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IMAGINATION I: Key to the Outside

This morning, and for the next two Sundays, I will revisit a subject that grows more and more important to me as the years pass: the role of the *empathic imagination* in the recovery of the Christian faith. I say “recovery” for good reason. It’s hard to find the Christian faith these days. We still have plenty of churches, but people are still arguing over their beliefs instead of joining together to *live* the faith, to walk the walk, to choose a different path. Countless seekers talk openly about both their need for a spiritual life and their disgust with organized religion. I truly believe that no recovery of the church can occur until we discuss something seldom talked about in the church: the imagination.

Some people think this is a subject more suited to a psychology class than to the pulpit. I want to argue that it is a subject suitable for discussion anywhere, anytime, and by anyone who is interested in putting the “humane” back in humanity.

My interest in rhetoric makes it impossible for me not to think syllogistically —that is in terms of the construction of an argument — its premises and their relationship to the conclusion. So let me suggest that the premise of this series of three sermons shall be this: each of us, when we are born, is locked inside a prison of self, a dungeon of self-absorption, which is at first necessary for survival, but if not outgrown can make us a permanent prisoner of sorts, trapped inside ego, vanity, and an blindness to the “other” which is the root cause of all cruelty.

Most of the meanness I see in this world is the result of people who cannot escape that prison, who have never found the key to the outside. And I want to suggest that there is little hope of improving that situation, until we teach our children that the imagination is neither suspect, nor a tool of the Devil – but is, in fact, a divine gift, to be nurtured and cherished for the blessing that it is.

Jesus of Nazareth said once: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you *free*. Notice that there is an assumed premise here (in rhetoric we call it an enthymeme). Jesus knows that everyone wants, at some basic level, to be free. And prior to enlightenment we must possess the ability to escape the prison of self. The assumed premise is that before we know how to do that we are *not* free. Liberation depends on enlightenment; but enlightenment depends on something else: the emphatic imagination.

Humans are wired to be self-interested creatures. It is a survival instinct and it is powerful. There is even an ethical theory called ethical egoism, which my students studied in a class this spring that I taught called “Ethics of Communication.” It posits that every action, no matter how apparently selfless, has some degree of selfishness associated with it.

I happen to believe that is largely true, and that the consequences of deluding ourselves about the role that self-interest plays in most things we do blinds us. It traps us inside ourselves; and we become prisoners of fear, insecurity, jealousy and all the misery that results from being a slave to one’s ego rather than the master of it. To put it in the vernacular: there is no smaller package in this world than a person who is all wrapped up in himself.

So along comes Jesus of Nazareth, about whom the late Kurt Vonnegut said when he visited OCU four years ago, *if what he said was true – then what difference does it make if he is, or is not, the Son of God?*

Can’t simply telling the truth, and then living it, make you a Son (or daughter) of God? It was Jesus who said that this condition, this imprisonment, causes a kind of moral blindness (the biblical idiom is scales over the eyes), and that what we need is to have those scales fall away and then see the world with something called the “eyes of the heart.”

If you ask the man or woman on the street, what is the greatest of all the commandments of Jesus? – he or she will almost certainly quote the *shema*: to love the Lord you God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Love, they will say – that is the greatest commandment. Love – that’s our essence and our first responsibility. Love — that’s what God is and that is our first and highest responsibility as human beings.

But I want to say this morning, and in different ways for the next two Sundays, that something else must come first. That love itself is impossible without the development of this divine gift we call the *imagination*.

It’s a strange and wonderful thing, this distinctively human gift that allows us to travel

through space and time without ever leaving our skull cups. Many of Vonnegut's characters, including Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five* are time-travelers. Part of the genius of his work is that we see past present and future in terms of all three. Everything is poignant because there is, in all Vonnegut's work, a "third eye" if you will, that knows how it will all turn out, and thus what it all means if it means anything at all.

When the poet of Genesis says that we are made in the image of God, expressed beautifully in the Latin phrase *imago dei*, he is imagining creation as an act of imagination. God is the ultimate Imaginer, because before there was anything there was a dream — an "impulse" toward Something. Some people are disturbed by the idea that we might simply be a dream, but not me. I think that's a compliment. Stephen Spielberg's amazing movie company was called "Dream Works." Maybe that's what we are.

I watch my wife at work in her studio and I do not see what she sees (but I can see that she sees something). When the work is finished, I say, "Where did that come from?" And she says, "I don't know. . .out of my head I guess." "It's not in my head," I say. . . "Words are in your head," she says. "Sometimes I listen to you writing at the computer, that rapid clicking sound you make when you are pounding on the keyboard, and I wonder: "Where do all those words come from? And I say, I don't know. . .out of my head I guess."

"And who do you think put them there?" she says. "The Same as put those images in your head," I say. And we smile a knowing smile, not altogether comfortable just saying it out loud. We should be careful, and we should be hesitant, and we should even be a little bit afraid to say it out loud – the name of the Holy One, blessed be He. But we know, down deep, that all art, that all creativity has one essential responsibility: *to mediate transcendence*.

The great Quaker William Penn said, "Love is the hardest lesson of Christianity," and Thoreau said no greater miracle could take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant. But it does not happen very often, because most of us are preoccupied with walking a mile in our own shoes. Let's see, how do they fit, how do they look, and has anyone noticed that they are new, and they are blue. Don't step on my blue suede shoes.

I'll never forget what happened over four years ago when I was asked to do an interview on channel four about the imminent invasion of Iraq, and the anti-war demonstrations, the largest in the history of the world, were occurring across the globe.

Kirsten McIntyre did the interview, who had come over from FOX news, and we were walking through the hallway toward the studio, when she commented on how cold it was outside, and how she had just done an interview in which the wind blew her hair right over her

face and into her eyes. “I’m going to look terrible she said.” “Well, I said, just keep it all in perspective. “What is a bad hair moment compared to a war?”

We sat down, and they wired me up. She had no idea at all what to ask me. In fact she asked me several times what I wanted her to ask me. I know exactly how an alien would feel now being interviewed by an American journalist. We talked for ten minutes, and they used ten seconds, but the most interesting moment did not make it on the air. She was puzzled, and a bit annoyed that a minister should be a peace activist. She said, “Shouldn’t you just take care of the sheep, and stay out of politics?” “I’m not “in” politics,” I said. But I understand my ordination as compelling me to consider that every Iraqi child is also part of my congregation.”

She looked totally confused.

Strangely, our ideas about the universe are changing at precisely the same time as we seem stuck in outmoded ways of thinking. We used to think the universe was like a giant clock, ticking away with Newtonian precision. Now we know that it is not nearly as ordered as we thought, and that it resembles something closer to a what we used to call, in science class, a “field,” or what Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor called, in a marvelous phrase, a “luminous web.” Everything is part of Everything. Which means that the most appropriate response to war for anyone with an imagination is to weep.

Now you may think I’m drifting from my stated topic, but in fact I’m only trying to persuade you that in this new world, there is going to have to be more right brain thinking, more intuition, more trust in an empathic imagination that is not irrational, but is, in fact, *trans-rational*.

A lot of things that don’t make sense only seem senseless because we cannot imagine. In fact, one of the most revealing phrases of our own time is this: *I just can’t imagine*. “I can’t imagine why she did that. . . Can you imagine anything that stupid? . . . [or this], What on earth got into your head?”

When people said, of the Littleton massacre, or of Virginia Tech, “I just can’t imagine how anyone could do such a thing,” it may be a kind of defense mechanism. What might be even more accurate would be for those three shooters, those boys to admit, that they just can’t imagine. That when it comes to the difference between reality and fantasy, they are prisoners of a world in which the empathic imagination was replaced with a kind of demonic surrealism.

One morning not long ago I went to my neighborhood Seven-Eleven (right down the street here at the corner of 63rd and Portland) and noticed several police cars. That’s not unusual at 5

o'clock in the morning, but when I went inside they told me that the store was closed. "There had just been a robbery," they said, and I looked at the young girl who worked behind the counter and could see the fear in her eyes.

But what was stranger still was the soundtrack playing in the background. It was the sound track of one of those video games you can play – it goes on whether anyone is playing them or not, providing the *Muzak* if you will of the Seven Eleven experience. And the sounds were of simulated gunfire, and kick boxing, and macho men wielding semi-automatic weapons telling everyone, Freeze or you die!

Well, we are an entertainment culture. That's what we do best. That's where our money and our brain trust goes. Some of our most brilliant and creative minds are in advertising. It's an art form. Our movies are what teach the world about America. Movies. Games. Spectacular visual effects.

But the problem, I think is that this external form of "visuality" has now largely replaced the interior life – which is where one develops a moral sensibility. That is, Hollywood images have largely replaced the imagination. Only 40 years ago, children had to read books if they were going to travel to distant lands without leaving their bedrooms. Every image created had to be created in the interface between the printed word and the imagination.

Then along came radio, and with it, the auditory special effects that required slightly less imagination. You could hear the villainous voice, the wind through a haunted house, the clapping of horses hooves, the rumble of distant thunder. "It was a dark and stormy night" was now replaced by the sound of a thunderstorm. Radio gave us more, but required less.

When the movies came along, you could actually see the shape of the hero, the grace of his movement. When color was added, imagination could retreat still further. No need to paint this scene in your mind; now it was painted for you. When television came along, it was placed, ironically, in the place most American's called their den or library. It brought pleasure, exciting and useful information, and in some ways it widened our horizons. But it also required even less of the imagination.

Ironically, it seems that the effect of all this is that we *know* more, but *feel* less. And I beg you, parents of children, not to succumb to the inevitable request that you provide a TV in your child's bedroom. Don't do it, and if you've done it, undo it. Buy them a book instead, and insist that there is a time every night for reading.

The mind, after all, is a gallery hung with images, and you are the curator. In the words of

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, life is a vale of "soul-making." That is – life with all its joy and sadness, all its shifting seasons, all its sleeping and waking, fretting and dreaming, loving and losing – is a kind of "interior decoration." If someone walked through the museum that is your mind, what would they see? And do you hang your own shows, or do you hire that out?

I think we need to read more, and talk more, and be entertained less. Because reading and conversation develop the interior life, while entertainment often stunts it: Descartes did not say: *I have observed and been amused, therefore I am.*

Quaker novelist Jessamyn West, who wrote *Friendly Persuasion*, penned an essay some years ago in which she recognized the vital role of the imagination in the development of children. Too often we carelessly denigrate this marvelous faculty by saying things to children like, "That's *only* your imagination." But West writes:

If I were a mother or a teacher or anyone with responsibility for the young, I should be even more concerned for the imaginative development of my children than for their muscular development. A thousand times more concerned. Children will climb trees and swing from door frames without our showing them how. But they may never discover, and hence never develop that faculty which permits them to escape. . . their own craniums unless we show them the way. Every day the mother and teacher should show the child by example and precept how to escape the prison of self, which, unless it imagines the state of others, cannot help but be narrow and impoverished.

The most important question a mother can ask her child each night is not "What did you learn today?" or "Did you go to the bathroom?" or "Have you said your prayers?" but "What did you imagine today?" Prayers, learning, and health are barren without imagination.

The sick child may die, but the unimaginative child is already dead. The pious child who does not inhabit his prayers with imagination might as well be saying "Hickory, dickory, dock." The child who learns but does not illuminate his learning with imagination is an inferior calculating machine – but alas, unlike the calculating machine, capable of terrible brutalities.

Good words to remember. But not new. Listen to the testimony of scripture in Paul's letter to his friends at Philippi: "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus." How is that possible without imagination?

"Think constantly of those in prison as if you were prisoners at their side," the author of Hebrews writes. But this is an act of pure imagination. It all hinges on the "as if." And in

Matthew 25, Jesus answers the unimaginative query of his disciples, “When did we see *you* naked, hungry, or in prison, and fail to respond? by saying that in the face of every stranger was his image, and thus he could be “imaged.” That is, if you have an image-ination.

When a person joins the Episcopal church, this is the question put to her: “Will you seek and serve Christ in *all* persons.” I am particularly fond of E.M. Forster’s life motto: *Only Connect*. And then of course there is that comment, I heard once about a patient who went to see a new doctor, and wanted to know, right off the bat, not whether he had gone to the right medical school, but whether faith played a role in his practice. He said, “Do you have a working relationship with God, or do you work alone?”

Elizabeth Peabody was asked once how she happened to run into a tree on the Boston Common. Her explanation: “I saw it, but I did not realize it.” That’s the story of our lives. 20-20 vision, but hearts that are not in focus.

Next Sunday, “Lord willing and the creek don’t rise” part two. . .of my on-going battle against that cultural pejorative: *It’s only your imagination*.

Of course, what else can save us?

To be continued.

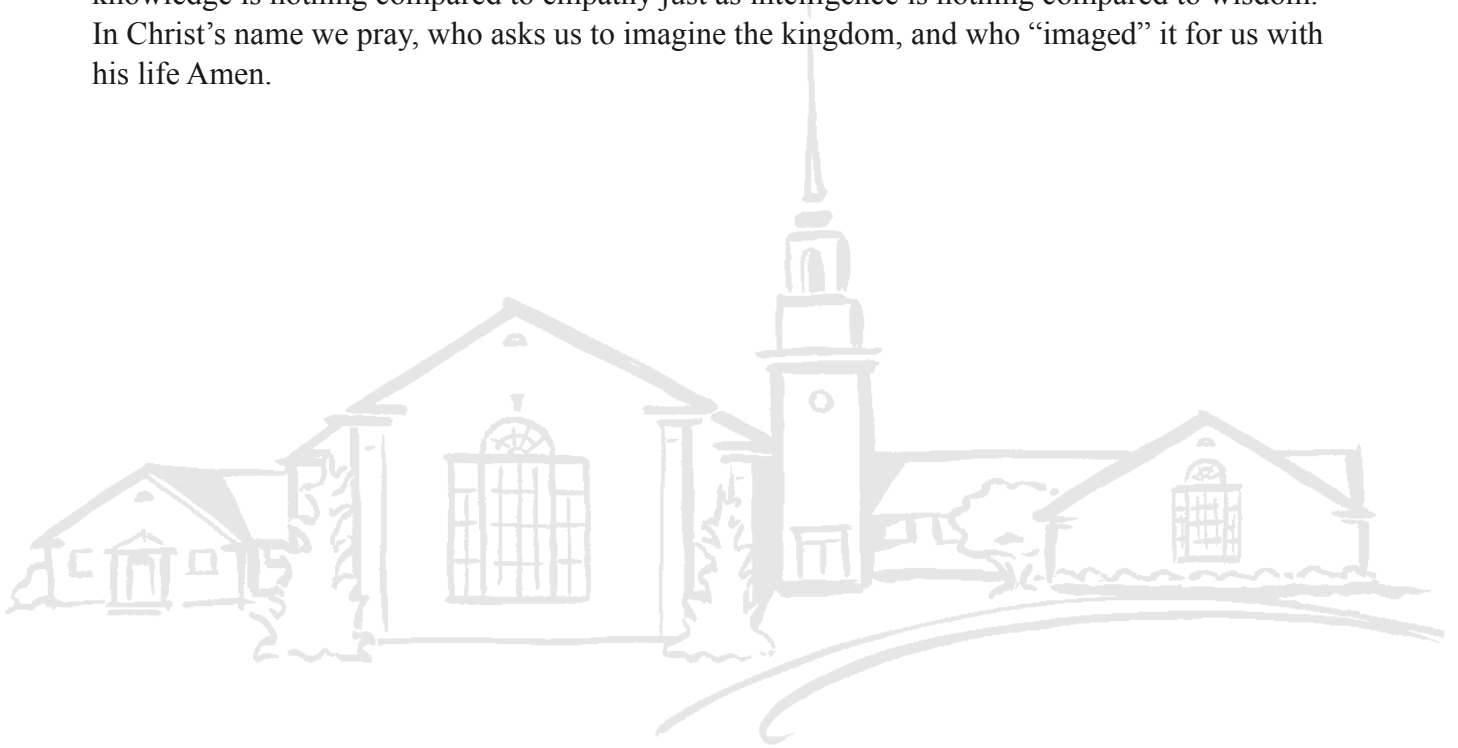


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Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, May 16, 2010

Lord of Life, we come to you for a time of quiet reflection, and to open up the places in us that have gotten hard and calloused. That includes, most of all, the ability to see with something

other than our optic nerve, to feel with something more than just our skin, and to know at a level deeper than mere cognition. We are here to feed and water a part of us that is often undernourished — the moral imagination — to find our way back to what the ancient scriptures call the “eyes of the heart.” Help us, we pray, not just to look, but to “see.” And to know that knowledge is nothing compared to empathy just as intelligence is nothing compared to wisdom. In Christ’s name we pray, who asks us to imagine the kingdom, and who “imaged” it for us with his life Amen.



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