

“Three Pennies and a Rock – Christian Imagination” {outline}

Ecclesiastes 5:10-17; Matthew 18:1-4

October 24, 2021

Series RECAP

- Three Pennies and a Rock story in brief
- Want to be like children
- Jesus tells us to be like children
 - o **Matthew 18:1-4** – *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*
- Wonder, Curiosity, Imagination

Imagination

- Long before I was blessed to be a dad, I was blessed to be an uncle.
- Taylor came in one day grinning
 - o I figured it all out – You actually CAN be friends with a shark, he declared.
 - o Well, I thought this an interesting line of discussion so I asked the big question – “Taylor, how can you be a friend with a shark, wouldn’t it want to eat you?”
 - o Here’s what I realize - You just need to find a friendly shark.
 - o How would you do that?
 - o That’s what I gotta figure out next, he told me.
- Kids have big imaginations
 - o There was a show, “Kids Say the Darndest Things”
 - o Sometimes, they’d ask kids how things worked. Their answers were funny and imaginative.
- Kids naturally live in an imaginative space where all sorts of wonderful things can and do happen.
 - o We do not.
 - We have to deal with the sharp edges of reality.
 - Supply chain problems
 - Rising Inflation
 - COVID 19
 - o It’s hard to be imaginative.
 - Anxiety

The United States and Anxiety

- In God We Trust might be on our currency presently, but a more accurate description of the United States right now would better be, “In Anxiety We Live”
 - o Rates of anxiety disorders have risen precipitously over the last 25 years.
 - The rates far exceed where they were during the Coldest Days of the Cold War when the threat of global thermonuclear war was at a peak.
 - More and more people are struggling
 - Feeling restless, wound-up, or on-edge
 - Being easily fatigued
 - Having difficulty concentrating; mind going blank
 - Being irritable
 - Difficulty controlling feelings of worry
 - o Any of that sound familiar?
 - Both individually and societally.
 - We’re blowing up at each other on airplanes, tearing down entire cities with violent “protests”, we’re an anxious bunch

- And, pardon me for saying so, I can't help think that the diminishment of our trust in God leads inexorably to our nationwide anxiety issue.
- The brunt of these issues is felt in younger generations.
 - Younger generations are statistically more removed from faith than any other generation in America before them.

The Failure of Imagination

- Lillian's Soccer Team story
 - Bored little boys fashioned a solution – they were SUPERHEROES!
 - When presented with an untenable situation, they imagined their way around it.
 - Notice – we do not
- America, just like the world, has fixable problems. Now, whatever you think the problem with the country is, I'm here to tell you, it's fixable.
- But, in order to do that, we're going to have to, you guessed it, use our imaginations.
- As different as we are from the rest of God's creatures, in some regards we're just like them.
 - We have a fight, flight or freeze system.
- When under duress, our mental capacity shrinks, and all our options reduce to just three.
 - Fight – Win with force
 - Flight – Run away
 - Freeze – stay put, the predator might not see you
- I would say nationally, we've developed even less of a survival skill.
 - We tend to think
 - Conservative or Liberal?
 - Fox News or CNN?
 - Elephant or Donkey?
- It's an imagination-deprived reduction of our options
 - Maybe that's why we leave so LITTLE TO THE IMAGINATION.
 - Have you seen what goes on, on dating apps? Men and women are sending compromising pictures of themselves to one another with increasing frequency?
 - Lack of imagination!
 - That's just what anxiety does

Lack of Faith in America

- The number of people in America right now who hold an active faith in God is shrinking precipitously.
 - Younger generations, the most anxious of the demographic groups, have increasingly less faith than did previous generations.
- When you've not got faith in God, it isn't that your faith system is eliminated, it just finds a new object in faith.
 - Generally, we start with placing our faith in people
 - Our parents
 - We find out they're wonderful but not perfect
 - Other people
 - We look to others to be perfect, when they fail us, we have but one remaining option
 - The Unholy Trinity of Me, myself and I
- Praying to God for no rain so I could play baseball
 - It rained
 - Figured God wasn't real, that I had to figure things out on my own.
- That's just it, when we can't put our faith in God, we know other people will fail us, we turn to the worst possible option – US!

- If you're offended by that, I get it. It's a hard reality to face that we're not the best option to put faith in, either
 - But are you?
 - Don't you?
 - Tell half-truths when the situation demands it?
 - Think you're just a bit better than so-and-so?
 - Believe you know more and can make better decisions than everyone else?
 - Wish you had something your neighbor has like a car, a pool or a fancy job?
- Yep?
 - Don't put faith in yourself.
- To be free of our anxiety, to be free from our self-reliance, we're going to have to rub up against a word that we all know – FAITH.

Faith

- **Hebrews 11:1** – *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*
- If something is neither seen nor heard, how can it be experienced?
 - The answer – BY FAITH.
- Faith is imaginative. It requires us to believe something we can't possibly know for ourselves without reliance on something outside of ourselves.
- We must see the world through faith, otherwise all we're left with is our reason.
 - Which is broken by sin which is why reason alone fails us on really big things.
 - Really big things require imagination unbounded by philosophy to overcome.

Here's how Christians can and ought to have the most wonderful and awe-inspiring imaginations in the world.

All Things Are Possible

- In the 9th Chapter of the Gospel of Mark, a boy is brought to Jesus.
- This boy is suffering
- The Father is at wits end. He brings the boy to Jesus and asks, begs really, *“if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”*
- Jesus' reply – *“If you can"! All things are possible for one who believes.”*
- And I get it if that was the only place, we might be a little skeptical. But, as it would turn out, the Bible is replete with similar declarations
 - **Matthew 19:26** - *But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*
 - **Luke 1:37** – *“For nothing will be impossible with God.”*
 - **Mark 10:27** – *“Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”*
 - **Philippians 4:13** – *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”*
- I've seen people embrace the truthfulness of what all these verses aim to capture, and do amazing things for God
 - Kairos ministry

All Things Are Possible

- Kids on soccer field – superheroes.
- They'd found a way out of their predicament, using their imaginations
- We must use ours.
- How do we expand our imaginations?
 - Strengthen your relationship with the One who makes all things possible.
 - Spend time in prayer – James talked about this last week.
 - Spend time in the Word – Single best way to know more about the God you worship
 - Spend time with KIDS – You ever need your imagination stoked? A few hours with kids will do the trick

- Church needs

- Imagination made possible by faith

Participate in the Sacraments

- The Sacraments require us to use our imagination.
- Birthday Moments
 - An analogy – these are the special moments in a life that’s entirely and always surrounded by God’s presence.
 - Just extra special
 - Other days in a family are awesome and we certainly don’t forget to love our other children on the days that aren’t their birthday (or are their sibling’s)
- What we’re doing in Communion, for example, is something quite normal, isn’t it?
 - Eating a little piece of bread and a sip of juice? We do similar things all the time.
 - What makes it presence is the blessing and seal of God.
- Baptism
- Requires imagination
 - What we’re doing is pretty mundane, actually. We’re about to really annoy and confuse little Levi. That’s what we’re going to do. But what we’re going to do is much more than that. Truly.
- The Specialness of the Sacrament
 - They allow us to practice
 - To practice seeing with the eyes of our Lord.
 - Because what we’re about to do is far more than annoy little Levi by placing some water on his head.

“Three Pennies and a Rock – Imagination”

{Next chapter in Pastor Jason’s book}

One night in the late spring, I sat watching my 6-year-old daughter’s team play soccer. The weather was nice, not too hot, not too cold – a perfect example of why spring in the Mid-South almost makes you forget about the stifling heat stands knocking on the door. There I sat, enjoying the game just poised to commence. Fortunately, my daughter’s team had a surplus of players. Sometimes that didn’t occur that season and the children were then forced to play the entire game – good for the but a challenge to parent’s having to put overtired children to bed afterwards. Knowing that wouldn’t be the case, I was especially relaxed, knowing bedtime would likely go just a bit easier.

As the game began, I noticed three of Lillian’s teammates sitting on the sidelines. By the hunch of their shoulders, it was obvious that they were upset as to not being in the game. I felt their pain. No child likes to be placed on the cusp of running and playing with their friends, only to be forced into the idleness of the sidelines.

As providence would have it, my attention stayed focused on those three little guys. For a moment, they were sullen and withdrawn. Thankfully, their circumstances were about to radically change. Fun arrived in the form of a squat teammate of theirs who, running, jumped in front of them and proceeded to make a variety of special-effects noises as he performed some quasi-karate moves. At first, the other three boys remained sitting, watching their teammate jump, crash and gyrate in front of them. Soon though, the active little boy’s fantasy became alive. In their minds, the young man in front of them was a superhero, dashing the malevolent desires of a cosmically evil foe. In the face of such dreadful terror, what are superheroes to do?

Rather quickly, the other three 6-year-olds jumped up and began crashing and kicking and trashing their arms at the imaginary foe. As an entire field full of parents remained engrossed in the game, these three courageous young heroes were defending all that was good in the universe. It was such a joy to see them! I was taken back to childhood when my own imaginative power could conjure up similar daunting quests although my own imagination led me more towards being a knight than a superhero.

Here were these three boys caught up entirely in an imaginative world. Their boredom was interrupted by one of their peers who could “see” the world momentarily in a different manner. They were not four sidelined players; they were the means by which the universe itself would be saved!

After a few moments though, the noise these boys were making caught the attention of their assistant coach. He told them to, “settle down” which at first, they completely ignored. As their dangerous heroics continued, the same coach intensified his

Efforts to silence them, eventually overcoming their playfulness. Now, don’t get me wrong, it was probably the “right” thing to do. After all, the game was going on and one of the difficult things to learn is how to be a good teammate, cheering on your team even as you are sitting on the bench. At the same time, you could see from the returned hunch in all of their shoulders as they sat there wistfully watching the game that they weren’t altogether happy about their change in circumstance. Who could blame them? To go from world-changing heroes to benchwarmers isn’t an enjoyable change of condition for most folks.

I’m reminded of this fun occurrence as a means to begin talking about imagination. One of the things that oftentimes diminish, sometimes disappearing entirely in adulthood, is our imagination. We who are forced to deal with difficult events and realities, too frequently lose touch with our imaginative thinking. And, to some degree, it is the means by which we successfully navigate adulthood. Although it would be fun to daydream for 8 hours instead of actually work, chances are our bosses wouldn’t especially appreciate it and we’d likely soon end up unemployed. Dwelling entirely in a make-believe world of our own creation would also render us largely incapable of entering into sustaining relationships. That is to say, the objective world that we share with others is vitally significant to take heed of...much of the time. For example, I can’t “imagine” my way out of pneumonia, let’s say. No, I’ll need to take some antibiotics. Neither could I find someone to truly love me if I were wrapped up completely in my own imaginary world.

At the same time, one of the great boons of childhood is the ability to so naturally view the world with an unrestrained imaginative eye. Kids are just naturally capable of getting swept up into fictional worlds of their own conjuring in which there are superheroes and epic deeds to be done. Children can look at a pile of

blocks and shape things with them that become exactly what they've created in their mind's eye. I'll never forget my son bringing me an odd amalgam of Lego joined together with a glee-filled look in his eye. He happily added, thankfully, "it's a fighter jet, Daddy." Benjamin then proceeded to swoosh his fighter jet around the room. Coming upon a pile of dirty clothes Ben made the sound of a missile firing followed soon thereafter by a thunderous boom of explosion. In his mind's eye, the enemy base was utterly destroyed. I looked upon that pile of clothes, remembering a promise I'd made to my wife to carry them upstairs.

I have to confess, I liked Ben's accounting of reality better! I'll spare you the "lecture" about how we all must be grounded in reality. I truly needed to take those dirty clothes up the stairs and wash them. Adulthood brings with it a crash course in the realities of the objective world. Yet I would argue equally, we need a measure of child-like imagination. We require it for a enjoyable life but we are especially going to require it to remain Christian and deepen our faith in our Lord.

I say this because I believe it vital that we both remain cognizant of the world as it is just as we remain imaginative about the world as God would have it be. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that this world can be filled with sad and soul-draining events and people. All too often, the weight of these things piles upon us. If left unattended, it is often these very difficult matters which will rob us of joy. For if we believe that all of the world is only what we see, hear or experience, we're bound to become disillusioned – restless, irritable and discontent. It is in this place of deep, unabated discontent that many of us do one of a few things. One way we can process deep disappointment is to grit our teeth and avow that similar events or people will never again waylay us. This world is something that CAN be mastered, we think, and we're uniquely equipped to do so. Other people may faint in the face of adversity, but not us. Soon, we've concocted a variety of plans and means by which we will somehow avoid the very things that have disappointed us too greatly.

Unfortunately, oftentimes what's left to such deep disappointment are either people or events. Now, I don't know about you, but I've found my own attempts to change other people haven't been nearly as successful as I've imagined them at the outset. In fact, quite frequently I find that such endeavors oftentimes leave either me or the other person resentful and even more jaded with humanity.

As to soul-draining events, there is simply no means by which I can entirely escape them. Both the Bible (Matthew Scripture citation) and experience demonstrate over and over again that I'm simply incapable of controlling things. Sickness arrives, at my own door or the doorstep of friends and loved ones. Despite taking precautionary measures, there are heart-attacks, cancers and a host of other maladies which crop up without much notice. So too are there natural disasters which inexplicably create untold and unavoidable consequences. Sometimes, evil comes to us through an entirely human channel, be it anywhere from a trusted friend's betrayal to a stranger harming or stealing from us

For those who believe themselves incapable of being harmed by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, I'm afraid only disappointment lies in wait. Here is a case of what I'll call "harmful" imagination. Harmful imagination occurs we rather delusionally place our trust singularly in ourselves, our thoughts and our abilities.

Other form of harmful imagination occurs when we try, by hook or by crook, to ignore either the events which occur around us or the feelings which arise as a consequence of them. I confess that it is precisely here that I find myself guilty as charged, so to speak. Personally, I am a master of intellectualizing, figuring a way to think past the pain of loss or harm by assuming such matters shouldn't affect me. After all, I think, I know that we're all sinful and that everyone dies, so I shouldn't feel bad after experiencing those precise things. "God's in charge," I think, "it all turns out well...so I shouldn't feel angry or sad in the wake of loss or betrayal." It is only recently that I've learned such "forced" belief is just an attempt to override a necessary and natural reaction to disappointing events or behaviors by others. It is akin to an ostrich burying their head in the sand as a predator approaches. It only provides temporary relief, not remotely changing its present circumstances.

Christian imagination in the face of sorrow, loss or disappointment, in contrast, is neither the removal of oneself from the present reality but neither is it lapsing completely into a fantastical world, never to emerge. The Bible teaches us that we do live in a wonderful world, one created and sustained by Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the Scriptures also teach us this world is torn asunder by human sin. Finally, though, the Word we receive in Christ is that this world is only temporary, someday to be replaced by a new one, perfect and untouched by sin. In the Kingdom which comes, every tear will be wiped from every eye.

Sickness will be a thing of the past, as will death. The lamb will lie with the wolf and children shall play with adders.

But the Bible teaches us, that future vision is only partially with us in the here and now. The Gospels show us, time and time again, that we live what theologians call, “the already and the not yet.” Because Christ is come, part of God’s Kingdom, His plan for our eventual rescue announced and partially given us. Because we can know Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit’s revelation, we can access a robust measure of the joy and peace that will serve as our eternal destiny. We’ve been given a down payment by God, a potent signal that our infinite joy and peace lie just on the other side of death or the blast of the trumpet, announcing Christ’s return.

Using Paul’s phrasing in Philippians, our citizenry is in heaven, but for the meantime, we’re hanging out here. Here, in a broken world. A world which is frequently amazingly upsetting. Worse still, we travel in this chaotic world alongside others. Now, perhaps if these other people travelling with us were somehow as awesome as we are, even making it through this time in exile from the Kingdom would be a snap. Sadly though, we look out upon others and see nothing but their inconsistent, upsetting natures. We must also wrestle with our own inconsistent and upsetting natures. Too often we know exactly what to do, only to find ourselves not doing it or, worse, doing the opposite. If we can be honest with ourselves, we recognize that we are just like everyone else here. Flawed Imperfect. Sinful.

This is exactly why we both individually and corporately need to hear God’s Word of Grace shared most potently in Jesus’ death and resurrection. God has acted for our redemption. God continues to bring forward into our time and place Himself through the Holy Spirit. And one day, we believe, God will bring forward even more of Himself in the return of Jesus Christ and the impending merger of a new heaven and a new earth. As ? is so fond of saying, God’s space and our space will, in the Kingdom of God, be one space yet again, even better and more complete than it was in the Garden of Eden, as difficult as that may be to imagine.

So, if we’re not quite yet in the Kingdom and have our feet stuck here with all the mess and uncertainty of this world, again, what are we to do?

Here, I can’t help but think, that here we need to interject a measure of our long-since-forgotten fantastical thinking. That is to say in another way – we need to be childlike in our imaginative capabilities. We need to see beyond our present time. Further, we must be steadfast employing our God-given time, talent and energies towards forging more and more of our current reality into the way things God will have them eternally in the Kingdom that comes.

It is at precisely this point where our current thought-systems may fail us, dragging us back entirely in the cold, hard reality of this time and place. Here is where, for most of us, our imagination fails us. There’s a reason for that thud back from the heights of where our Christ-filled minds into thinking ourselves entirely and completely trapped in our present condition.

To begin this conversation, I’d like to share with you a conversation I had many years ago with my 4-year-old nephew, Taylor. One afternoon, Taylor came bounding up to me with all the energy of a child that age. He arrived in front of me sporting a most delighted grin. I asked him, “Taylor, what’s got you feeling so happy?”

His reply was simple. He told me, “I just figured out you CAN be friends with a shark!”

I, in turn, was delighted by this rather erroneous understanding. Cute, I raced ahead worried he might actually attempt to forge a bond with one of those sharp-toothed terrors of the sea. Remember, I grew up during the era of “Jaws” movies. If there is one thing those films made resolutely clear it was this. You cannot be friends with a shark. Drawing upon all my wonderful wisdom and experience, I said, “No, Taylor, I do NOT think you can be friends with a shark. They’d just as soon eat you as shake your hand.”

Taylor was absolutely unfazed by my adult brilliance. He said, “Yes, of course. You just have to find the right shark!”

Taylor then proceeded to bound off towards his grandmother. A wise choice as she usually has a piece of candy about her somewhere.

While I wanted to shift things to the concrete world, Taylor was much more flexible in his thought processes. It wasn’t the case that he didn’t know that sharks were dangerous. It was instead that Taylor’s more flexible thought allowed him to keep hope. It may take many years and a lot of thoughtful and potentially

dangerous work, but they day would come that Taylor would happen upon that one shark with whom he could hold a friendship.

Now, it should be noted I don't think that outcome is likely. At the same time, this paradoxicality of thought allowed a young Taylor to intellectually maintain a measure of hope.

How often does hope, in matters unrelated to sharks, escape us? Oftentimes it's absence can be traced to a rigidity of thought shaped by adult learning. As I think and pray over the obstacles which prevent me from coming to Jesus Christ "as a child," one major impediment is my frequent inability to imagine beyond the "either/or."

Not that what I'm about to unfold for you is not entirely the culprit but I definitely think it plays a major part in our inability to both imagine and act on God's dreams for us. It's a little thing called "the law of non-contradiction." This law was, by most accounts, originally put forward by Aristotle in his work, *Metaphysics*, but it's almost so obvious as to not require articulation. The law of non-contradiction essentially says that one thing cannot, at the same time, in the same place and in the same fashion be two different things. Put more simply - an apple cannot at one time and place and in the same fashion be a banana. Pushed further it is the law of non-contradiction which informs me that I cannot both overweight and thin at the same time and neither can I exist here in this moment and at some point in the past at the same time and in the same way. I may well remember being in the sixth grade as I sit here on my couch but I cannot, at the same time, actually be in Ms. Reed's classroom in 1982.

The law of non-contradiction helps us stay anchored in reality. It also assists us mightily in science, in law and in nearly all things on this side of eternity. The problems start to arise when we apply it uniformly to everything. In the case of God, it fails us entirely.

Somewhere, lurking in the back of our minds, is the thought that it's simply not possible for God to be with us, in the midst of our trials, and also with Jane in Seattle as she struggles to overcome depression. It's the dark thought which sometimes comes to us during a funeral which tells us that it's just not possible that our loved one is dead here, yet alive in some other place beyond our cognition.

Precisely because the law of non-contradiction is so helpful that it is hard to overcome applying universally.

But it doesn't hold. Not always and especially not as it pertains to God. We know this both through the Scriptures as well as nestled deep within our hearts. As we sit in the pews, perhaps with tears in our eyes, we know our loved one, although not here with us presently, is in fact alive with God. We feel its truth as well as here it in the Scriptures as the Pastor reads John 11 to us. We who are in Christ live, even though we die. Even though we die, yet shall we live. It is a profoundly true set of statements even though it also fails the test of non-contradiction. After all, are there any more contradictory states than dead and alive? Further, doesn't all of our "scientific" thinking demonstrate to us that what dies simply does not live again? Jesus statement here ultimately makes no sense if we unnecessarily force an either/or upon it.

Much of God does, really. Again, we see that clearly in the Word revealed. God is both love and justice. Unsettlingly, that love includes both grace and wrath. Again, two very difficult realities to place an either/or upon in light of the Scriptures. Push further into Scripture and you'll see Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are both one and unique at the same time. The Kingdom is already here, but not quite here entirely.

Much of the Scripture is paradoxical. How perfect that it matches so much of our lives for they are filled with paradox as well. Most of us continually reckon ourselves "good" and many of us, no doubt, are. But, I wonder, if we were to apply the same lens to ourself that we frequently do to others, how would we define ourselves? Have we not lied? Have we not been self-centered? Maybe we've cheated – on our spouse, our partners, our government? Have we not gossiped about others' lives? Do we not quite frequently feel superior to others?

Those are difficult matters to wrestle with but all of us do these things on occasion. It precisely what Paul was drawing attention to when he reminds us in Romans that "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Still though, we remember that we do help other people. We have been silent when prompted to speak badly of others. We did pay all of our taxes, even when accounting software makes cheating a mere matter of

clicking in a few bogus numbers. There are occasions where we've resisted doing wrong. But they occur right there alongside our bad deeds.

To quote the Dave Matthews band, "...it makes no sense when I bow to the priest while I worship the witch." If we're truthful, we are both saint and sinner at the same time. A paradox, no?

But, because of the law of non-contradiction, we try to shave off the ends of both when two things are both opposite and true at the same time. It is in this unease at which the Bible hits our reliance on non-contradiction that we'll likely become entranced by some form of Christian theology.

Just as we are too quick to embrace either the saint or the sinner within us, too often Christian theology operates like an ax, lopping off huge portions of Scripture in order to appease the false god of non-contradiction. Because we adults don't handle paradoxicality well, we frequently take comfort in someone else's systemization of Scripture. One of the most obvious ways we see this play out is in the handling of baptism. Should only those that can be cognizant of belief be baptized as certain passages of Scripture clearly indicate or is it acceptable to baptize infants, who, presumably can't accept Jesus Christ because they aren't fully aware? Unfortunately, because of this very ambiguity in Scripture, Christian brothers and sisters are divided from one another.

If we're going to read scripture we're going to need to become comfortable with a measure of ambiguity. Just at the same time, if we're going to successfully navigate this thing called life, so too will we need a measure of our thought be unwed to the "law" of non-contradiction. In Christ, it is possible to both accept reality as it presently exists and at the same time envision how things shall be. Such an endeavor isn't an either/or, it is rather a blessed both/and.

It has been my experience that children are much better equipped to handle paradox better than we can. Take, for example, a child's ability to believe both in Adam and Eve as well as a seven-day creative act by God as well as believe in dinosaurs. The two would, to most adult minds, require a measure of choosing one or the other. After all, our adult minds spin, "how could both be true?" Children, however, are delightfully nonplussed by such thinking. This is because children are much more at ease with both/and thinking than we are.

All of our lives occur in a place which is both sanctified by Jesus Christ as well as despoiled by human sin. At one level, we Christians rejoice at Easter saying, "Christ is risen." In such a declaration, we give utterance to the reality of John 16. Christ has conquered the world! Love won! There is nothing to worry about for death is vanquished and sin overrun through Christ's death and resurrection!

Then we leave those Easter services with our bonnets and "in Christ the Lord is Risen Today" our minds and encounter a world still seemingly broken by sin. Perhaps a dear friend is dying of cancer. Maybe we read the paper and see some sort of genocide being perpetrated in the world. Can Christ be Victorious and evil still exist. Either/or thinking would lead us to choose one or the other, yet both apply and are equally true.

If we were to choose one or the other, it would be very difficult for us to make it through life. We'd either have to baptize great harm and or reject the very notion of God's involvement in the world, witnessed by ongoing evil.

My sense is that in this intersection of what is and what will be, we Christians need to be constantly in touch with both realities for they are both present here. After all, what would Christian witness mean if it were not somehow directional towards the coming Kingdom? We may be here, but we are going there. In this interim space, Christ is alongside us, witnessing with us of the coming reign of God. As we gather with other Christians undertaking the work Christ calls us to, we give human expression to and a foretaste of the happiness, peace and joy that is yet to fully arrive. As Christians, we must paradoxically dwell on both an earthly plane as well as a kingdom plane.

And I think here we encounter yet another reason why Jesus Christ encourages us to be child-like in our faith. Too much of life, to say nothing of too much of God, simply can't be reduced to a hegemonically applied law of non-contradiction. There are quite many occasions in which life will require us to be grounded in the here-and-now, just as life equally presents myriad opportunities for us to exercise our imaginative powers and see the world as it was meant to be – free from fear, worry, sin and death.

Then the question becomes, how do we who've been jilted by this thing called life, who've had our hopes dashed, who've tasted the bitter gall of loss open ourselves up to Holy Imagination?

Again, I return back to that soccer field with those four young children. My sense is that we who lift high the cross simply must attempt to see ourselves as we everlastingly are, not how we are in this moment. Jesus Christ calls us the “salt of the earth” and “a city on a hill.” We simply must see ourselves as the evil-fighting superheroes we are, for we can bring God’s very presence into being for others through our love. Our words and our actions, as they present Jesus Christ to others, see ourselves transformed from every day laborers into vessels of God’s amazing power and grace. Just imagine for a moment if we all woke up imagining the world as God would have it be, as opposed to how we, in our finitude, probably imagine it’s going to turn out.

In a way, we’re to be exactly like that little child, enervating the masses, by really, truly believing that we are superheroes. We have been blessed with the keys to the kingdom, after all. Jesus Christ tells us that whatever we ask will be given to us. That means, dear friends in Christ, that we can cure cancer. We can end hunger. We can bring a permanent cease fire into all the world. If we lament the way things are but are unwilling to imagine how God would have it be, then the chances are we will never take action. Never will we imagine that we are part of the most divine drama of all. The redemption of all creation through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Too frequently I wake up and hit the ground, never taking time to quietly imagine myself as a humble ambassador of God (2 Cor 5:11). It is largely through that inability to acknowledge God’s alternate reality for myself that I curse the driver who cuts me off instead of blessing them with a word of prayer, as my Lord suggests, loving my enemy instead of smiting him.

In order to more easily arrive at that place of imagination, I’ve found that a number of practices can be uniquely helpful. I can’t help but notice that many, if not all of them, are things children do more naturally than do us adults.

Bridge into how-to section.....

The Sacraments

In order to “practice” developing our Christian imagination, one practice which I believe intensifies our ability to “see” what will be is through ongoing participation in the Sacraments of the Church Universal. To begin with, I want to state for the record that I will be focusing entirely on the Sacraments of my own Church denomination. These are Baptism and the Lord’s Table. Other churches, namely the Catholic ones, hold that there are more than that. I have no opinion on that matter and discuss these two only because they are ones that I understand and preside in and for the sake of time. Even if your church celebrates others, I heartily commend you participate in them. For all Sacraments are united in the fact that they do what our either/or wired minds find difficult to do – imagine that God is, in the acts and words, doing something.

I also want to confess that what I believe about the Sacraments isn’t always necessarily a reflection of what my denomination, or even other Christian minds, believe. To my thinking, as they transcend the realm of the ordinary, Sacraments can have a multiplicity of “meanings” yet all be unified under the banner of God’s action through words and deeds. One may not pass a theology exam employing my thoughts, but I do believe that they will assist you imagine and then see and feel the action of God within them.

First of all, I want to make a bit of a differentiation between a Sacrament of the church and the rites and rituals of the secular world. I do it with such frequency and dedication towards order, making a morning pot of coffee is a bit of a ritual in my life. First, of course, I’ve got to feed the cats lest their constant meowing interrupt the concentration I’ll need to perform the coffee making ritual. Once their bellies are being filled, I take the coffee carafe and rise it out. There’s not usually much left in it from the day before but I wash it out, nevertheless. Then I deftly scoop exactly 5 tablespoons of ground Dunkin’ Donuts Original Blend Coffee into the basket into which I’ve placed a filter. Next, precisely 6 cups of filtered water is poured into the machine. A button is pushed and the rite is completed.

Most of us have some ritual life in our day-to-day routine. If we plumb the hours of our lives, isn’t there some daily, ongoing thing we do that, if it doesn’t occur, we feel it’s absence.

In that regard, I can’t help but imagine that somehow, we’re programmed for such events, for lack of better words

But, despite my daily reliance on my coffee-making ritual, I wouldn't say that God is powerfully acting in and through it. I would, however, say that He is as I lead a congregation in the Sacraments of our church. Many of us within the church, unwittingly reduce them to something more like my coffee ritual than to what they actually are.

The Sacraments of the church are gatherings of God's people together to experience the powerful presence of God in a special way. Whether the act is as obviously social as the Lord's Table or as private as the Catholic rite of Extreme Unction, these events, unlike my coffee routine require a joining of human beings with God. That is to say that Sacraments are not solitary acts of individuals. Instead, they are events meant to take place between at least two or more people.

This necessity for others to be joined with us is, I believe a reflection of our creation. After all, Genesis 1 teaches that, as man and woman, God created us. It is only in that togetherness with others that we fully reflect the divine nature of the one who's image we bear. So, Sacraments, by their nature, reflect the communal nature of our creation.

Also as opposed to our daily life rituals, Sacraments join us in a special way to God. After all, if God is divinely acting, it stands to reason that He must be present. In sacramental acts, we humans are joined to God in a special and unique way. To answer a question I'm sure is in some of your minds, yes, God is indeed with us in every moment, in every breath of every day. Yet somehow, gathered around Baptismal font or Communion table God is acting in, around and through us in a manner that rises above his daily participation in our lives.

Perhaps a return to childhood offers us a pleasant, if incomplete, analogy. Although no childhood is ideal, it is my sincere hope that everyone reading this work had parents who helped them celebrate their birthdays. If you didn't, I'm sure you imagined how you'd like a childhood birthday to be. For me, my parents were especially present on those days. I can vividly recall just how delighted they both looked as Mom carried in the cake, with candles ablaze. I also recollect my father, hovering somewhere nearby with a camera, wanting to make certain the moment was preserved for the years ahead.

But it wasn't just in the arrival of the cake, was it? My experience and the one I try to duplicate for the kids are to make the entire day "special." Perhaps I'll allow them to have soft drinks or eat chocolate for breakfast if they so desire. Both my wife and I try to make certain that, for the birthday child, the day sparkles with joy and expectation of the gifts which are to come.

Do we, on those days, treat our other child poorly? I sure hope not. Beyond that, is it the case that on the day before the birthday or after that we are somehow absent from their young lives? Again, no. We are, just like the vast majority of parents, alongside our children every day making certain they are fed, clothed, sheltered and protected from the things that go bump in the night, so to speak.

Sacraments are perhaps those "birthday moments" in the life of Christians. While the entirety of the Lord's Day is akin to our birthday day, the sacramental event themselves like the arrival of the cake with the signing of "Happy Birthday to You." In those moments, God smiles as brightly upon us as all the candles on all the birthday cakes before this day and hence until the Kingdom comes.

In much the same way, it isn't the case that God arrives, like a bad parent, just as the candle is about to be lit and leaves as quickly as the final "you" is sung in the song. No, God remains. He "hems us in" before and behind us as Psalm 139 indicates. There is nowhere, no place under the sun or in the Kingdom to come in which God in Christ isn't with us, according to Paul in Romans 8. No, God is with us always.

Yet in the Sacraments, he appears to us just a bit more clearly, if we will listen, experience and, dare I say it, imagine what's really going on.

For us to really participate in the sacraments, we need necessarily take off those wonderfully grounded lenses we typically see the world through. Don't worry. They'll be there when the Sacrament is over. Instead, through your God-given imaginative powers, allow yourself to see the movement of God through the Sacraments.

Personally, I am only able to do this insofar as I focus intently upon what's transpiring before me. If I am thinking more about what Monday morning holds for me than I am listening to the words of the Great Thanksgiving, I will by default force the event to into the realm of the ordinary. If, on the other hand, I vacate my mind of those things (again, don't fret, those worries will be there for you when it's over), I am much more

“in tune” with God’s frequency. It’s then I hear not only the words but fill their richness and profundity stir in my soul.

When I try to see the baptismal waters with all the excitement of a 6-year-old encountering their birthday cake, I am elevated in mind, body and spirit into the present reality of God’s goodness shining here in our time. Insofar as I am able to conjure up the same excitement of a child awaiting their first taste of that cake (and ice cream) as I prepare to accept the sanctified bread and wine, I will be transported to the wonderful place where I sense the palpable presence of God. Suddenly, the awareness of God in around and through me becomes as real as those worries, I’ll face come Monday morning. I just know, deep down in my soul, everything is going to be all right, no matter what may come.

Now, it should be noted, this experience of the Sacrament is just as much aspirational as it is real. Sometimes, some mornings, I openly confess I am somehow unable to force the cares of the world apart from my brain. It is on those mornings as well as others, where, although expectant, things don’t quite “click.” I am left here, on this plane, neither transported nor elevated. I don’t know why they occur, but they do.

For a great many years, I considered those occasions entirely disappointing. Now, however, I try (with an emphasis on try) to remember two things. Just because I didn’t feel anything special, doesn’t mean something awesomely powerful didn’t occur right before my very eyes. After all, even as I write these words, I am on a planet that’s both hurtling through space as well as rotating on its axis. While I don’t sense either event happening, they do happen and I am grateful for i

The second thing I try to recall on those mornings where my experience of the Sacraments isn’t what it has been in the past is this. While not a “top 10” for me, the Spirit did move as profoundly in someone else as she has in me previously. Secondly, it is because I have been so affected within the Sacraments, I know that the day is surely coming where I, too, will be returned to the apex of faith in and through the Sacraments of the church.

I was greatly assisted in being brought to this awareness by a dear Christian friend of mine. On Sunday morning, I was telling him a story of a worship service that included liturgical dancing. Perhaps it is my rational brain, but I oftentimes find liturgical dancing to be less than thrilling. Well during the course of this particular service in-between scanning the bulletin for the next “enjoyable” item to me and sullenly waiting for the dancing to end, I happened to see a woman in a pew directly across from me positively beaming at the same occurrence. If you could but see the radiance in her eyes and the wattage of her smile, you’d know as I did then, she was in that wonderful place of joining with the Almighty. I was envious, to be sure.

Of course, as I was telling my dear friend, aiming towards sharing with him MY disappointment in the service, he took a different tack. One that I shall be forever grateful that he did. He said, interrupting my story, “isn’t that amazing? To see God move so powerfully in someone else’s heart? What a great God we serve!”

He had it. The key by which I am able to take in God’s greatness, even on those Sundays where I don’t necessarily connect with God. When they happen, and they do, I try to look around the gathered congregation. I look intently at, let’s say, the parents or grandparents of the child being baptized. Perhaps I see that delightful power of God stirring on the face of someone I don’t know yet. But, if I will but bother to look, I’ll see it. And, in seeing it, I am able to vicariously experience God’s power.

There are also a couple of actionable items which I try to do to sort of stoke the fires of faith, so to speak. On the morning a sacrament is to be performed, I try to be especially mindful and prayerful, humbling asking that God reveal himself in a special way during the sacrament. I pray that I may feel the baptismal waters upon my head, sense the fresh garments of Christ being placed upon me.

Just prior to the Sacrament, I make certain to do a quick breathing exercise in the hopes that I can clear my mind of its excess and unnecessary baggage so that sacred room can be made in the corners of my mind to process the holiness of the event.

These practices enable me most mornings to truly drink deeply of the cup and feast upon the bread.

Finally, I try to somehow connect with the true sense of communion with others in Christ. In the Sacrament of the Lord’s Table, we Christians believe that through the Holy Spirit acting in the moment of Sacrament, we are somehow joined with all believers past and present in the joyful feast of the Lord. As we take in the bread and wine, we are in a way getting a foretaste of that joyous, eternal banquet in the coming Kingdom. As I look around, I try to imagine all those brothers and sisters in Christ that have been lost to me

gathered right there with me. So too do I attempt to imagine the peace and joy that will be eternally ours in the Kingdom. It will be a feast in which we will no longer fear death or sickness or war or worry. Time itself will have lost meaning and we will no longer be chafed by its brevity. Dearth will lose meaning for us all as there will be an abundance of everything we truly need

It is in Communion that, by the very act of Sacrament, that we are drawn especially near to that coming Kingdom. Expect it to come as the pastor or priest begins the liturgical words and it will arrive. Ideally, before the pastor begins the Sacrament of Holy Communion, search your heart. Locate those places you've allowed sin to take root and grow, hardening your heart. Is there something, either an action or an idea, you keep hidden from friends? That's generally a concrete way to start the process of finding and articulating your dark thoughts or deeds. Next, consider your relationships, especially those which are presently or seemingly permanently strained. There you'll likely see a hardness of heart which largely goes undetected. Maybe there's an aunt or a cousin you avoid for some particular reason. A lot of times, mentally scanning a list of friends that are no longer close with us can reveal for us hard feelings. Now, consider the broader world beyond family and friends. Are there people you're actively resenting? To whom would you least like to be seated next to on a long flight? A boss, current or present, frequently comes to mind but so too can coworkers inhabit this list. Who knows? It could even be the person who cut you off as you drove to the church that very morning.

In the Gospels, Jesus frequently shares with us the power of forgiveness. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear our Savior say – “or if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals for us another angle of forgiveness telling the Disciples after his Resurrection, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” Think then just a moment on the power your own forgiveness holds. Not only in it do you lay claim to your own salvation, so too do you release its' power for others.

Communion offers us a great opportunity then both for an expansion of our imagination as well as providing us a great entry point into the healthy Christian practice of self-reflection. It's been my experience that imagination expands our capacity to forgive while the practice of forgiveness grows our ability to imagine. Quite often, forgiving others requires me to think eschatologically. I simply need ask the question, “Will my beef with or disliking of this person be relevant in the Kingdom?” Almost invariably the answer is not only “no” but a more emphatic, “of course not.” If that doesn't work, I think a bit on our Savior, Jesus Christ. When facing deep resentment and animosity, I recall that Jesus Christ died for this person just as He did for me. Further, if this person is reconciled to God through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, why would I bother holding this grudge. Sin, my own and others, has no eternal dimension. Thus, what I am often guilty of doing is placing overwhelming emphasis on something (an argument, a bad deed, etc.) which has only temporarily affected me. Imaginatively speaking, these things are the spiritual equivalent of pole vaulting over mouse droppings.

So also does forgivingness of others enhance my capacity to imagine. Burdened with ongoing resentment, I am simply incapable of seeing much beyond the tip of my own nose. You've probably experienced something similar. Can't you recollect a time when you really needed to get something done but your mind kept circling back to a personal injustice? It is in these states of reliving the harm that we encounter a large impediment to our faith, to say nothing of our productivity.

In Communion, we experience a moment of profound reconciliation with God. It is only fitting that we, ourselves, be reconciled to others.

Finally, in preparation for Communion, we need inquire inwardly about our own relationship with God. Now, a word of caution. This practice of self-reflection as it relates to God can often be hijacked, so to speak. In guilt and in shame, sometimes it is the case that we use good or bad. For example, if I become more fixated on how I'm not pursuing a deeper relationship with Christ than by considering how such a thing can be accomplished, I'm bound to come away feeling bad about myself. Such ill-will towards self is a fertile field for darkness to creep into our light-filled lives. No, as we prepare for Communion, we should be more focused on imagining a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ than fretting over what we've left undone. Framed in such a manner, self-reflection can be the entry portal into a vibrant life with Jesus Christ. In order to bring anything to

fruition, we necessarily must imagine it. Imagine yourself deep in prayer. In your mind's eye, see yourself reading more Scripture. Envision yourself hammering nails at a Habitat for Humanity home.

Then, as you approach the Table or the elements are passed to you, taste and see the Lord's goodness. Realize that what was accomplished in and through Jesus Christ was imagined by our own God before the foundations of this Earth. In a similar fashion, in leaving Communion, ask God in quiet prayer to bring into reality those things you've imagined in your heart prior to the Eucharist.

You can forgive people.

You are able to strengthen your relationship with Jesus.

You will do more work in Kingdom building.

But it all begins with employing our imagination for its God-given uses.

Art

Chances are, if you've had kids, you've proudly hung pieces of their artwork on your refrigerator door. Now look, I know your kid is talented. But, I wonder, were any of those pieces destined to hang at the Louvre? That being said, even though they weren't the greatest pieces of art ever produced, didn't they awaken in you amazement and joy?

I'll never forget my son bringing home some of the drawings he'd done in preschool. There on those pieces of drawing paper were scribbles of all kinds of colors with absolutely no discernable form. It was a chaotic masterpiece. One day as he arrived home, showing me his work proudly, I asked him, "What are those pictures of?"

Ben then launched into the most amazing discourse. What appeared to me to be little more than unruly colored lines on a white sheet of paper were, for him, a farmhouse filled with all sorts of creatures. The red lines, those were roosters, the brown ones, cows. Over in the corner, where a circular doodle of black stood was the farmer watching all the animals have a dance. On and on Ben went, telling me all that the picture entailed.

To my trained and discerning adult eye, this was all just a wonderful mess. Of course, it was a wonderful mess because it was done by my son. But it was a mess, nevertheless. To my son though, this drawing was alive right before his very eyes, inhabited by dancing animals led by an erstwhile farmer.

Children are just naturally drawn to all forms of artistry and see in works of art things beyond our rational, adult eyes. This ability to see and breathe life into artwork is truly a gift of childhood. Pretty soon, instead of enjoying artwork, we adults become critics of it. How quick we are to rank particular pieces of art. We decide, "this piece is good but it's not great." We might look upon a painting and take momentarily pleasure in it but, all too quickly, don't we lapse into comparisons? As in, "that's a nice painting, but it isn't as good as the Mona Lisa."

As we take up the work of being critical, we tend to untether from the sheer enjoyment of artistic endeavors. We spend too much mental energy thinking upon what a piece isn't instead of enjoying what it itself is. Not everything is going to be of Van Gogh quality. Yet if I remain disappointed that a work doesn't achieve that level of artistry, I'll never enjoy it for what it is.

Kids, in contrast, see the beauty in most any piece of work. Sure, they're going to like some things more than another. But in even those things that aren't their favorite, they'll find something to like. They'll see some new avenue of thought in the work that tickles their fancy. One way to see this in action is to ask a kid what they see in a particular work of art. You may see little more than a poorly drawn tree. A kid, in contrast, will see in that tree a bird tweeting a song or a cat waiting for a fireman to rescue it, etc.

I remain convinced that we are able to return at least partially to our pre-critical method. In so doing, we will be released from the torturous prison of judgment and be freed to appreciate a great many things that perhaps previously we were unable to find pleasurable.

Here as with a great many things, it all begins with practice.

While kids, no doubt, enjoy seeing or hearing artistic endeavors, they almost always prefer doing art to consuming it. Ask a child if they'd rather see a few pieces that you've fingerpainted, let's say or if they themselves would like to finger-paint. Unless they're tired, a child will always opt to do art rather than see, hear or taste art.

Somehow that same query elicits the opposite answer from us adults, doesn't it? Would we fingerpaint? We probably wouldn't citing the mess. But, at a deeper level, the reason we'd decline is that we wouldn't want our output being judged, either by ourselves or others.

You see at some point in our human development, we begin to realize that, well, we aren't Picasso, Beethoven or Marlon Brando. Too often, just because we aren't as good as the best, we quit doing art ourselves. This loss of actually making art leads us to largely disconnect with artistry all together.

It need not be so. It is, I believe, in our abandonment of doing art ourselves that we begin to diminish our own imaginative powers. Ultimately, where we end up is quite like me viewing my son's artwork. I simply was unable to conjure from the mess the message.

Consider this. We live in a world that oftentimes strikes us as unrelated, a mass of divergent lives, random events, happenstance and differing objectives. In this unharmonious din of life, we can become depressed. We can even begin questioning God's role in it all, if not his existence itself. At the risk of employing an overtired analogy, we are losing sight of the forest through the trees.

I sincerely believe that making our own art is a significant piece of finding God amid the tree we've squashed our noses into.

But in order to get to that point, we simply must abandon our comparative lenses. No, we will not be Picasso, but we can do art. We simply have to see the process as more important than the output.

Personally, it was through my children that I was led back into producing art. One day during a long, hot summer here in the South, my kids and I needed something to do. As it was late in the summer, most of the low-hanging fruit was long-since consumed. We'd been to the pool two dozen times. So much so that the prospect struck us all as rather dull. We'd also seen every conceivable kid's movie released that summer. With the noonday sun hanging high in the humid air and being neither mad dogs nor Englishmen, we were determined to enjoy the great indoors. So, what were we to do?

It was then that my 6-year-old daughter suggested we go paint things. Unsure of what she meant, I asked her where we would go to do such a thing. Of course, she knew. We'd go to a pottery painting place. Immediately I thought it'd be great fun for the kids. It would also allow me to surf the internet for a few hours on my phone whilst they painted to their heart's content. When we got there though, the script was flipped.

Both my daughter and my son absolutely insisted I participate as well. As their demands echoed in my ears, I thought back upon all the times I'd set out to do art and felt like I'd failed. You see, God did not choose to bless me with any great gifts for making visual art. So, all I could think of was how much better other people were at it than I was.

Notice, I didn't recollect all the fun I'd had making art as a kid. I didn't remember the art camp I went to as a 5-year-old at a neighbor's house when I had so much fun making art projects. No, all I could recall was that my product rarely was as aesthetically pleasing as others.

Thankfully, my children won that day and I selected a piece of pottery to paint. Not so much because I necessarily wanted to do so, rather because I didn't want any further argument. Truth be told, I picked what I construed to be a rather easy piece, hopeful to finish quickly and turn my attention to my smartphone screen. Things did not go according to that plan.

Instead, I found myself lost in painting. Perhaps it was because I'd selected a Cross that I felt as though I couldn't just half-ass it. Maybe I became transfixed because I was with my kids. Who knows really, probably a bit of both? However, it came to pass, I was blessed by it. Now look, did the piece turn out to be great? No, it didn't. When I gaze upon it, sometimes all I see is the crookedness of the lines or how I wish I'd made better color selections. All very adult realizations.

But thanks be to God, on other occasions I look at that particular cross and I am instantly transported back to that table, with the smell of acrylic paint in my nostrils and the freedom of just sitting there and having fun with my kids. If I can but leave behind my critical, adult, either/or thinking, that piece of my own artistry can elevate my thought and heart beyond the present moment.

I noticed it's power most poignantly the day my sister died. Needless to say, I returned to my home in utter and complete loss and shock. As I sat upon our green sofa facing the mantle above the fireplace, I was lost in grief.

Thankfully, my eyes caught sight of that crooked-lined, oddly colored cross. In an instant, I was able to remember happier days. If but for a moment, my heart emerged from its sorrow. I could again remember that because Christ died for us, my sister was only gone from the present, alive with Him forever. I could momentarily imagine her there, with Him, free from the cares of this time and place.

From there, I could connect with the fact that though this was one of the worst days of my life, there was the potential for joy in this world as well. Looking at that cross, I just knew – time would provide salve for my sorrow. Better still, one day I would again be reunited with my dear sister. I can imagine that day and await it's coming.

Art provided the portal through which I could discover an end to the pain. Now look, it wasn't a permanent solution. Make no doubt about it, the grief remains with me to this very day. But it isn't as profound as it was that way. When the sorrow rises like an unwanted specter, I try to imagine the kingdom. Quite frequently I do so by thinking back upon that day on the couch in which my eyes were drawn to that particularly awkward Cross.

I can't help but wonder what would've happened to me that day if, months prior, I'd chosen not to pick up a paintbrush? While I'm sure God would've found a means by which to lift my heart up to him, I'm really glad He did so in such a fashion. I'm grateful because not only am I blessed with that moment, I am also reminded of the power art holds in my life. Specifically, I am glad that I am still able to do art, freed from the tyranny of self-criticism.

It is for that reason and a few others that I heartily recommend you find some way to produce your own works of art. Listen, I understand your objections and, I'm sure, they all seem fairly reasonable. A few are probably valid but not nearly enough of them to waylay you from at least trying. I know I've focused on visual arts but there are other forms, to be sure. Personally, I favor the artistry of cooking but many of you are likely drawn to music or creative writing or any other number of artistic endeavors. My hope and prayer is that you'll find the time to return to the joys of art just as a child.

For it is through art that our imaginations can run wild. Deepening our imaginative power can then more amply be brought to bear in the realm of Kingdom building. After all, if we can imagine a place where peace reigns, where there is provision for all of God's children and there isn't sickness in the world, then perhaps, just perhaps, we might tentatively begin to take steps into shaping those grand pieces of imagination into reality.

Meditation

I've left for last what, for many of us, is the most difficult means of expanding our imaginative capabilities for last. Meditation. I have no doubt that a great many of you reading this book will immediately begin leafing through the pages to the next section. I can't say that I blame you. Just a few years back, this kind of chapter would've provoked the exact same response in myself.

Meditation strikes most as some bizarrely impossible practice best left to adherents of other religions. Maybe our minds turn to some lotus-positioned Buddhist monk chanting with the scent of incense hanging in the air. Others will have tried the practice and declare themselves incapable of meditation. Again, a few years back, I would've been right there with you. I held both erroneous assumptions both about the practice as well as my ability to participate in it.

But just as with doing art, so too has my opinion of meditation shifted as I've grown longer in years and thinner of hair. Most mornings you'll find me spent at least 45 minutes engaged in the practice of meditation. I deliberately wake up early in order to do so finding it that much of a boost to my Christian walk. But if that boon of meditation wasn't sufficient isn't enough to sway you, let me say that I deeply enjoy it. Actually, I've been blessed to have some really amazing encounters with God in and through the ongoing practice of meditation. And I think myself no outlier. I am certain that if anyone can enjoy an additional measure of peace and joy through Christian meditation.

Before I share for you just how I do it, I think I should point out a few important items. First of all, my meditative practices didn't just arise out of nothing nor did I immediately begin to profit spiritually from them.

It isn't the case that one morning I just began without any instruction nor did I reach some spiritual mountaintop on the very first day. No, meditation like many great things, requires dedication, discipline and time. Just looking on those three words I can't help but notice that the acronym arising from them is DDT, a repellent. NO wonder most of us eschew them, right?

Seriously though, no one should expect themselves to take to the practice like a fish to water nor will it ever be "easy" to get fired up to meditate. I neither began with a bang nor do I always look forward to waking up early. Truth be told, most nights I go to sleep figuring, "I'll skip tomorrow" only to wake up and begin meditating somewhat resentful of it.

Still though, I loop back to my previous comments saying simply, it's worth it.

I also want to add that meditation was a practice I was taught. Left to my own devices, I never once would've been able to begin, much less, continue were it not for dedicated individuals as well as books and electronic assistance. How quick are we all to figure we can accomplish anything on our own, only to taste the bitter fruit of failure? My sense is that meditation poses the same risk. If you believe you can just begin today without any instruction, who knows, maybe you can. But, if having tried it your own way to little progress, might I suggest listening to others more advanced in the practice?

Again, that was my experience. Somewhere in the early 2000's, I became convinced of the power meditation held. Looking at the salient data and studies, I was convinced meditating was a practice I wanted to begin precisely because it offers so many benefits. Hearing it was just a matter of "turning off" your mind, I determined to do so.

I made it about 3 seconds before my mind raced down a rabbit hole of thought. This initial though led to cascading thoughts stemming from the first one. I wonder if the dishes in the washer are clean led to a throughout exploration of my history with dishwashers. Dishwashers in turn led my back to my days in culinary school. Wonder what happened to that guy? Or that curly haired girl with the Grateful Dead tattoo.

Just like that, my thoughts were racing at a million miles an hour.

I caught myself. I took a deep breath, cleared my mind and...

After about 2 seconds I was onto another thought with its never-ending branches of subsequent thoughts.

I hope I tried again that day. I don't believe I did. I do though remember telling others multiple times when the subject matter of meditation arose (most notably at Duke Divinity School) that, "I am incapable of doing" it. I meant those words sincerely yet they were demonstrably false as subsequent years have made clear

But the pathway from there to here includes a couple of additions. First, a great set of teachers. When I really got serious about expanding my meditative life, God put into my life several instructors. Allowing others to show and lead me into meditation enabled me to delve more deeply into it. To begin with, there is something vitally important about hearing a meditation coach say, "I wasn't good at this to being with, either" that I found especially freeing. So, if you haven't yet heard it, let me be the first to mention it – I wasn't good at this in the beginning, either.

In addition to the knowledge that meditation is tough to do, teachers were able to alert me to some means by which a racing mind could be slowed, prior to letting go. Deep breathing, yoga and a number of other means prepare our minds for meditation. If you're a book learner, I'd heartily recommend Susan Salzberg's work, "Real Happiness." "Real Happiness" is an outstanding primer on meditation. Working a reader through a 21-day process, Salzberg shares with her readers several methods of meditation. Along the way, you'll also glean a bevy of reasons why we all should practice mindfulness. These "benes" will often serve as the carrots to keep you moving ahead. Also, Salzberg writes in an easy, understandable fashion to which she adds concrete ideas and methods.

Finally, I'd like to point out that successful meditation isn't just turning your mind off, so to speak. It can, and should I believe, have a decidedly Christian element attached to it. Personally, I conclude each period of meditation with prayer. Most mornings, it is during my meditative time in which God "speaks" to me in my innermost heart. Or perhaps out of the blue I'll recall someone for whom I can pray. Simply put, I use meditation as a means by which I attempt to turn off the cares of this world so that I can pick up the still-small voice of God providing wisdom and guidance.

I also employ Scripture in my meditative practice. A portion of my time is spent both reading, and then quietly reflecting on, the Word of our Lord Jesus Christ. Again, coming back to some of the ideas I unfolded

for you on the section about the Bible, I find that my faith grows and thus my joy increases as I intersect with the Word of God. By meditating on (deeply reflecting would be another way of phrasing it) I find my understanding of God's Word grows richer in addition to me remembering it throughout the day. If I can find just one verse or idea in my reading of Scripture, and then reflect on during meditation it is my experience that it stays with me. I like both pot-roast as well as French-fries. Both feed me. At the same time, I can't help but notice a serving of pot-roast keeps me satiated far longer than French-fries. So too do I find that meditation over the word "sticks to my bones" whereas brief readings of scripture depart me rather quickly.

Okay, with those preliminaries attended to, I will now describe my practices. Please do keep in mind you don't have to follow these in whole or in part in order to discover how meditation will lead you towards having a child-like faith. You do, however, need to begin.

Here is what I do, in the morning and the evening. Feel free to take what you like and leave the rest.

1. I begin all periods of meditation with the practice of deep breathing with my eyes closed. Personally, I favor what's known as 4-7-8 breathing in the morning and square breathing (or 4x4) breathing at night.
 - a. Each of these types of breathing links to inhales/exhales and holds. In 4-7-8 breathing, you breathe in through your nose for a four-count. Then you hold that large breath for a 7 count. Finally, you exhale through your mouth for a count of eight. Keeping your tongue on the roof of your mouth and exhaling loudly, if need be. This tongue positioning extends your exhale to the allotted time. Otherwise, it's likely you been none breathing out well before 8 seconds elapses. Square breathing is very similar only the count changes. It's four seconds in, then a hold of four seconds. That's followed by an exhale of four beats and another period of rest for the same measure of time. Then, you begin again with an inhale of 4 seconds.
 - b. After the measured breathing, I spend a few moments initially clearing my mind. I then continue my deep breathing by "breathing" into my body progressively.
 - i. I take long, deep breaths in through my nose and then exhale them. As I am exhaling, I try to imagine breathing into a part of my body, feeling it relax. I begin with my toes and work upwards continuing to breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.
2. I then try to let go of all thoughts.
 - a. Typically, most of my mind is emptied through the period of deep breathing. This may not be the case with you. Remember, meditation is more practice than anything else. Should a thought interrupt your unthinking, allow your consciousness to focus on it for a beat or two. Then, attempt to send it away. Many folks say either inwardly or aloud, "go away." Regardless of how you hasten unwelcome thoughts out of our mind, remember that it happens to everyone, even the Dalai Lama, no doubt. Many get wrapped up in self-judgment here and stop altogether. Please don't. Thoughts during this time are absolutely normal. Don't fixate on them. Allow them to wash over you and ebb away, as though a mental wave on your thought ocean.
 - b. I find repeating one word over and over to be helpful in drowning out other thoughts. In my mind or aloud, I'll repeat the word "love."
3. I focus on light alone as I listen for God.
 - a. With my eyes closed, I seek an inward light. I then "stare" at this, trying to maintain a level of thoughtless-ness.
 - b. In the silence and openness of thought, I listen for God to speak to me in a still-small voice. Some mornings I'll hear Him, others I do not. No matter whether I do or I don't, I use this period to make an attempt to listen to what God would say to me.
4. I then imagine the Kingdom of God.
 - a. For me, it's a house on a prairie, for some strange reason. It's a blue house. Off in the distance, a cluster of three crosses raises from the hills beyond the daisy-filled plain and high grasses which stretch out in all direction. Regardless of what your images will be, try to focus your heart around the peacefulness and quiet of heaven.

- b. Sometimes I encounter people in this imaginative time. These are mostly non-verbal interactions. Sometimes, I confess, I am quite surprised who I “run into” there with me in the coming Kingdom
 - c. This is my most favorite part of meditating, I should note. Sometimes, I’ll stay in this blessed space for upwards of 30 minutes or more as I find it so blissful. Again though, it didn’t come in the first dozen attempts.
5. I slowly return back down to earth, so to speak.
- a. I begin this process with a series of affirmations. Feel free to use your own. What I speak inwardly is as follows
 - i. I am Jason Bryant, beloved child of God. I was created in the image of the Father, redeemed by the blood of the Son and am vivified through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Because God loves me first, I am able to love myself. I love you, Jason Bryant. Jason Bryant, I love you. Even though I am beloved by God, I am yet a sinner. I confess that, even on my best days, I fall prey to pride, gluttony, lust, sloth, greed, envy and anger. I am not perfect. Yet I am loved by Jesus. Because I am imperfect, I am just like everyone else in all creation. There is no one better than me, just as there is no one worse than me. We are all just bozos on the same bus. Flawed yet loved by God. Unlike God, I am a finite being bounded by space and time. I am here, in the Milky Way on the third planet from our sun. I exist presently in the Northern Hemisphere, on the continent of North America in the nation of the United States. I am in North Carolina, in Gaston County, living in the city of Mount Holly. I am in the neighborhood of Dutchman’s Ridge, on the street named Augustus at 468. I am sitting here on my couch. I am no other place but here just as I am incapable of being at no other time. It is the 31st day of July in the year of our Lord. I have only this day, this hour, this minute, this second, this breath. For me, there is no tomorrow and there is no past. There is only just now. This is sufficient because right now, I am joined by God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit
 - b. I next employ a 1-2-3-4-5 method of accessing my senses in order to move me further back into the present time and place.
 - i. First, I try to focus on one particular smell. From there I move to sensing two tastes, three things I feel, sour things I hear. Finally, I slowly open my eyes and scan for 5 distinct objects. Now I don’t stress if I can’t taste two things or smell anything save home at all. The point isn’t that I receive these points of sense data, it’s rather that I tried.
6. I use some devotional books and read Scripture.
- a. These readings are all short. I then close my eyes and think briefly upon one pertinent aspect of each.
 - b. For Scripture, I tend to read one Psalm per day. If time permits, I’ll read a chapter of Proverbs and/or one chapter of the New Testament, preferably one which will allow my imagination to wander. That is to say I tend to use the Gospels more than a letter for example.
7. I pray
- a. Personally, I get on my knees to do so, resting my body on an ottoman.
 - b. During these prayers, I thank God for the day, praising Him for both its creation as well as allowing me to exist within it. I then offer Him my hopes followed by brief prayers of intercession and supplication. I then generally close with the Lord’s Prayer or some other rote prayer.

That’s it. Of course, that’s my method. I hope you will find your own way when it comes to meditation. As I said at the outset, you don’t have to do it my way, just try it for a period of time. Don’t be surprised if you emerge from the practice with a greater capacity to imagine things. This imaginative power in Christ is the means by which will be able to conjure joy out of the mundane or even the tragic things of this life.

Ever notice how easily kids are able to do this? I'll never forget my son smiling one rainy morning. To complicate matters further, it was a morning his soccer team was to play. The incessant rain, however, cancelled that game. Ben was yet non-plussed by this news. Choosing instead to look forward to some board game we'd get to play more of, Ben was proverbially making lemonade from lemons.

Anxiety has a way of cutting us off from a similar process. All too often, setbacks of any size have the capacity to derail our day, if not our entire week. Oftentimes, these setbacks are situations which lie beyond our present control. Just as I can't stop the rain, neither can I make a person choose to hire me for a job or stop my father's dementia from progressing. I can, however, choose to find just one positive thing in each and every situation which I encounter. This always requires both force of will as well as imagination. As adults, we are typically better at the former than the latter. All of the practices I've laid out in this chapter are designed to stoke your capacity for Christian imagination. It is my steadfast belief that, in so doing, you'll soon be able to take abiding joy in the little things in life. Perhaps items even as small as three pennies and a rock!