



Do Not Neglect the Gift That Is in You... (1 Tim. 4:14)

by Wesley H. Goldsberry

With his May graduation just several months away, Matt Schultz found himself happily mired in the call process, perhaps one artifact shy of a truly distinctive pastoral portfolio.

“I didn’t think to record it,” he said of a unique sermon he preached in Miller Chapel.

And no mere audiotape would have done it justice.

“As I preached, I painted a landscape that interlinked with the sermon. It was a challenge, but I think it turned out really well.”

For an aspiring minister who had been dabbling in visual art since the age of three, taking a paintbrush into the pulpit was perhaps as inevitable as graduating from crayons to pencils. The sermon showed, as well as any juncture along his vocational journey could, that embracing ministry might not have to mean relinquishing what some have seen as a competing passion—his art.

Schultz, a fourth-year dual-degree student at PTS, was raised in minuscule Steventown, New York, in the Berkshires, the first in a sequence of scenic locales that has inspired Schultz’s artistry. It was art that propelled him into undergraduate school, but his years at Westminster College were, more than anything, the first chapter in discovering the surpassing complexity of God’s designs for human life.

“I didn’t want to do art as my career,” Schultz said. “I just wanted it to be something I did because I loved to do it. The chaplain [at Westminster] was someone I really connected with as a mentor, and I became more interested in the ministry.”

Following college, he and his wife, Elizabeth (herself a 2004 graduate of PTS), seized on a job opportunity at the First Presbyterian Church of Anchorage, Alaska.

“We were both looking for an adventure,” Matt said. “We prayed about it, and off we went. It was the best four years of our lives.”

Not to mention one of the best natural backdrops a muralist could hope for.

“Seeing the beauty of the landscape just inspires that artistic element,” he said. “Before the move, I had done more black-and-white stuff, but up there I was seeing in color a lot more.”

Schultz put his talents to work, painting a few murals for both fun and profit. Gradually, the boundary between vocation and avocation blurred. While art had proven an ideal occasional respite from ministry, he began to see it as a conduit through which ministry could be done. While on a mission trip to Mexico, Schultz managed to help some local children with novel forms of artwork, a rejuvenating experience for the kids, and one that saw their erstwhile instructor “having a blast.”

Since 2001, when he came to Princeton, Schultz has continued to employ his craft in healing ways.

“For people who are feeling a certain way, I can try to express those feelings through my artwork,” he said.

One of Schultz’s latest projects adorns a wall in the front stairwell of the Hodge House, now home to the family of associate professor Kenda Dean, Schultz’s adviser in the dual-degree program.

“Matt really took the first step for us to make this house into a home,” Dean said. “At first he was thinking of painting some really serious things; then he got to know us and had another idea.”

The resulting mural, which imbeds images of various Dean family “icons” into a unified landscape, features a frolicsome bear prominently in the foreground. The bear commemorates the family’s first night in the Hodge House, when an actual bear paid an unexpected and thus far unrepeated visit to the Deans’ backyard.

“It’s much more fun to know that it’s not ‘my’ artwork going up,” Schultz said. “I’m helping to get their heart and soul up on the wall as opposed to my own personal agenda.”

“We’re just grateful to have a little whimsy in Hodge House,” Dean added.

A second Matt Schultz original can be found in the nursery at his church in Wrightstown, Pennsylvania, where he recently finished painting his own rendering of Noah’s Ark. He hopes to keep himself busy with similar projects for as long as his family calls Princeton home.

The church’s relationship to art has historically been tenuous at best. But Schultz sees two enterprises that share critical functional similarities.

“My approaches to ministry and art are similar,” Schultz said. “In ministry, you try to get out of the way and let God’s work be done. When my art is at its best, I feel like I’m not doing much of it on my own; just that I’ve been given a gift to have these kinds of things work through me. There’s a similar process in which I humbly try to get out of the way.”

It is no accident, then, that Schultz finds his soul captive to these two passions, equal but by no means opposite. Even as ministry may entail a life of many sacrifices, art will not be one of them. ■