

SERMON

The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
September 8, 2019

Luke 14: 25-33

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother,
wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself,
cannot be my disciple.*

IMAGINE by John Lennon

*Imagine there's no heaven It's easy if you try
No hell below us Above us only sky
Imagine all the people Living for today...
Refrain: You may say I'm a dreamer But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one
Imagine there's no countries It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for And no religion too
Imagine all the people Living life in peace...
Imagine no possessions I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people Sharing all the world...*

Imagine! Before this Chapel was restored and before the Children's Center was built, a group of us here at Epiphany invited a facilitator to come and help us make plans. What I remember is that she asked us to close our eyes, to pretend that we were each on a magic carpet, and to fly above and look down. She asked us each to imagine what we each saw five and ten years from that point in time. Then, we discussed our visions. Imagination. I believe it was Lynn Evans who first saw the Childrens' Center. Who could have imagined that it would have been possible for Epiphany to build a million dollar building—back then, or now. Imagine. Dr. Howard Thurman writes in an essay entitled, *The Gift of Imagination*:

*One of the most positive expressions of the life of God
in the life of humankind is the gift of imagination.
If it were not for the imagination,
reflective thinking would be quite impossible.
Think of it: because of the gift of imagination,
you can go back into the past,
relive experiences that are no longer present,
leap into the future, anticipate that which is yet to come,
walk through a wall,
or span an ocean in the twinkling of an eye.*

Like John Lennon in his song, *Imagine*, which is ranked number three by Rolling Stone in their list of the top 500 songs ever—Dr. Thurman concludes that

- ~ *Without imagination human love would be impossible....*
- ~ *The mechanism of love is the ability to put oneself in the life of another
and to look out upon the world through the other's eyes--
to enter into the feeling and thinking and reacting of another,
even as one remains oneself.*
- ~ *Imagination is the creative vehicle that carries one spirit
into the dwelling place of another.*
- ~ *There could be no sympathy in the world if men and women
had not the gift of imagination.*
- ~ *The spirit of man could never take flight in dreams, hopes, or
aspirations if there were no wings of imagination....*
- ~ *There could be no hope for anything beyond.*

It follows that there could be no freedom without imagination. This is what today's Gospel lesson is all about. The Gospel is about a remarkable breakthrough of mind and spirit—known as The Jesus Movement. At the core of The Jesus Movement is a freedom, a freedom that scholar Larry Siedentop writes in his book, Inventing the Individual, is Christianity's gift to human society.

The word in Luke's Gospel is *hate*. Hate? I know it's easy get hung up on the word *hate* —

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother,
wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself,
cannot be my disciple.* (Luke 25)

Hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself—is not what we expect to hear. Note that these words are also included in the Gospel of Thomas, a non-canonical book written earlier than Luke—a sort of collection of Jesus Sayings—written at about the same time as the Letters of Paul. It gives us reason to believe that Jesus did say something like this. So what can it mean? I've heard plenty of explanations that water down, or try to redefine this hate-word. But lacking or being afraid of imagination, unwilling to float around to see and imagine what might be going on with this word—we will miss the very breakthrough that the Jesus Movement was about—and what it is that continues to turn the world upside down. Why it is that our Jesus-faith is important even today. *Imagine*. From the vantage point of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the context of Jesus' world—the crucial distinction in the social sphere was not between the public and private life. It was between the public and domestic life. The domestic sphere was understood as the sphere of the family. And this was a place where the individual

was NOT endowed with rights. The domestic sphere was a sphere of inequality. Inequality of roles. Inequality of honor. Inequality of rights. Inequality of freedom. In the ancient world, citizenship was available only to the *paterfamilias* and his sons. Women, slaves and the foreign-born were categorically excluded. And family structure and piety were part of religious practice. Social barriers and limits that were associated with the ancient family included a sort of intensity of feeling — a conviction about reality —that overcame, outweighed, any claim of humanity. See where we’re going with this? In other words, the family was everything. At the core of ancient thinking individuals had no freedom. Built into the social, political and economic —and religious systems was a pervasive, systemic inequality. So entrenched was this vision that no one imagined it in any other way.

But yet, in the writings of early Christianity, as evidenced in the letters of Paul—this belief in a *natural inequality* is challenged. Instead, emerges a link between the divine will and individual value or worth. Paul speaks of people becoming “one in Christ.” As Siedentop insists—there is a seismic shift in imagination and vision and this is what Christ offers to humankind and to the world. Belief in Christ is about a relationship that changes everything—a relationship and therefore a status shared equally by all, whether father, daughter, official, priest, or slave. A new kind of family. Imagine a new kind of love that offers freedom for each of us to become whoever God has created us to be. Jesus calls this *The Kingdom of God*. I must turn to Paul’s third chapter of Galatians!

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring,
heirs according to the promise.* (3:28-29)

In the *Kingdom of God*, the old limits are no longer valid. A mystical union in the body of Christ raises us and sets us free.

Heir to all possibilities! Children of God and brothers and sisters with Christ! Hate? This means that there can be no backsliding for the disciple. There is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all.”

Imagine. We are still trying to imagine a relationship with Jesus that shapes, defines, and characterized all of our relationships—in our families, neighborhoods, the nation and the world. We are still trying to imagine a life in Christ that frees us, gives us the strength and courage to shape our lives and the communities around us with justice and peace. We are still trying to imagine a work life, school life,

family and home life, internet life, recreational life, political and civic life and church life that witnesses to the love of God for all people. and imagines ways to make a difference. We are still trying to imagine how to love our neighbor and our enemies. We are still trying to imagine how to honor creation not as a commodity to be used and polluted, but as a sacred gift entrusted to our care.

“Imagine all the people, living life in peace....”

I remember a sleep-over we had with the youth here at Epiphany—about a dozen young people—the acolytes—spent the night in sleeping bags on the floor. So did I. After lights-out, and the giggling and the whispering stopping, I lay there and listened. First, to their breathing. And then, *with imagination*, to the silence of the past and present and future. I tried to imagine if the soldiers who gathered here a hundred years ago, could have imagined this scene—a dozen young people in the 21st Century sleeping on the floor. Not to mention a priest, and a woman at that. Then in the darkness, I wondered who would be here in our places, 50 or 100 years from now. Could they imagine that we tried to imagine them, imagining us. Not just these buildings but our diversity, who and what we are. Certainly we exceed the expectations of 1918.

This Fall at Epiphany marks the beginning a new chapter. As individuals, we will each face new challenges. As a community—there are some exciting new possibilities ahead of us. And, as a nation and for the world. Let’s not get caught in the old ways of thinking—like, “But we’ve always done it this way.” or “We can’t possibly do this.” Let’s not listen to the voices of doubt or judge who’s in and who’s out. New and old together. I’ve learned that surprise is always part of God’s call. I often come back to the words of Dr. Thurman:

- ~ Without imagination human love would be impossible....
- ~ The mechanism of love is the ability to put oneself in the life of another
and to look out upon the world through the other's eyes--
to enter into the feeling and thinking and reacting of another,
even as one remains oneself.
- ~ Imagination is the creative vehicle that carries one spirit
into the dwelling place of another.
- ~ There could be no sympathy in the world if men and women
had not the gift of imagination.

~ The spirit of man could never take flight in dreams, hopes, or aspirations if there were no wings of imagination....

~ [Without imagination...]

There could be no hope for anything beyond.

Amen.