

“Reimagining Church”

1 John 1:1-7

Second in Series on Rebuilding

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“If we walk in the light as he himself is light, we have fellowship...”

1 John 1:6

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may we imagine life with you as God’s children, as those called into being by your Word and as those faithful to the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

Message

To be sure, we are moving toward the future; as someone recently shared with me, “We will be living the rest of our lives there.” And yet, looking over the last year, we have experienced what many generations have never experienced, and we pray will never have to experience.

But it is good to see people who have gathered in person, and it is good to know that there are people who have connected online. In some ways, I feel like we are two young kids who have to acquaint ourselves about our second date, getting to know each other. On the other hand, I think we have been seeing each other for some time, although it has been more of a one-way street, where you have seen us, and not always the other way around.

However, here we are! Who could have imagined?

Through it all, God has been faithful, and God’s people have found ways to minister and worship, out of necessity, yes, but what is the old saying, necessity is the mother of all invention!

We have been learning, and we are still learning, what it means to have what many people are calling are a hybrid ecology: we are learning how to be online and in person. We are learning how to navigate the new amidst some of the old. We are learning how to communicate both near and far, and we are learning how to be

together while apart. We are learning how to do in-reach and outreach all at once. In short, we are learning how to chew gum and walk at the same time!

Such a move, I think, requires imagination; that is, it requires a way of “seeing” things a little differently.

Do you remember as kids going outside and watching the clouds in the sky? We would look up and see different shapes in the clouds – e.g., dogs, cates, superheroes, or famous people. Or as kids, we used to have pickup baseball games and we would imagine we were the Cardinals or the Reds. Usually not the Cubs!

Indeed, what is it about children and the imagination? They see things and respond to things by pointing out what we adults often miss.¹ It reminds of the little story of a family driving through Kansas on I-70. Five-year old Tyler was looking out the car window, whereupon he said, “It’s so flat out there, *you can look farther than you can see.*”

Isn’t that a great phrase? You can look farther than you can see. There are people who can look farther than they can see! For example, in the 1930s an engineer by the name of Joseph Strauss looked over the San Francisco Bay. In his mind, he formed a picture of a bridge connecting the two sides. In 1936, the bridge became a reality. He could look farther than he could see!

Eyes to See!

Call it vision, call it the “imagination” or call it dreaming, or call it the kingdom of God where the blind see and the deaf hear – there is this spiritually gifted capacity to see what others cannot, or will not see (Mt. 11:5).

Maybe this is why Jesus on so many occasions said: “Those who have eyes to see let them see!” (Mk. 8:18). Remember that during Lent we spoke about listening, or the capacity to hear with our hearts. Today we talk about the eyes, or the vision to see what is possible!²

It is what faith is all about: the ability to imagine life a certain way!³ To imagine the church, or the world through the images of scripture. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes about how the scriptures “fund” or guide our imaginations,” as a way of seeing.⁴

¹ William H. Willimon, “Imagination,” (Luke 1:39-45) at www.esermoms.org.

² For the Lenten sermon series at Grace UMC on listening, go to www.franklingrace.org.

³ James Whitehead, “The Religious Imagination,” *Liturgy* 5 (1985), 54-59.

⁴ See *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979).

It is an important insight because somewhere along the line, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the imagination fell out of order. People did not view the imagination as “true knowledge,” as compared to science or historical research. Something was not real unless you could actually “prove” it, empirically or rationally.⁵

When we turn to the Bible, however, we discover the importance of a different kind of knowledge, of a kind of knowledge that is able to envision what is possible.

First John and God’s Children

Listen, for example, to how First John he speaks of Christians as “children,” or “little children.” Those who are born of God are “children of God.” Those who receive the gospel are those whom God has given the power to become part of a special family (1 Jn. 2:29).

In short, we all are children of God – still learning, still growing, still needing to improve, still finding ways of understanding who God is, and what God is doing, still trying to make sense of life! John wants us to know that becoming a child of God is a gift, but a gift that continues to invite us to see more, for with God there always is more!

In fact, John himself writes, “What we will be (as children of God) has not yet been revealed; but we know that when Christ appears, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is, and all who have this hope purify themselves as Christ is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2-3). As children of God, we can imagine what we can become in this life and in the life to come: to become like Christ, the perfect image of God.⁶

In other words, it is all about who we are now and who will we become in the future; but always moving toward Christ, the goal of the Christian life. We are not fully there yet, but someday, someday, we will through God’s love and grace!

I wish I knew how many times I have shared these verses at the graveside: they speak to what our lives can become. John is inviting us to imagine what shape our lives can take, lives that will offer light in a world of darkness, violence, deceit, delusion, and death.

Reimagine!

⁵ See “A Holy Imagination” in HomileticsOnline at www.homileticsonline.com.

⁶ See “A Holy Imagination” (1 John 3:1-7) at www.homileticsonline.com.

For the Christian life must always take a particular shape, or form, regardless of where it is, or what is happening. As we mentioned at the beginning, who could have imagined fifteen months ago what shape the church was going to take? Our expectations need to adjust to new circumstances.

Think of your own relationship with God: how have you had to adjust and grow? Moving forward, how might we all will continue to envision new forms of relationships, both in the church and outside the church? How might God be inviting us to imagine discipleship?

For example, I know one shape the church took during the height of the pandemic at the Otterbein Community was gathering near the Gazebo to sing, pray, and share. Residents came together there to support each other. How might we imagine such gatherings going forward? Or: how might we imagine people from all walks of life at something like Dinner Church, or gathering in small groups to share a meal and a Jesus story, maybe even with people we don't know?

Or: how might people meet at a Dog Park with folks who have other furry friends, who gather to learn about God? Sound crazy? Well, a gentle man who lives in Ocala, Florida created a little community that meets on Saturday mornings at a Dog Park and when they meet, they get to know each other and share about Christ. Can you imagine that?

We know that more and more people will probably *not* darken the door of a church these days for all kinds of reasons. But we do know that they will connect online, and in other ways: we know, for example, that they will connect to a Zumba group, or an AA Group, or a Scouting group before attending worship, or they might attend some other gathering outside the walls of the church.

Is this not what John Wesley so reluctantly did: to meet people where they are and then invite them to see what they could become, to invite them to see and imagine another way? How about it? Can you reimagine your relationship with God in that way? Could we reimagine church expressed in different ways?

Remember: it is all about seeing! Imagining! Sometimes out of necessity as we have learned, but also out of God's own initiative, through God's love, for all God's children, becoming more like Christ, and constantly seeking to do what is right and good! Breaking the mold of sin, but being "shaped" by the Light of Christ. And above knowing where we are, and always looking farther than we can see! Amen.