

Imagination and Faithfulness

Rev. Kaye Edwards

Church of the Covenant – 10/26/14

My message to you this morning is quite personal, but I trust that my struggles and thoughts are not so different from yours, and pray that at least some of what I say will resonate with your own journeys. I want to talk with you about what I have come to call my "stroke gifts." First, of course is the gift of gratitude. Whenever any of us make it through a difficult time or survive a life threatening illness, the first thing we feel on the other side is thankful. Thankful for life, for friends and family, and all that living our lives means to us, imperfect as they are, and always will be. I can say without reservation that I am totally grateful for the stroke that shook my life three months ago ... grateful not only that it gave me a new appreciation for life but also for many wonderful and unexpected gifts that just keep multiplying.

Gifts like a true acceptance of unconditional love. I once had a seminary professor say to me that he thought I would rather be admired than liked. I became very defensive at that statement which means, of course, that it held a lot of truth. But now I know he wasn't totally on target. The truth is that I have always believed that I had to be admired in order to be liked or loved. I did not accept God's unconditional love of me, evidenced in the fact that I didn't love myself. In our scripture from Matthew today, a lawyer, out to trick Jesus, asks him which commandment in the law is the greatest. Jesus tells him that he must love God with his whole being, his heart, his soul, his mind. Every part of himself must manifest a love for God. And along with this commandment is one that says we have to love others as we love ourselves. I don't think it is possible to love God with our whole being, if we don't love who God created us to be. And I certainly can't love others

if I don't know how to love myself. It is said that we learn about unconditional love from having another human being offer us such a love. And I think that is true to some extent. But the big work has to be done in here (points to heart) The expressions of love and care can open us to the internal work it takes to get the idea of love out of our heads and down into our hearts. Only then can our whole selves manifest the love of God.

I was truly overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and care that I received in those weeks following the stroke. So many of you played a part in softening me up. You tore a lot of holes in my wall of self-contempt with your care, and you helped me blaze a new path for the idea of love to get out of my head and be felt in my heart. I really did not have any idea that I could be loved so deeply and completely by so many people and not for anything I was doing but just because I am a child of God, no better, no worse than any other.

Another stroke gift was time. After the stroke I had the first real sabbatical of my life. I have taken sabbatical times in the past. I have gone on retreats, at least once a year, to my soul's home, the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse, outside of Louisville, Ky. But those retreats, I know now, were not Sabbaths. My life has always been one of doing, and telling others what to do. I prided myself on being able to go, go, go on very little sleep, usually 4 to 5 hours a night most of my adult life. Wake up in the middle of the night or the wee hours of the morning? Don't lie in bed, a waste of time, get up, do something. Tired? Push through, I would tell myself. You can always rest later. One of the many articles I read online about strokes pointed out that sleep deprivation can actually be a contributor to strokes in women. It is nothing to be proud of.

I slept a lot in the hospital and afterward at home during my forced "do nothing" time. I loved it. I relished sleeping. Indeed, I slept like a baby, even in the hospital. This was not my first hospitalization and I know how hard it can be to

sleep in a big, busy hospital. The halls can be noisy, the nurses are constantly coming in to check and take vitals. I slept through it all. How could I do this? Now I know it was because I had the gift of being told I HAD to let go of everything. I only had one job to rest and heal. I realize how lucky I am to have a husband, like David, who willingly took complete care of me and a mission group and church community who willingly took over everything and also cared for me. Thank you for making this Sabbath time possible. This letting go of life responsibilities we see as a luxury that we think we can't afford but maybe we can. In such a community as this, maybe we can.

There were many gifts out of that true Sabbatical but the most important one was a recovery of my imagination. Finally, you must be thinking, maybe we are going to get to the subject put forth in the title! Imagination is so important to faithful living, yet I don't remember a single discussion of it in seminary. Imagination in our society has been scrubbed from our adult minds and that cleaning away of imagination begins, sorry to say, in early childhood now. The only adults that might be allowed to spend time imagining are artists.

All of my life, as most of you know, my call has been to advocate for children. I take very seriously the words of Jesus that tell us, in no uncertain terms, that the kingdom of God belongs to children and that, if we want to be part of God's realm (which is already here, the kingdom of God has already come, God is present with us now). In order to truly know and live in that kingdom, we have to become like children. Yet in another part of scripture (not Jesus' words) we are told that we have to put away childish things to become adult people of faith. What part of being a child do we need to keep and what part do we need to put away. I have always thought it had to do with the present moment living, which young children do. Children sense the presence of God, and a lot quicker than most adults. Is it because their heads are not filled with all the junk that fill our minds? Yes, but their

heads are not empty. They are filled with imagination, and that enables them to connect with the holy. They believe in the mystery, that we are too knowing to believe in, and they feel the presence of the unknown, that we are too jaded and sophisticated to feel.

Imagination is not one of the childish things we should leave behind in order to be faithful adults. It is one of the most important "childish" things we should hold onto. People who do great things have to have great imaginations. It may not have been an original statement to him, but once I heard Gordon Cosby say, "If you can imagine it, it can happen." He was, of course, talking about outward mission ideas. The impossible is possible IF we can imagine it. One of the reasons Moses was such a great prophet was because he had a very active imagination. He saw impossible things like bushes that burned and were not consumed. He accomplished impossible tasks like going up against a powerful and cruel government and freeing a whole nation of people from bondage and then there were smaller tasks like opening up a sea of water, climbing up a smoking mountain to talk with God and returning with laws to live by. There were smaller but quite impressive and showy acts like striking rocks and producing water to drink, and throwing his staff on the ground and having it turn into a snake. The point is, of course, if he could not *imagine* God doing these things through him, he would have turned his back on God and not given God a chance to work miracles through his life.

But I want to take this imagining thing one step further. If imagination is necessary to living our outward journeys of faith - that is entering into doing missions that in reality are impossible, then doesn't it stand to reason that imagination would be a necessary element of our inward journeys?

Before the stroke, I have to tell you that for the most part, my inward journey experience was making myself do the time because I knew it was good for

me and because sometimes it worked. Once in a while I would manage to get myself quiet, every once in a while the Bible verse for the week actually did speak to me. During these times I was reassured of God's call in my life. On rare occasions I might receive new insights into the nature of God. But really, mostly it was a dry and boring time, a necessary exercise. However, with the stroke gift of imagination, mostly made possible by the enforced real Sabbath, I have come to love my daily time of inward journey. It is now a rich, vibrant time. I look forward to it mainly because I never know what will happen. There is always something surprising. Every word now has an image attached that brings it alive. For instance, "being open." My head is always telling me I should be open. Now I cannot think of that word without seeing myself, my body actually split open, exposed and raw. An image that is not particularly pretty to look at with my mind's eye but when I complained, the message came to me that it would become more comfortable to look at as I learn to actually live my life in a way that is open to other people and to what life gives me to deal with.

Light has become a very important image to my understanding of living a faithful life. I continue to struggle with an image that truly conveys what I am gradually coming to understand is the power of light. A power that is available to my life. I am searching for an image that pictures the positive light energy that comes into me and is available to *me* to send forth into the world to heal, to mend, to bring peace, to increase understanding. It is all possible and I can participate in the possible if I have the imagination to enter the mystery and believe in the possibilities.

The further away from the enforced inactive time, right after my stroke, the harder it is for me to stay connected to my imaginings. I get overwhelmed by responsibilities, simple daily tasks, negative thoughts, worries about my children, the Cafe, concerns about friends. I let daily life interfere with the discipline of my

daily inward journey. And believe me, my body, my soul, my spirit lets me know when I miss. It is the only time and place that I have a chance of getting back in touch with that gift of imagination that takes me into the mystery of God. Every day I need to recreate that mini-Sabbath, freeing my mind of responsibilities and tasks and worries and cares and on and on. Sometimes I make it. Sometimes I don't. But when I do, there are no words to describe the joy, the beauty the depth of gratitude I experience and carry with me into the rest of my day.

Sabbath is more important than we realize and I think we, as a faith community, need to find ways to help each other experience true sabbaticals, without each of us having to have a stroke or other major medical event happen to us. It may sound impossible that we could give such a gift of care and taking of responsibility for one another. But then, if we can imagine it, it can happen. We need true Sabbaths in order to find our true selves, or be enlightened, or be whole, or connected to God or whatever we want to call it. We have to make the time to recapture the capacity to imagine, not just what we are called to do as outward missions needed in our community and world but in our own daily time of inward journey. God is mystery. And I am now convinced that we have to become like children by dusting off our imaginations and begin using our imaginations once again to believe - in the power, the healing energy, and the light of God, that is available to all of us. To experience living in that deep, deep gratitude and beauty that is available to all of us. We have to enter the mystery, and believe in the impossible so that the power of God's love and light and healing can work through our lives. Just imagine what could be. Just imagine ...