that this is an ancient problem, far removed from our lives, remember Calvin’s assessment that the human mind is a factory of idols. And that factory is at work 24 hours a day, all week long, all year long, never shutting down for vacation or even stopping for a coffee break.

Forbes recently reported on the A.G.I. House in Silicon Valley, that’s “artificial general intelligence”—and the pursuit of a machine that can do anything a human brain can do. Many there see artificial intelligence as a more real, more powerful alternative to the God they grew up disbelieving in. Rayan Krishnan, the chief executive of Vals AI, a San Francisco company that tracks the performance of the latest A.I. technologies, and a part of this circle tells us: “People are matter-of-factly saying that they are looking to build a machine God. They are not saying that ironically or in jest. They are saying it as a matter of fact.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The article said that this should worry anyone who employs young people or who cares about the kind of future we will share with them. “No wonder,” the author wrote, “No wonder AI executives are being ‘booed’ at commencement ceremonies across the country this summer.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I want to come back to some of this next Sunday. But let me add that this is not just a problem created by artificial intelligence.

Scripture warns us that all of our works run the risk of becoming idols. And from climate-altering industrialization through the development of atomic power to our current pursuit of artificial intelligence, the works of our hands and our minds quite often threaten the very world that has been entrusted to us.

So, we are called to humility in all that we do—to an awareness that we are not God, that our creations are not to be made into gold-plated idols.

It takes some awareness, some self-searching. But by God’s grace, we can do that.

We can live out of the real love that honors the other person, created in the image of God as we also honor ourselves, created in that same image, while above all, honoring God.

We can live out of the genuine love that calls us to seek the good; that empowers us to stand for the right; that will empower us as we confront the idols around us.

We can strengthen our relationships that can keep us honest to one another and honest to God.

We can let go of idols so that we can take hold of the life that is really life.

In this way, may we do the work God has given us to do in our time.

In this way, may God prosper the work of our hands.

We thank you, O God, that we are made in your image, bearing the gifts of creativity, imagination, intelligence, and love. Help us to use your gifts with gladness, that we might increase the joy and well-being of others.

May our words and our actions be honest.

May our work bring fresh perspectives and new insights into your world.

May our lives be signs of your goodness and compassion.

Through us, bring your new creation into being. Amen.

ⁱ W. Brueggemann, Exodus, NIB, pg. 922.

ⁱⁱ *N Y Times*, May 26, 2026. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/26/technology/pope-leo-ai-religion.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20260527&instance_id=176239&nl=the-morning®i_id=218778745&segment_id=220527&user_id=9463f7838d976ca5b76a25c2bd7890ea

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelly Woodard, Some In Silicon Valley Want To Build A Machine God: Here's What Business Leaders Should Build Instead. *Forbes*, June 26, 2026. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yassprize/2026/06/26/some-in-silicon-valley-want-to-build-a-machine-god-heres-what-business-leaders-should-build-instead/>