

Isaiah 62: 1-5
I Corinthians 12: 1-11
John 2: 1-11

The Spirited Imagination
January 20, 2013
Mary R. Brownlow

Do any of you remember Gladys Knight and the Pips? There is a wonderful song of theirs from the 70's called "I've Got to Use My Imagination." The first line has Gladys sing, "I've got to use my imagination to think of a reason to keep on keeping on." And periodically, the Pips sing the refrain, "You're too strong not to keep on keeping on." Look for it on Youtube: it's great. Of course, "Midnight Train to Georgia" is really their best.

The Scripture readings today sent me to Gladys Knight because I began to think of the role of imagination in faith and practice. We need imagination, if only to begin to understand any prophetic Scripture. We need to imagine the setting, imagine the intent of the speakers. And then we need to let our imaginations play with the metaphors we are given. Today, we heard the words of the prophet Isaiah (actually, Bible scholars say that we heard 3rd Isaiah, the third of the prophets whose words are recorded in this book.) Speaking to a community that has returned from exile, but remains demoralized and aimless, the prophet says that a dawn is coming. Not the literal dawn, that comes every 24 hours, but a time of insight and enlightenment, which the people will experience as salvation. This will involve a new identity, a new vision, and new names. Imagine, if you will, the community as a crown or diadem in God's hands. Imagine that the forlorn people will no longer be named "forsaken" or "desolate," but now "The Lord's Delight" and "Married." Imagine your community as a bride, in whose company everyone celebrates, from highest heaven to lowest earth. Just imagine all that abundance and delight.

This is not the kind of imagination or day dreaming that is self-serving. It is not about being able to afford new clothes (or crowns) or appearing on a TV show to win adulation and praise. It is about pulling a vibrant future out of a painful past. It is about opening eyes to the surprising work of God. It is about trying on a new role as a beloved partner of God, capable of reflecting the light of God's glory beyond the narrow boundaries of our lives.

So then we come to the wedding feast at Cana in the Gospel. The Gospel of John has a number of miracle stories, most of them presented as "signs" or revelations of who Jesus was. This one is called "the first of his signs" in the text today. It has never been one of my favorites: at first glance it looks like a party trick. It's easier to feel good about the stories where someone is healed from a terrible disability like blindness or pain, or when hundreds of hungry people are fed with bread and fish, or when a widow's only son is raised from the dead. When Jesus touches the people who desperately need help, and their lives are changed, it is such a clear example of why he came to live among us. But when he just happens to be attending a wedding party, and the wine runs out, it is hard for us to believe that it was all **that** important for them to have more wine to carouse with. They don't seem so needy. Why waste miracles – why waste your **first** miracle – on them?

But that's when I remember to try using my imagination. As my mind wanders through this little story, it alights here and there, on the odd exchange between Jesus and his mother, on the interesting use of huge empty stone jars as the receptacles for a miracle, at the confused

conversation between the steward and the host-bridegroom. But then I start to focus my imagination on those servants, the ones who hear Mary say, “Do whatever he tells you.” Those hard-working, probably strong servants who carry water – 180 gallons of water – back and forth to fill those stone jars, which were empty, waiting to be used for ritual purification. You have probably seen “servants” like this at other wedding receptions, serving, clearing, filling the champagne glasses, passing around the slices of wedding cake. The ones who get to clean up afterwards. Two thousands years ago, this would have been a sub-class of slaves or indentured servants...maybe I have to stretch my imagination to think of a comparable class of people today, the ones who always clean up after us.

But, come to think of it, those servants were not at the edge of a wedding. They were at the most important part of the occasion, in the thick of a miracle. They probably never got a sip of that great wine. But it was through their hands and muscles, their cooperation with the purposes of Jesus, their pouring and filling and drawing out, that the miraculous gift of abundance was enacted. The steward didn't have a clue, and neither did the host. The servants, the underclass, got the first glimpse of the first sign of the coming kingdom of God. And maybe this is fitting, since we hear over and over again in the Gospels that these are the people Jesus came to serve and set free. They are in on the business of God's renewing grace and abundance from the beginning.

I think that all of Jesus' “signs” – there are seven of them in this Gospel – require us to take leaps of imagination, skirting the interface between the world of the Spirit and the world of the senses. But what about other passages, like the letters of Paul? They tend to be much more practical, written in response to some church conflict, or some attack upon Paul himself. Can we allow a spirited imagination to explore this kind of writing too?

We heard a beautiful passage about the variety of gifts and the unity of the Holy Spirit read earlier. It is so beautifully crafted that I sometimes have to remind myself that it was written in response to some really messy church conflict about who was in charge, who was more spiritual, who was worshipping incorrectly. Into the cacophony of that petty squabble, Paul sends this deep message: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

So the first thing we have to remember is that the gifts and service and activity we bring and use in our church community are not isolated, individualistic, or static. These manifestations come together as building blocks for a common purpose. Paul gives us a few examples – speaking gifts, threaded through with inspired wisdom or knowledge; healing gifts; the ability to discern deeply – but I do not think that this is meant to be a complete, definitive list. I believe that we can give our imaginations a little room to explore our varieties of gifts within the framework of the One Spirit and the common good. But our imaginations start from the premise that each person will be given a manifestation of the Spirit. Each person will be a vital part and make a difference in the body of Christ.

Our faithful imagining means that we look deeply and carefully at one another. We do this to discover the unique and blended gifts that we have been promised. But we do not stop there. We commit ourselves to support and honor and nurture others, and to receive support and honor and nurture, in living into our gifts, for the common good.

A spirited imagination is an antidote to conformity. Paul's teachings allow us to make way for difference. In the last few weeks, with the turn of the new year, the secular world has

encouraged us to make New Year's resolutions, most of which focus on self-improvement. This self-reflective type of thinking often turns out to be a way of making cookie-cutter people. The resolutions do not encourage different gifts; rather we try to meet an ideal, we idolize the false gods of success and beauty. We can turn our thoughts instead to Paul's vision of a diversified and unified community, where each unique and remarkable person discovers gifts called forth by God, and offers them to neighbors with joy, reveling in the symphony of all gifts working in concert.

A spirited imagination is also a pathway for empathy. I have been reading about Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel Uncle Tom's Cabin raised the consciousness of northern readers about slavery before the Civil War. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave act, Stowe was worshipping in a church and somehow saw imposed on the image of Christ on the crucifix an image of a slave being whipped. Her vision and imagination, seeing Christ in the face of a suffering slave, gave her a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. She also was able to turn her private tragedies, including the death of her sixth child, into empathy for the suffering of others. She would write that her grief helped her understand the grief of a slave mother whose child was taken away to be sold.

And, of course, on this Sunday I want to remember the spirited imagination of Martin Luther King, Jr., who dreamed dreams and discerned the ills of society and prophesied about a new day. In his vision for the future, King imagined our nation as a network of interdependence in which each person recognizes that their security and health depends on the health and security of others, both neighbor and stranger. Because of this, it matters how other people's children are educated, how other people are fed, how other people receive health care, how other people find and realize opportunity. Threaded through our tradition, from Isaiah to Jesus to Paul to today's prophets is this image of the Beloved Community: beloved of God, loving of each other.

And so I close with King's words to fuel our own imagination.

He wrote, *"But, the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men and women."*

And he also said: *"We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools. . . . The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood."*

Amen.