

Sermon Proper 9
Year B
July 4, 2021
CCM

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When you were little, what did you imagine you wanted to be? A ballerina dancing on great stages? An explorer heading to the North Pole? A swimmer breaking world records at the Olympics? A princess? A mighty warrior? A wonderful actress? A pirate with a ship full of gold sailing the seven seas?

Better yet, a super hero – Batman or Wonder Woman, Super Woman or Green Lantern? Someone able to fly through the sky and leap tall buildings in a single bound? What hopes and dreams and adventures were fueled and empowered by way of your imagination when you were a child?

If you watch a group of small children playing together, it is always wonderful to see that they believe that they are more than they appear to be. Give them a bunch of pillows and blankets, building blocks and tricycles and empty packing boxes and they are no longer small children, but queens and kings occupying impenetrable fortresses and charging around on their mighty steeds. Tie a towel around their necks and they transform from mild-mannered kindergartners into invincible caped crusaders. Give them leftover cardboard tubes and suddenly they are musicians or wizards or astronomers searching the night skies.

As one child psychologist has expressed it, “What looks like simple fun to them is actually vitally important work in a child’s development. Imaginative play develops important psychological and emotional capacities in children, helping them to learn how to solve problems, create new possibilities and – perhaps most importantly – develop the belief that they can one day change the world. Imagination transcends the limits of the present physical world and the limits of a child’s inner world, opening new ways of seeing and being.”

But then things change. At some point, the acquiring of various kinds of knowledge becomes more important than imagination. Now, please don’t misunderstand me this morning. I believe that knowledge is extremely important. Hopefully, knowledge leads to wisdom, although I am not convinced that that is always the case. What I am suggesting this morning is that the acquisition of knowledge can, when it becomes our chief reason for being, place limitations on our ability to think imaginatively, to think “outside the box.” And that’s too bad. For as one of the greatest thinkers, Albert Einstein once said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world...Imagination is everything. It is a preview of life’s coming attractions.”

You know, I think the Church sometimes suffers from a lack of imagination. Furthermore, it seems to me that imagination goes hand in hand with faith. Too often, Christian communities know a lot about God as expressed in the Bible, worship, and in the traditions they hold dear. But knowing about God is not the same thing as imaginatively believing in God and the promises God has declared through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. When we know a lot, but imagine very little, then I think we can become jaded and cynical, even about God. Indeed, sometimes familiarity rooted in only knowledge can lead to contempt.

I think that this is exactly what's happening in the first part of this morning's passage from Mark's Gospel. After a remarkable tour of Galilee, during which people were healed and demons were exorcised, teaching the likes of which had never been heard before were shared, and even a little girl was raised from the dead, when people had been left amazed and filled with great awe over and over again, Jesus has come home. It is the Sabbath and he has obviously been invited to share the sermon that morning.

At first, many from his hometown of Nazareth are also astounded by what he is saying. But then, collective knowledge begins to kick in. "Wait a minute. Where do these divine insights and these miraculous powers to heal and restore come from? After all, isn't this the Jesus we know? Isn't this our neighbor Mary's son, the one we watched growing up? And look, aren't these his sisters and brothers whom we also know so well? I mean, he's just a carpenter! He works with wood! No way he's a great prophet or miracle worker!" Again such knowledge rooted in familiarity breeds nothing but contempt, and the community in which Jesus was raised take nothing but offense at him.

It is startling that in Mark's telling of the story that, in the face of such cynicism, the power of God entrusted to Jesus is actually restricted. It seems that Jesus, in the midst of such lack of imagination, such unbelief, was unable to exercise the power God had given to him.

It is also remarkable that Mark uses this moment to then launch the first missionary journey of the twelve apostles. Do you see what Jesus is doing in this moment of commissioning? He is removing all the baggage and stripping everything down to one primary message: Invite the people to once again believe in the love and power of God. The call to repentance is an invitation to turn from the cynicism and jadedness that is rooted in unbelief and live again with imaginative belief that with God, all things are indeed possible. Here, healing and the cleansing from sin do not come from acquired knowledge. Such power comes only when we use our God-given imaginations to see beyond our human limitations and step onto the grand stage that is the kingdom of God.

What does this all mean for our community here at Christ Church? Well, to put it succinctly, I think it means tapping into our greatest hopes and dreams and allowing the Holy Spirit to fire our collective imagination in order to see new possibilities for

mission and ministry in the world we are called to serve. Maybe it is time to focus only on the one thing that the Church has always been called to do: To invite others into the presence of Jesus Christ that they too might have their imaginations rekindled and come to truly believe that the kingdom of the living God is here. Because again, depending solely on human knowledge has its limitations. However, an imagination rooted in the love of God as revealed in Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit does indeed make all things possible, even things that are not yet evident and for this moment seem beyond our reach.

Perhaps this is why in the 18th chapter of Matthew, Jesus says to those who seek to follow him, "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Amen.