

“What’s Imagination Got to Do With It?”

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First Presbyterian Church, Marianna, FL

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2 Sam 11:26-12:10

²⁶When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David.

[Nathan came to [David], and said to him,

“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor.

²The rich man had very many flocks and herds;

³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up,

and it grew up with him and with his children;

it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.

⁴Now there came a traveler to the rich man,

and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd

to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him,

but he took the poor man’s lamb,

and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.”

⁵Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man.

He said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die;

⁶he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

⁷Nathan said to David, “You are the man!
Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel:
I anointed you king over Israel,
and I rescued you from the hand of Saul;
⁸I gave you your master’s house,
and your master’s wives into your bosom,
and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah;
and if that had been too little,
I would have added as much more.
⁹Why have you despised the word of the Lord,
to do what is evil in his sight?
You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword,
and have taken his wife to be your wife,
and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.
¹⁰Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house,
for you have despised me,
and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

Eph 4:1-8, 11-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord,
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling
to which you have been called,
²with all humility and gentleness, with patience,
bearing with one another in love,
³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.
⁴There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,
⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.
⁷But each of us was given grace
according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

⁸Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.”

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When Presbyterian ministers get ordained, one of the things we promise is to serve God and the Church with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. I remember at the time of my ordination, the word “imagination” struck me as an unusual thing to promise. Imagination seems more like the kind of thing you might require of an artist or a poet, not a pastor. Yet the more I serve, the more important I find imagination to be in my work, not just as a leader, but as a Christian.

Take today’s texts for starters, both require us to engage our imaginations.

In Second Samuel, the prophet Nathan is given the difficult task of confronting King David with his sin, which began as coveting, grew into adultery, and finally snowballed into murder.

Now in case you didn't know, it is risky business to be a prophet, to speak truth to power. Prophets who bear bad news have a way of being punished for their troubles, if not outright killed. David himself has already killed more than one messenger for bringing news that displeased him. Nathan's task is no easy one. But thankfully, Nathan is able to use his imagination to come up with a way to tell David the truth so that he can hear it.

Emily Dickinson wrote a poem that begins, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." In it, she compares the Truth to a bolt of lightning that must be allowed to dazzle us gradually, lest it render every one blind.¹

Nathan must have known this intuitively because he before he confronts David, he tells him a story that at first seems to have nothing to do with him.

Of course, having just been told what David has done, and how evil it is in the sight of the Lord, we cannot help but draw comparisons as we listen. David is like the rich man, who has everything. Uriah the Hittite is like the poor man, who has only one thing, a lamb whom he treasures. David, who has many wives of his own, takes Uriah's only wife for himself, not to treasure but to use as a means of satisfying his insatiable appetite.

David, oblivious to allegory and metaphor, condemns the greed, selfishness, and lack of compassion of the rich man in the story.

¹ Quoted in "Tell it Slant: How to write a wise poem," by Camille T. Dungy, originally published June 10, 2014 (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/247926>).

And then the lightning bolt of truth from Nathan—You are the man!

The parable was just slant enough for David to hear it, and then with Nathan's help to hear himself in it. The truth was presented first as art, which in the words of Picasso, is simply "a lie that makes us realize truth."² David has to engage his imagination to see the connection between Nathan's story and his own life. His imagination is what enables him to confess his sin before God.

And the same is true for us. Every time we read scripture we are being asked to use our imaginations. We hear a story that appears to be written to other people, about other people, set in other cultures, in other times, and we are asked to wonder with David, "Am I the man?" "Could this story also be for me, about my life, about my community?" "Are there ways in which I have used other people to satisfy my own insatiable appetites? What sins do I try to cover up?"

If we really believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, that God is still alive and speaking to us through the scriptures, and that the Jesus Christ revealed to us in scripture is still relevant for us today, then we must use our imaginations in order to hear that Word and apply it to our lives.

I came to see myself in that text this week, when an old friend posted something on my Facebook page that got my goat. One afternoon, my husband came upon a rather large snake in our backyard. We weren't 100% sure what kind of snake it was but we thought there was a pretty good chance it was a Water Moccasin, so Richard killed it with a shovel. We posted a picture on Facebook asking if anyone could help us identify it for sure. We

² Ibid.

got a ton of replies! Most people thought it was either a Copperhead or a Water Moccasin and applauded our kill.

But one friend, who is very much an environmental advocate, berated us for killing one of God's creation.

Shame on us, he said, for celebrating such an act in this way.

My friend did not quite have the wisdom that Nathan did—he didn't tell it slant, he just laid right into us, and so my instinct, of course, was to be defensive. But the story of Nathan confronting David was so fresh in my mind that I had to stop and wonder, Am I guilty as charged?

Giving it some further thought, I had to admit, that even though I did literally ask God for forgiveness before we killed it, and even though my initial post was simply to find out what kind of snake it was, I did post another picture right afterwards of my husband on a paddleboard with a beautiful sunset behind him, and a caption that read, "Richard's reward for killing that snake."

So I had to admit that, yes, there was an element of celebratory gloating in our posting. I also had to admit that we shared my friend's values of honoring God's creation and respecting all life. So instead of replying with some snide comment, like I was tempted to, I said instead, "It was not lightly or without a prayer for forgiveness that we made that decision. Thanks for lifting up the importance of honoring all of God's creation." I removed the language about killing the snake from the picture of Richard paddle boarding. And I found myself feeling grateful to our scripture this week for helping me not only to be more honest with myself, but also to see my friend as a kind of prophet instead of writing him off as a self-righteous jerk.

If Second Samuel encourages us to use our imaginations to see ourselves in the stories of others, the Ephesians text uses an extended metaphor to help us relate to each other differently. You can guess what the problem of the Ephesians is by the number of times that the text says “one.”

One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” You think maybe they are struggling with division?

But instead of harping on them for being divisive, the author of Ephesians tells it slant. He emphasizes how much they have in common, and then he starts speaking in metaphor. They are not separate entities, moving this way and that, they are members of one body, joined and knit together, each part meant to work with the others, promoting the body’s growth, building itself up in love.

This Tuesday, I went to the Walton County Commission meeting to listen to its citizens debate whether or not the Confederate flag should be removed from in front of the County Courthouse.

I heard a lot of people making an effort to be respectful to those they disagreed with. Most people tried to just stick with telling their truth—what they had experienced, how they felt. Occasionally, someone would imply or say outright that the other side was ignorant or racist, offensive or “outsiders,” and there would be lots of murmuring from the crowd. The conversation was actually much more civil than what typically takes place online. But it was clear that the room was deeply divided, and for the most part, they were just talking past each other.

In the Ephesians passage, the author gives some direction as to what speaking the truth in love might look like: humility and gentleness, patience, making every effort to maintain the unity of

the Spirit. It is hard to embody humility when you feel strongly about the truth of something. Because humility has to admit the possibility of being wrong. It is hard to be gentle or patient, when you or your way of thinking or living feels threatened. It is hard to make every effort to maintain unity when you don't know very well the people to whom you are supposed to be united.

But it was more than just manner. It seemed to me that something essential for unity seemed to be missing in that County Commission meeting.

And I wonder if what was missing was the kind of imagination encouraged by this passage in Ephesians. I think most people in the room imagined themselves as opponents in a wrestling match, in which there was a winner and a loser.

But what if instead, we in that room had imagined ourselves as a single body, in which the suffering of one part affected the whole body. It wouldn't have made finding a solution any easier, and in fact, it may have required a completely different format. Something that was less about speaking at a microphone with an audience and more about looking each other in the eyes, sharing our stories, and listening to each other's deepest hopes and fears.

It seems to me that the church has a unique opportunity to bear witness to what it means to be the body of Christ in this time of deep division. The riots in Ferguson and Baltimore and the shooting in Charleston reveal a deep division in our country along racial lines. All you have to do is compare Fox News to MSNBC or read people's Facebook posts to see that we are deeply divided along political lines. There are debates happening in churches all over the country about the definition of marriage.

So what better time than this to take this letter to the Ephesians to heart and lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called, which is to grow together in love into full maturity in Christ. Christ, who refused to fight violence with violence. Christ, who said, whatever you do to the least of these, you do unto me.

What better time than this to use our imaginations to help us see those who disagree with us, not as enemies, but as members of the same body.

Members whose gifts we need in order to do better the work Christ has called us to. Members whose suffering is our suffering, and whose joy is our joy.

The biblical reality is that our faith requires us to use our imaginations. That is the only way to live out the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. That is the only way to access a God who describes himself as Living Water, as Bread from Heaven, as the Vine for our branches, as our Rock, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

So as we take communion together today, I invite us to let this Table stir our imaginations.

What does it mean to come to this common table together, month after month? What does it mean that the same body broken for me is also broken for my enemy? What does it mean that this same meal is celebrated in nations all over the world?

God is always telling us the whole truth, but sometimes God gives it to us slant, in bread broken and a cup shared. May it dazzle us gradually, and change us forever.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

In our trouble and need, we look to the Lord,
the giver of our daily bread, saying:
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the church . . .
Equip us for the work of Christ's ministry;
by the gifts of your Holy Spirit
build us up in faith, hope, and love.
Unite us in our diversity,
That we may bear witness to your love.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world . . .
Protect the poor and vulnerable
from exploitation and neglect;
give justice to those who call on your name.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for this community . . .
Let your kindness and compassion
be showered down upon them
in this time of transition.
Prepare both them and their new pastor
For this next chapter of ministry together.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for loved ones . . .
Have mercy on all those who suffer,
whether in sickness, sorrow, or sin;
give them the joy of your salvation.
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Generous God, as you provide for us each day,
nourish and strengthen us in faith and faithfulness,
so that we may share your grace in a hungry world;
through Jesus Christ, the bread of life, who taught us to pray,

saying, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...

INVITATION TO OFFERING

At the communion table:

Every generous act of giving
is itself a gift from God above.

Let us bring forth the fruits of our lives and our labors.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

At the communion table:

We give you thanks and praise, O God,
For these gifts and the many blessings of our lives.
May these offerings and all we do and say,
Be used to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
Or bear witness to your love for the world,
In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Invitation to the Table

Friends, this is not a table
belonging to any one denomination,
Or political opinion, or race or nation.
This is the Lord's table, and he invites to this table,
All who trust in him, and all who want to trust in him more.
This is the table where Christ promises to meet us.
This is the table where enemies are changed
Into brothers and sisters, into members of one body.
So come, all who hunger for the truth,
or thirst for love. Come.

Eucharistic Prayer

Holy One, Holy Three,

You made us and called us by name.
When we strayed from your path,
You spoke the truth to us in love,
Through scriptures, prophets, friends,
and the quiet whispering of your Holy Spirit.
When we still struggled to understand the depth of your love,
you sent down from heaven, your Son Jesus Christ,
the true bread, giving life to the world.
His body was broken for us,
his blood poured out even as he offered words of forgiveness.
His resurrection is our one hope,
That Love is indeed stronger than hate,
That Life is stronger than death,
And Truth stronger than lies.

Remembering your goodness and grace,
we offer ourselves to you with gratitude
as we share this joyful feast.

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon this bread and cup;
make us one with all who share this feast
in the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Help us to lead a life worthy of your calling:
a life of humility and gentleness, patience and love,
keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
Through the Lord Jesus Christ,
in the unity of the Spirit,
we praise you, God of glory,
now and forever. Amen.

Friends, these are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Elders pass the bread to the congregation. Then feed the elders and take a piece yourself. Then say the words of institution:

On the night before he died, our Lord took the bread, and after giving thanks, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, Take, eat, this is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

All eat together. Elders pass the bread to the congregation. Then give cups to the elders and take a cup yourself. Then say the words of institution:

In the same manner after supper, he took the cup and poured it, saying, This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you eat this bread or drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of the risen Lord until he comes again.