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IMAGINATION II: *I Just Can't Imagine*

Last Sunday we talked about the empathic imagination and its vital role in the life of faith. This morning, in part two of a three-part series, I want to continue to explore this essential human faculty by suggesting that without it we are less than human, and almost certainly less humane.

Albert Einstein believed that there were children who could solve some of the problems he wrestled with because they still possessed a vital and unbridled imagination. In fact, he said that imagination was more important than knowledge.

We should never say to children, “That’s *only* your imagination” or “There you go again, just *imagining* things.” Once, in grade school, one of my teachers complained to my parents that I had what she called an *overactive imagination*. “Robin is quite the daydreamer” she said. And she was right. Besides, all those day trips I took without leaving my desk, they were considerably more interesting than her class!

This morning, I’d want you to consider why lack of imagination is a recipe for disaster, captured in the oft-heard phrase, *I just can’t imagine*. We hear this all the time, but seldom think about what it really means. “I just can’t imagine how she could have done such a thing. . . I just can’t imagine what he could have been thinking when he said that. . . I just can’t imagine how she could even think of leaving him.”

Or how about this — “I just can’t imagine what she sees in him?” That’s an admission of blindness. That’s an indirect confession that love is not just blind as the poets say, but also

incomprehensible sometimes, except through the eyes of the heart. We say that, after all, when two people seem “mismatched” – it’s a comment usually based on physical appearance (i.e. he is too good looking for her, or she could have anyone she wants, so why did she pick him). It is that purely physical way of seeing things that dominates our entertainment culture.

Or there is this: *What you see is what you get*. This is often spoken by someone who wishes not to be changed. Here’s the package – what you see is what you get — so don’t take me on as a renovation project. But that comment is more revealing than we think. Because it is only through the imagination that a person is seen as something more than just what they appear to be on the outside, and can be loved at a deeper level. It would be more helpful if people would say, *What you see is not all there is*. Because the correct answer when someone says, “I don’t see what she sees in him,” should be — “Obviously not.”

Love begins as a physical attraction of course, but survives as a form of imaginative co-habitation. We move out of ourselves and into another self. It’s literally an out-of-body experience. In fact, it occurs to me that you can’t even talk about imagination, and be understood, except by listeners who can imagine. When I was doing my graduate work in communication at OU I learned that talking about talking is called “meta-communicating.” Isn’t that a great word? It’s meaningless outside of the Academy of course, but then so are a lot of other academic words. It just means “talk about talk.” So, for example, If I say, “There is a river over there” I have made a statement. But if I say, “She says that people say there’s a river over there, that’s meta-communication. It’s talk about talk – I don’t know how I got along before I knew that word, and occasionally, just for fun, I’ll drop it on my students.

In the public speaking class, for example, I’ll say, “This class is going to be unlike most of the others you take because in here we *talk about what we do and do what we talk about*. You don’t do that in biology class, for example. You don’t “biologize.” But in the study of human communication, we will try to talk about effective talking and I will give speeches about effective speeches, and we will check in from time to time by way of an exam or an assignment to see if our talk about talking has had any effect upon the way you talk. In not, we’ll have to talk about it some more.

So, this is a sermon about the imagination, which requires the very faculty in question to be effective. Which makes this a “meta-sermon.” Which, if you want to carry this even further (and you may not) means that Jesus was a meta-messiah — because he did what he talked about as he talked about what he did. He explained how to live *as* he was living the explanation. And this is what confused some people. That’s the meaning of that marvelous text in Luke which says, that “He taught as one with authority, but not as the scribes.” And people were “amazed at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.”

So what made them so gracious? Had he been to the toastmaster's club? I doubt it. Perhaps it was because you could not tell where the words left off and the life began – speaking of enlightenment even as his speech was enlightening. Notice the disciples did not say, “We’ve never heard anything like this before.” They said, “We’ve never *seen* anything like this before.”

The great philosophy Immanuel Kant said that it is never acceptable to use other people as a means to an end, but only as an end unto themselves. His categorical imperative stated that we should only do that which we would will to become a universal law in every similar situation. If I choose to do something, would I want everyone in a similar situation to do likewise? In other words, can I recommend that my course of action become a universal law? Only if first we can imagine the consequences.

My teacher and mentor, Fred Craddock, said that nobody can be a preacher without an empathic imagination, because otherwise he will be hurling words at strangers. He wrote:

When the pastor preaches, he doesn't sell patent medicine; he writes prescriptions. Others may hurl epithets at the “wealthy,” but the pastor knows a guilt-ridden man confused by the Bible's debate with itself over prosperity: Is “wealth” a sign of God's favor or disfavor? Others may display knowledge of ‘poverty programs’, but the pastor knows what a bitter thing it is to be somebody's Christmas project. He sees a boy resisting his mother's insistence that he wear the nice sweater that came in the charity basket. He can see the boy wear it until out of his mother's sight; but not at school, out of fear that he may meet the original owner on the playground. There are conditions worse than being cold.

Others may discuss “the problem of geriatrics” but the pastor has just come from the local nursing home and he still sees worn checkerboards, faded bouquets, large-print King James Bibles, stainless steel trays and dim eyes staring at an empty parking lot reserved for visitors. Others may analyze the “problem with youth today” but the pastor sees a fuzzy-lipped boy, awkward, noisy, wishing he were absent, not a man, not a child, preoccupied with ideas that contradict his fourteen year's severe judgment against the girls.

In order to do cruel things to one another it is important to keep ourselves from really *knowing* one another by *imagining* what it's like, what it's really like to be the other person.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear* the old Monarch forgets once that his companion is physically blind and he cries out, “You see how the world goes?” To which the blind Gloucester responds, “I see it, *feelingly*.” Our problem, said a poet once, is that we dream in poetry, but we live in

prose. I wonder if that's what we mean, really, when we describe someone's life as *prosaic*?

Some people are simply not *aware* of what it's like to be the other, and that's because we are trapped inside what I called the "prison of self." Take the awful legislation that is spewing out of the state capitol — a required ultrasound for a woman considering an abortion; the requirement to fill out a long questionnaire that will be put on line. Not only is this about trying to shame women out of having an abortion, but it's about men who cannot *imagine* what that woman is going through.

Recently we passed the 50th anniversary of the traumatic events surrounding the court-ordered integration of Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas. I listened to a story about it on NPR, as they spoke with a woman whose picture is the most recognized artifact of that ugly incident. She was the handsome African American girl, in a starched white shirt, holding her textbooks close to her heart, who was photographed walking up the steps to go to class as a white mob shouted epithets. One white girl close by is shown with her face twisted by anger and rage.

I listened with particular interest because I was there when it happened. It was 1957, and I was five years old. We lived in Searcy, Arkansas, where my father taught at Harding College, and he and some other ministers in those days from what was then the fledgling civil rights movement had decided to drive over to Little Rock to be part of a counter-demonstration and assist students in getting into the school safely.

My dad decided that a five year old could handle what I might see, and decided that it was important that I go along. Etched in my mind is a scene that I will never forget. We were standing close to where the students were passing by, and I remember being frightened by what I was seeing and hearing. Then I looked up just in time to see a white man spit into the face of one of the black students, a young girl. My eye recorded the moment when she was fully disgraced by this obscene gesture. She looked straight ahead, and she walked on into the school with amazing dignity. But any *imaginative* person present would call this act obscene.

I know now, looking back, that the man who spit on her lacked imagination, or he could not have performed his vulgarity. He would have felt, inside himself, all her loneliness and fear already, and it would have been impossible for him to add to it. It would have been like spitting on himself.

Growing up in Kansas, and radically Protestant, I remember making fun of Catholics. I remember how amazing and disturbing it was to some people that John Kennedy, a Catholic, might become president. The Pope would take over America, we said. Washington would be taking orders from the Vatican. Congress would have to cross itself and say the rosary before

every session.

And to mock all that we did not understand, my friends would mock Catholics by making the sign of the cross and then laughing – because we just knew that making the sign of the cross was a stupid, empty gesture performed by stupid, empty people. That is, until I read James Agee’s lyrical book, *A Death in the Family*. In it a woman is faced with an agonizing loss, a loss she cannot bear alone. She is Catholic, and this is what she says, and does:

“Oh God, if it be Thy will,” she whispered. She could not think of anything more. She made the sign of the Cross again, slowly, deeply, widely upon herself, and she felt something of the shape of the Cross; strength and quiet.

That’s when I realized that making the sign of the cross has been an enormous comfort to millions, just as it has been to say the Rosary. Who am I to ridicule this expression of faith because it is different from mine? Now I understand. Or perhaps more accurately – now I can imagine.

When Shawn and I lived just outside New York City, in the early 80's, I saw something on the evening news one night that I will never forget. Sitting in a deli on the upper west side, I watched the evening news and heard the nightly parade of horror stories that came out of the Big Apple in those days. On this particular night, there was a report about a man who was standing on a tall building ledge, threatening to jump, to commit suicide.

A large crowd had gathered, and some in the crowd were mocking him, saying, “Go ahead, jump!” He was a young Puerto Rican man in his 30's, and a Brooklyn Rescue Squad was on the scene, trying to talk him down. Apparently he been denied admission to the NYC Police Academy because he flunked the physical. And he had always wanted to be a policeman, a man in blue, one of NYC’s finest.

And on that day, there was a tough, grey-haired lieutenant working for the rescue squad whose job it was to try to talk the man down a ladder. This is what he said to the reporter from the TV station. He said, “When we got there, we were sure that he was a goner. . .I’ve seen lots of ‘em, and this guy was gonna go. . .he was gonna jump.”

“What did you do then?” the reporter asked. “Well,” replied the lieutenant, “He kept saying over and over, I want-to-be-police. . .I want to be police.” “And so what did you say?” the reporter continued. “Well, I said. . .tonight you are. Tonight you’re police. Tonight, you are one of us.”

“And then what happened?” “Well,” the Lieutenant continued, “He said that he wanted to touch my gold lieutenant’s shield. He wanted to touch it and to kiss it.” “So what did you do?” “I got out my shield and I handed it to him. And he touched it, and kissed it. . .he just kept kissing it and kissing it.”

“And then?” “Then he said that nobody loved him, and he just wanted somebody to love him. And so I told him that I loved him. I hugged him for a long time and told him that I loved him. And that’s when he decided to come down the ladder with me.”

I was very moved by this, especially by the willingness of that old lieutenant to tell this stranger that he loved him. And that’s when the guy sitting next to me in the deli said, “I don’t know. . .that’s one weird guy. . .and that lieutenant, I don’t know? Sounds a little peculiar to me — all that kissing and hugging. Maybe he’s a homo?”

We need to be very careful when we say, *I just can’t imagine*. Because that’s a recipe for disaster. When Jesus came upon a woman caught in adultery, about to be stoned, he asked for someone in the crowd who had never sinned to do the honors and get the killing started. Some of the men “knew” her well, but Jesus wanted to know how well they knew themselves. One by one, the rocks started dropping with a thud, and then he told her to go and sin no more.

How can we ever expect to love the other wisely and well if we have never bothered to imagine what it is like, what it is really like, to *be* the other.

In a play by George Bernard Shaw, Joan of Arc is questioned about her strange ways by a group of inquisitors, and they deliver what they believe to be the ultimate putdown: [Madame]. . .they say. . .“this is only your imagination.” “Of course [it is]”, she replies. “That’s how God speaks to us.”

Well, that’s a good place to stop, but if you’ll come back next week I want to wrap up the series and talk once more about the empathic imagination. That is, I have more that I want to say.

Me with more to say?

Imagine that!

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, May 23, 2010

Lord of Life, I give thanks for the gift that is Mayflower church, and this congregation — and for the work and ministry of Chris Moore, whose presence among us has made us stronger, wiser, and more loving.

I give thanks for all the years that I have been blessed by this congregation, and how often I have learned from you what a faithful church should look like and sound like and act like. I ask only that You might continue to bless us, even as we understand that with those blessings come responsibilities. The good news is that we are not in this, or anything else for that matter, all by ourselves. We can be, and we must be, the Beloved Community.

We will study and sing and pray together this day, and we will imagine a better world. But we promise to do more than just imagine it, and enjoy the thought. We promise to be ambassadors of your blessed kingdom, a walking, talking, image of a more empathic, less competitive, less violent world. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth our Teacher and Lord we pray, Amen.

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