

Recollected: “On Imagination”

Introduction:

So. We're continuing on in this series of revisiting and remixing and correcting things we've heard at some point in the foggy past.

This morning I want to talk about what it means to use our imaginations christianly, imagine in a Christian way, and to do that well, do that toward some godly end.

It's Complicated:

But to say that we have a complicated relationship with our imaginations is simplifying things. So I promise that when I'm finished this morning, you'll disagree with something I say.

First of all, just the word “imagination” is loaded for all of us--something good or something bad based on all sorts of things, but largely on what the adults in our lives praised or criticized us for as children.

Whether or not we really realize it, how imaginative we think of ourselves, and how positively or negatively we think of “imagination” as a *thing* is deeply tied to our sense of identity. Some of us would quickly say--or admit, given a certain context--that we're very imaginative, and believe something positive about that, others of us would say we're just not really all

that imaginative, and be very satisfied.

So already, even as I mention the topic, we're measuring ourselves against some standard, wondering what's positive or negative about us, about this thing. But I think we mistake, sometimes, just what imagination is. Before we talk more about it, let's pray.

Prayer:

Imagination: Definition

Imagination is actually a difficult thing to pin down. Both what it is and what it does get confusing to talk about well.

Let's call "imagination" this: That capacity to envision a reality other than that which is. The capacity to envision--to see--a version of reality other than the one in front of us.

If we define "imagination" this way--the capability to picture in our minds a version of reality other than the one right in front of our faces--than certain things would follow from it. First of all, we'd all have imagination, we'd all be "imaginative."

Because, of course, everyone does this. It's neither moral or immoral, as a capacity, as something we can do, just like the way jazz hands are neither moral or

immoral. It's just a thing humans can do. (Okay: Jazz hands might be immoral.)

But it's a human thing, "imagination," part of what it means to be human. What we do with it may be moral or immoral, on Christ's side or the side of his enemies. We'll talk about that.

But we all have the capacity to see in our minds other than what exists in front of us. You don't have the arts or engineering without imagination. You don't get theology, architecture, design, music. Imagination is fundamental to being a human. You don't get creation without imagination, and we people are creators--of great good and ruthless horror. Whatever it was that went through the mind of God at Creation, it was imagination that made it happen. You don't solve anything--problems, proofs, anything--without imagination, without the ability to see, in our minds, a more complete version of what exists before us, and pursue the creation of that thing--whether, again, it's art, it's an argument, it's applied science.

Imagination is part of the human capacity, it's part of what makes us who we are as people, and we all have it. If we have ever made something or solved any problem it is because we have been able to perceive an end, a finished something, in our minds, something that didn't really exist until we brought it into existence--whether that's a picture, or a solution, or a

conclusion, or whatever.

Imagination & Christian Responsibility:

But if an imagination is just a capability we people have, like the ability to speak or jump or pass gas--a thing that we can say, broadly, is a human thing even though in this death-filled, broken world there are those who have never get or lose some basic human capacity. If imagination is just a capacity that people have, then we, as Christians--people not only made in the image of God, like all people, but by the Spirit are being remade into the image of Christ--then we have to figure out what it means to use our imagination in a Christian way.

It's part of our calling, part of what it means to be a Christian. This is a formational thing: Just as we have to figure out how to use our strength or our appetites or our speech in a Christian way, so also we have to figure out how to use this part of us in a Christian way.

This means that we use our imagination in ways that are at least as positive--for the common good for the people around us--as those who aren't Christians, and we do what we can to use our imagination in ways that are better--that is, more in line with Jesus' character and calling--than those who don't have the Spirit. It also means that we're not to use our imagination toward evil ends, toward things that act against the message of Jesus in the world.

Imaginations Abused:

We can abuse our imaginations, and abuse others with them, of course.

Like anything about us, they can be strengthened in a particular way, used toward a particular ends. And if it's true that we're not supposed to use our imaginations for that which is against Christ, then have to own the fact that we often do.

We do. We create things that affirm retributive violence, even as Jesus says to us "Don't return even for evil."

We spend hours talking about what might happen in the next episode of our favorite television show that glorifies death—whatever violent, retribution-centered, murder-happy show it is we watch. We talk about the ways our nation can kill its enemies more quickly and thoroughly so that we don't feel threatened by them. We gossip, which invites us to imagine the motivations of others as negative, and then causes us to treat those same people as less than the sister or brother.

So it's not all sweetness and light when it comes to how we use our imaginations. We turn into hypocrites as we do this stuff, of course, because even as we target specific things--like sexual fantasies--as bad, we give ourselves permission to imagine these other Christ-less things.

But here's the rub: I don't think we abuse our imaginations as much as we leave them unused. We don't create, solve problems, or offer hope often enough in a way that contributes to the work of God, even though that's our calling. Ours is basically a sin of omission, not commission. Our sin is neglect.

Christian Imagination: Alternatives to the world as it is

Because what we should be doing with these imaginations of ours is using them in a way that contributes to the work of God.

God's People in the Bible are continually called to imagine an alternative to the world as it is before them, and live in the hope of that alternative. Whether that's Israel, wandering the desert even as God gives them plans for a Temple to build on land they don't even inhabit; or the prophets who, like in today's passage, are constantly painting pictures of life as it will be for God's People if only they can keep faith for a while longer; or Jesus, saying as he does in Revelation, "Look, I'm coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done."

And so in a world that can't imagine anything but punishment for our enemies, we imagine ways to forgive and reconcile. In a society that can't imagine

anything but antagonism between certain groups of people, we imagine what it would look like to enjoy a meal with people we think are wrong. In a globalized market that demands ever-cheapening labor, we imagine ways of producing things that better the makers lives, not just their employers or those who sell their products. We imagine ways to love and ways to promote life in a world built on death and the monetization of murder. In a world full of the fear of illness, we imagine ways to care for the sick.

And we do the hard, difficult work, of making the alternative world we imagine reality. When we pray, with Jesus, to the Father, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven,” it’s a reminder that we’re meant to work toward the coming of that Kingdom.

Because here’s the rub: What we imagine is what we create. What we imagine is what we create. What we imagine is always what we create.

Christian Imagination: Faith:

In many ways, faith is imagination tilted toward God. When the author of Hebrews says “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see,” and goes on to tell us “this is what the ancients were commended for” and then lays out all the ways those ancients acted with trust in God, we’re reminded that trusting God demands imagination.

Faith is imagination informed and shaped by a loving relationship. We know God has come through for us and will come through for us again.

Paul says that he doesn't lose heart in spite of all the troubles that he faces as he tries to tell people about what God's done in Jesus. He can declare that "our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." His trust in what is unseen and eternal--resurrection, a body like Christ's--is an act of faith. Believing that God will come through for him, and make good on all the promises God has made to him, keeps him going in his present darkness.

Question:

So we could ask ourselves this: What does the way we flex our imagination lately reveal about our faith in God? What does the way we flex our imagination lately reveal about our faith in God? Or have we lost our imagination lately?

Losing Imagination:

You know, a loss of imagination is a symptom of something breaking in our hearts. It means that something is broken in our souls. Like crying for no reason, if we find ourselves unable to imagine something better than what is, then it is a shout to us

that we need to examine our hearts and spend time with our souls.

To not be able to conceive--and conceive is a powerful word, right? "to create something that will turn into life"--if we can't conceive of way out of the situation we're in, of a way to solve the problem we find ourselves in, of an ending to this present situation that is good at all, it is going to be hard to live well. It's going to be impossible to trust God, because of course; faith reminds us that whatever the situation we're in is temporary, not permanent, and God will work out all things for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to his purposes.

This is where sin creeps in. Because we have no imagination, we resort to what's easiest or known, and what's easiest or known is almost always faithless--like giving back as good as you get, or numbing our pain through some sort of pleasure, or, like Judas, who couldn't imagine God's forgiveness, suicide.

So how is your imagination? How are creative acts lately? If you have lost your ability to imagine anything other than what you see in front of you, then there is some healing work in your soul that God needs to do, and I think that there are many of us--pastors we've called, each other--who would want to help position us for our imagination's renewal, and with it, a renewal of faith.

How can we help each other in such a way that God might begin to do that restorative work?

Losing Control of Our Imaginations:

Or, we may not lose our imaginations, but our control over them. We're meant to be people who can control ourselves, right? Who invite the Spirit to shape us so that we act in line with Christ's call on our lives. This takes effort, work; we call it being disciplined or strong, but it's meant to be.

And, out of the many things that can happen to us when we lose control of our imaginations, there a few that are worth noting in particular, I think. These are, oh, they're symptoms, you know, of a loss of imagination; and with the loss of imagination, often a loss of faith, too. If we find ourselves experiencing them, then it's time, again, to turn to each other, and turn to God.

One of these is worry. We worry. Worry comes when we can't imagine anything other than something bad happening, and our thoughts turn to all the different things that could go wrong--in general, or in some particular situation. When Paul says "in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus," we realize that

faith is worry's antidote, one Paul knew, and one we may need to remember.

One of these is escaping into fantasies that may become addictive. We escape into fantasies that may become addictive. There is a fine line between flexing our imagination and escaping into fantasies. And it's largely the escape that's the problem. Life is hard; but if our response to a difficult life becomes to continually retreat into daydreams in which our limitations and frustrations--sexual frustrations, financial frustrations, emotional frustrations--are being met we position ourselves to lose control of our imaginations. Just as anyone addicted to anything started out by simply wanting relief from life's trouble, we'll find ourselves limited in our ability to get out of our own heads, and our own fantasies. And even though you can make a good living by creating escapist fantasies--whether that's games or serial novels or fad diets--the end result can be that we lose control of where our mind goes when we find ourselves facing frustration. And where our mind goes, our heart follows.

Or we find ourselves unable to hope for a good future; unable to hope for much of anything. All is bleak, and we're indifferent at best to what's going on around us, and we find we can't say, with the psalmist, "I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living," because we can't imagine how we could. This is a symptom, again, of a broken heart and renewal work

that needs to happen in our lives; bleak hopelessness, this total inability to imagine any good for us in the future, is also something we can rarely heal ourselves from, and why God has given each of us all of us.

There are other things I could mention. Have you ever gotten caught up in an argument with someone in your head? This is a loss of control over our imaginations; unforgiveness has hijacked them.

Basic Power:

This capacity of ours to imagine is a power; it's a gift from God who imagined up creation and made it so. Story--which depends on our ability to imagine ourselves into a narrative, take up the emotions, experiences, and thoughts of someone radically different or radically like us--it's one of the most powerful things to move a person. The reason Jesus spoke in parables is because you couldn't not, if you're in control of your imagination, ignore what he was saying.

And because we cannot live faithfully without owning and flexing our imaginations, let me suggest a few, oh, ideas—or practices, I guess—for ways we can flex this basic power we have for good.

Realizing Imagination: Offering Hope

We can offer hope to people. And really, this just means giving people back control of their

imaginations, because hopelessness, if it's anything, it's an inability to imagine a good future. Who have you offered hope to recently? Who have you come alongside, and said, "But look what could happen if.."
And has anyone done it for you?

And of course we have a hope that doesn't disappoint, have a hope for a resurrected body in a resurrected world, and so we share with others the hope in Christ that we have. But some people just need help imagining that their tomorrow will be better than their today. How can you do this? How can we do this?

Realizing Imagination: A Creative Community

We need to encourage each other in the many, many creative pursuits we all have as Smoky Row Brethren Church. Whether it's writing, or drawing, or dancing, or composing, or stitching, or knitting, or building, or problem-solving, we just have to celebrate it all. We have to be wasteful in our celebration, the same way we celebrate every act of creation our children accomplish.

Because the Church needs to be a place that values this gift of God if we're ever going appreciate the creative, imaginative works of God--each other, pets, weather, stars. Creation itself. If we can't appreciate our own and our friends works of imagination made real, then we can't appreciate creation around us. I don't think we can really value the world that we look

forward to, either.

In what ways have you used your imagination lately to create something that didn't exist until you had it? That's amazing. Something was not, and then it was, because you picked up a saw or a pen or a needle or an instrument. Talk about power.

Realizing Imagination: Loss

It's worth asking ourselves if we've simply lost our ability to imagine lately. We may haven't even had the imagination to ask ourselves the question, because we're just that distant from our hearts right now. If we have lost our ability to imagine well, it means that we need some renovation, some healing, in our souls, and I'd urge us to follow up with someone who can act as a spiritual guide for us, a guide in our imagination's healing.

And of course, if we've lost control of our imaginations, and they are being hijacked by worry, by escapist fantasies, by bleak hopelessness, please, let's try to get the help we need to pursue the "renewal of our minds."

We have to act in our own interest here. If we awoke to legs that wouldn't work, eyes that couldn't see, ears that couldn't hear, we'd get help to correct that wrong. Imagination is as important a capacity as mobility, speech, eyesight, anything.

Conclusion:

And if we can't do any of these things, then I'd invite us to at least spend some time, 2 minutes or 4 or 5, in some story that Jesus tells. There are dozens of them. And stories are our imagination's playgrounds. There are few stories more Christian than the ones Jesus tells, so if it's a Christian imagination we care to cultivate, we should let our imaginations grow strong there.

And if we can't even do that then let's at least tell our stories to each other and listen as they're told to us. We might be surprised at the way even that bolsters this gift God's given us.