

## Wild Imaginings

**Luke 12:16-20**

**Stewardship – November 16, 2008**

To portray God as indulging in name-calling, Jesus had to have had strong feelings about the point he was making. (“You Fool,” he said). And it wasn’t as if this man in the story had been out robbing or raping or pillaging. He hadn’t deserted his family, wasn’t involved in substance abuse, hadn’t mistreated his wife or children, nor had he lied under oath. No, all he had done was, first, become a financial success and, second, decide once more to increase his capacity for protecting his holdings and savings. How, in God’s name, could that bring such total disdain, according to Jesus?

The man’s financial success wasn’t the problem. The Bible isn’t against success, achievement, or competence. No, apparently it was the man’s dullness, his dismal lack of imagination, his dreary lack of vision. At this pivotal moment in life, looking at what his resources and options were and what they could mean, he was so pathetically one-dimensional in his thinking that all he could come up with was to do more of the same -- in his case, build more storage. Even so, being unimaginative isn’t a sin, is it? So he came off a little stodgy. Couldn’t he also be seen as being prudent, conservative, cautious, and scrupulous? People like that aren’t normally thought to be fools. But that’s what makes this parable unnerving; the fact that it’s so harsh, so unequivocating and intolerant of this man’s business-as-usual, prosaic, pragmatic, approach to his life. In our idiom Jesus was saying, “You dolt, you numbskull!” That’s strong language in the Bible, so it undoubtedly needs our attention.

One gets some feeling of it in a short story by William Saroyan. A husband has obtained a cello and plays it incessantly. But he plays one note and only one, over and over and over again. His wife, not able to stand it any longer, going out of her mind, asks pleadingly, “Why do you play the same note over and over and over again? Other cellists play different notes.” To which her husband replies, “Other cellists play different notes because they’re trying to find the right one. I’ve found mine.” Doesn’t that sound a little like the “one note” man in Jesus’ story? It’s a “settling in,” a “selling short,” an underrating, an avoiding of the man’s own ability to create, improvise, experiment, grow, discover, and everything else that has to do with being a person fully alive. That really does happen. And it happens also in churches. It’s a life-sapping quirk of human beings.

A character in the novel, “The Finishing School,” by Gail Godwin says: “There are two kinds of people: one kind you can just tell by looking at them, at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keep moving, changing . . . they are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard against congealing.”

“Congealing!” That’s yet another way of describing the atrophy of imagination that comes with some approaches to living. It can happen despite lofty aspirations to be “creative,” to “make a difference,” to “leave this life a better place than we found it,” to live with vision and imagination, to “make our mark,” to “discover everything that it can mean to be the unique person that I am.” For there is this other powerful tendency at work, isn’t there? It’s the inclination to keep my routines the same, to rely on the same patterns of thought, to avoid surprises, to keep my surroundings the same, to use the same tools, tricks, and gimmicks to get by. The temptation is to choose repetition over imagination when “push comes to shove.” That’s what the man in Jesus’ parable did, and it gets a degree of scorn from Jesus that one would have thought would be reserved only for the most depraved.

So again, imagination as a part of Godliness is no small matter. It’s a distinctly spiritual issue. At least it was with Jesus. You can’t miss it in the Bible. Turning the other cheek when somebody slaps you, giving them your coat also when they help themselves to your jacket, or going a second mile when you’re forced to go the first mile, was a clear plea for imagination. So when you’re faced with conflict, stupidity or oppression, there are alternatives to being a victim or a mindless sufferer. So for God’s sake and your own, improvise, act, ad-lib with some imagination. It’s dullness to only love those who love you and predictably hate those who hate you and always get even with those who wrong you. And Jesus did improvise. When he was confronted with a man believed to be demon-possessed, instead of running from him as did everyone with common sense, he tried ordering the demon to go away and, whatever it was, it did. Apparently, it had never occurred to anyone to try that. And that kind of inventiveness is all through Jesus’ ministry. In fact, in a controversial parable he actually commends a dishonest employee, not for his dishonesty, but for showing some creative imagination in the midst of the mess into which he’d gotten himself. This dishonest manager showed more imagination, Jesus remarked, than do a lot of ostensibly good but tedious people.

There are always those who protest or object to all this by saying, “By nature, I’m just not an imaginative person. I can’t help it. It’s the way I was born.” NO! Absolutely not true. One only has to watch young kids freely and naturally improvise, imagine, and invent, to see how untrue that is. It can be smothered, but we were all born with incredible capacity for imagination. Barriers, restraint, suppression and malnutrition of our imaginations are the problems.

One of those barriers is our preoccupation with what we call “common sense.” It’s well-named because “common” is what it is. It’s an antiseptically unimaginative way of approaching all our experiences, our opportunity and information. It’s simply common sense, for example, always to be logical and reasonable. It’s common sense always to be consistent. It’s common sense to always

stick to hard facts. It's common sense not to let yourself get carried away. It's common sense to avoid every possibility of any error or failure. It's common sense to wait until you're completely sure.

I ran across a poem about two people to might be the patron saints of common sense. "The bride, white of hair, is stooped over her cane, her footsteps – uncertain – need guiding. While down the opposite aisle with a wan toothless smile the bridegroom in a wheelchair comes riding. Now who is this elderly couple, thus wed? Well, you'll find when you've closely explored it that here is that rare, so conservative pair who waited "till they could afford it." That's right. Wonderfully sensible, logical and careful people, but having had to smother the creative, adventuresome dimension of themselves to get that way.

Another barrier to imagination (perhaps the one of the man in Jesus' parable) is fear of failure, or fear of looking foolish. The words that go with this are "Yeah, BUT." "Yeah, I thought about trying to take that on, BUT... (never having done anything like that, I figured I could end up looking pretty foolish,) "Yeah, I was really excited and intrigued for awhile, BUT (I really don't know what's ahead for me in coming years, so decided I better play it close to the line.)" "Yeah, BUT I've never done that before." "Yeah, BUT I'm not the creative type." "Yeah, BUT I was brought up to be discreet and circumspect." "Yeah, BUT I blush easily." "Yeah, but this is the way I've always done it and who knows what might happen if I mess with it." And imagination withers. Unfortunately, there's nothing creative, innovative or imaginative against which there aren't questions one can raise -- for instance, "about how expensive it could get," "how confusing it could become," or "how destructive it could be if it went awry." Fearsome, impossible-to-prove objections are always there for those who choose to be controlled by them.

Habit, custom, sheer momentum are other terrible blocks to imagination. Once something is heavily engraved in our mind, it becomes very difficult to envision or imagine it otherwise. If the man in the parable has become really proficient at building new storehouses and has, at this time of year, built some every year, to picture himself seriously doing otherwise with his time, his money, and his opportunity won't come easily. No, in fact "oddball," "freaky," cockamamie," "absurd," are the most common answers to the voice of the imagination in those persons congealing, whose imaginations are eroded by habit.

One other barrier worth mentioning is ponderousness – the refusal to play. Imagination, you see, is the playfulness of the human mind and spirit. That's why children (until we force them to "get serious") are more at home with their imaginations than are adults. Imagination requires a childlike lightheartedness. It requires a willingness to be impractical.

But what does this all mean in practical terms? Where does it intersect with our normal average living? A LOT!

For openers, it suggests that when we're locked into a treadmill routine, imprisoned in unbreakable patterns, and held in boring predictability. The problem isn't usually fate or something someone has done to us. It's far more often a lack of imagination.

This should remind us, for example, that there's something deeply and eternally foolish about choosing, in the face of the thousands of experiences available to us, a little handful of them and repeating those over and over and over again (for example, build more storehouses.)

It asks why, when some of us have spent our whole life reacting to conflict, hurt or hostility by cringing or by getting mad or sullen or vengeful, with it never once working. Why not try something else? Why continue to return evil for evil, take an eye for an eye, etc.?

It asks questions like, "Is it really necessary, even given the fact that we do have some rough years financially coming up, to still function and act as if acquiring and hoarding additional money is the best, most creative thing you can do with yourself? Is this really all there can be to you? Or is it lack of imagination and force of habit?

It wants to know, with the limited time we each have left to live, that the remaining time of our lives is going to be something more than an insipid, humdrum, totally predictable extension of the past.

It confronts us with the possibility that even though it's true that you and I have always been the kind who does such-and-such, or who thinks so-and-so, or who has these certain appetites, we need not go our graves that way. With only a little imagination, there can be several more versions of us.

It asks questions like, "Who, that you've never cared much for, might you go try to make friends with, just to see what that might mean?" What is there, that even though initially it would scare you to death to sign up for it, might create a whole new growing edge to your life?" "What totally different thing could be done with your money that might, in turn, pull your heart and soul into changes and visions completely new to you?

Most simply, what about my life, about your life, if we're honest about it, can we imagine God saying (somewhat as portrayed in the story)? "C'mon, surely with all that you have, and all you know, and all that surrounds you, and all that you've become up to now, you are NOT going to CONGEAL on me, are you? You aren't going to keep believing only the same voices, reading only the same magazines, sticking to the same patterns of thought, going to the same places, spending or stashing your money the same way, reacting the same way to the same frustrations, massaging the same prejudices, licking the same wounds. Surely not!!!"

It's a probing question, isn't it? Moreover, in every encounter, each choice, every intention of ours, God waits for your and my answer. Now imagine THAT!