

Proper 19B – September 13, 2015
Proverbs 1:20-33 (or Wisdom of Solomon 7:26-8:1); Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“We just gotta learn each other”

Webster’s Dictionary defines *imagination* as the “mental synthesis of new ideas from elements experienced separately.” As Frederick Buechner illustrates [with my additions in brackets]:

“Even a thousand miles inland you can smell the sea and hear the mewling of gulls if you give thought to it [- if you imagine it]. You [also know that you] can see in your mind’s eye the living faces of people long dead or hear in the mind’s ear [a favorite lullaby or a full marching band]. If you work at it, you can smell the smell of autumn leaves burning or taste [hot fudge on a sundae, all in your mind]. You don’t have to be asleep to dream dreams either. There are those who can come up with dramas laid twenty thousand leagues under the sea or take a little girl [named Alice] through a looking glass [or Dorothy to visit a land called Oz; or go with a hobbit named Frodo, or a boy named Harry Potter, on equally exciting adventures]. Imagining is perhaps as close as humans get to creating something out of nothing the way God is said to. [Imagination is a power of vision] a power that to one degree or another everybody has or can develop, like whistling. Like muscles, it can be strengthened through practice and exercise. Keep at it, until you can actually hear your grandfather’s [or grandmother’s] voice, for instance, or feel [in your imagination] the rush of hot air when you open a 450-degree oven.”ⁱ

Imagination is certainly called for in understanding today’s gospel reading. So also is faith. If the maxim, “by God alone is God known” makes sense, then faith is the open space in our mind and heart in which God can act to make Himself known. Faith is also the active resolute desire to see God’s purposes of healing, wholeness and justice fulfilled in each moment and situation. In short, faith is the quality of being able to allow God to see and act in and through us. Imagination and faith...two sides of the same coin.

In today’s gospel Jesus asked his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” When Peter answers by declaring, “You are the Messiah,” it wasn’t just a lucky guess or deduced by a process of elimination or some other logical method. Rather, this response came because somehow Peter kept his head and heart open enough at that moment to see in the face of Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah of God. By recollecting what Jesus had said and taught, what Jesus had done in the midst of that community of disciples and in the places they traveled together, and who Jesus was at that moment in relationship with Peter—Peter was able to express a strong new idea from all these elements experienced at different times and places. The new idea—that Jesus the rabbi, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, the teacher—was actually the Messiah, the Christ of God, the actual “Son of the living God” as Peter adds in Matthew’s gospel—that new idea came from God’s gift of imagination and faith intermingled deep within Peter’s heart and mind.

Imagination and faith: a powerful and profound combination. This reminds me of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's lines in her poem, "Aurora Leigh":

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

Imagination and faith. But what about the rest of us who only sit round and pluck blackberries? What about the rest who could only see in Jesus a mistaken identity with John the Baptist, or a reincarnation of Elijah, or another one of the prophets—or worse still, who could only see in Jesus some misguided revolutionary or religious fanatic with a messianic complex? Or what about those who never even had a chance to see and hear Jesus as he journeyed nearby? Could these people all be said to have less faith or somehow not be in favor with God enough to find and then recognize Jesus as the Messiah of God? Even Peter "the rock" who recognizes in Jesus the Messiah of God immediately finds himself unable to grasp the full significance of that in the imminent suffering and death that would befall Jesus, and soon would be publicly denying any knowledge of him.

Certainly there is in all of us a lack of ability to see the majesty of God—a lack of ability to behold that the whole earth and each human heart are full of God's presence and purpose and power. In the same vein as Browning, Thomas Merton wrote, "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."ⁱⁱ Whether it's a hardness of heart, or a limitation of our faith, or a weakness of our imagination; or some other form of complacency, cynicism or apathy; or simply a hurriedness and harriedness in our lives—somehow there is this diminished capacity in most of us to recognize clearly the presence of God.

I'm intrigued how this is lived out in peoples' ordinary lives. I have a few stories to illustrate this, but today I want to tell the story of Rev. Green. This true story illustrates to me the power of imagination and faith at work in a man who drew out the good in another.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was 1981. I worked at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in downtown Meriden, Connecticut, a small, increasingly post-industrial city in the center of that state. It was a tough economic climate at the time, and the Ku Klux Klan was in resurgence—not just in the South, but also in the North. Now, in Meriden, there was an incident at a local shopping mall in which a black shoplifter was shot by a white policeman. This became very highly charged and the tension reverberated around Meriden and the region. A small group of Klansmen that had been forming at the time seized on this incident and tried to use it as a launching pad for their resurgence by proclaiming a national rally for the KKK in Meriden to be held just a few weeks after the shooting. At that rally they were going to proclaim the Klan's support for law and order and celebrate what they called "White Christian Solidarity Day"—and the rally was going to be held in front of the Meriden City Hall, which also happened to be at the front of St. Andrew's Church as well as a synagogue.

Well, the rabbi and I got busy and helped to organize a citywide interfaith response to this rally. We organized our own public interfaith service which was to be held at St. Andrew's the night before the Klan rally. All sorts of good ideas were tossed around on what the format of our gathering would be and who would speak, etc.

One of the people in our planning group was an African American Pentecostal minister named Reverend Green, who attended all of the planning meetings. While we were all in planning mode for this big citywide response—this big NO to the Klan—Rev. Green would speak up once in a while and simply say, “We just gotta learn each other.” We all nodded, and then went back to the nuts and bolts of our planning.

Now the Ku Klux Klan was also getting ready. The national “Imperial Wizard” of the Klan came up from Louisiana—he and I, in fact, got in each other's face during a press conference on the steps of Meriden City Hall a week before our respective events—on the same steps that Abraham Lincoln delivered a speech in his only visit to Meriden some 120 years earlier. Soon after the scene with the Imperial Wizard, I received my first hate mail and death threat—but this story is not about me or the Imperial Wizard of the KKK. No, it's about Rev. Green and the man who was the head of the Ku Klux Klan in Connecticut, who happened also to be a resident of Meriden.^{iv}

The night of our big interfaith citywide gathering arrived and we had all sorts of music and speakers—politicians, clergy and others. The place was packed. One of our speakers was Rev. Green who spoke very briefly, which is a rare thing for most preachers, especially Pentecostal. He spoke calmly and quietly, which is also rare for a Pentecostal preacher.^v People leaned in to listen to Rev. Green. His message was... “We just gotta learn each other.” That was pretty much it. We were all left in a silence after his simple message. Now, in the congregation that night sat many different people, including, unbeknownst to us, the very man who was the head of the Klan in Connecticut. It turned out that his wife had urged him to attend. It may have been, in part, due to his wife's elbow in his ribs, but later that night, this Klan leader called Rev. Green at his home, and told him who he was and that he had heard Rev. Green speak, and that it had cut him to the heart; and at that moment he confessed to Rev. Green that he had been all wrong, and he renounced his involvement in the Klan, and quit right at that moment, the night before his own planned rally. Sure, the Klan rally went on as planned, without him, but the few Klansmen and women who had gathered were a sorry sight, hiding behind their sheets and masks.

“We just gotta learn each other.” Rev. Green and the repentant Klansman are wonderful examples of faith and imagination working together in human hearts and minds. It is such a faith and imagination which can deliver such a seemingly simplistic, and yet utterly profound, message and watch it change a person's heart—every bit as powerful as the imagination and faith that could enable Peter to answer Jesus' question, “But who do you say that I am?” It is this faith and imagination, from the time of Peter and the early Church to Rev. Green and this Connecticut Klansman and his wife, which are inspired by the

presence, purpose and power of God; and which, in turn, are called forth from every heart to build and sustain both a community of faith and our common humanity.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 63-64.

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Montaldo, ed. A Year With Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 81.

ⁱⁱⁱ He knew, as William Sloane Coffin put it, that “[if we love the good,] we have to hate evil; else we’re sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we just become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many” (William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 20).

^{iv} This man had been at the center of the Klan’s resurgence in the Northeast and was the one who capitalized on the shooting incident of the black shoplifter by the white cop.

^v He left the ranting and raving for my Bishop, me, the rabbi and others.