

“Imagination”

Chapter four of Barbara Brown Taylor’s

The Preaching Life

1. According to BBT, what two advantages do children have over adults in their perception of the world? (See pp. 30-40, the par. beginning “Part of their secret” and the one following.)
2. BBT sees imagination as a valuable, even crucial tool in the process of taking every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5) in order to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:1). This change in our way of thinking is part and parcel of clothing ourselves with Christ (Gal 3:27). BBT sees this as a creative and imaginative process:

To find the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, we are called to participate in God’s own imagination—to see ourselves, our neighbors, and our world through God’s eyes, full of possibility, full of promise, ready to be transformed. (50)

Indeed, our very faith is

The surrender of one set of images and the acceptances of another. It is a matter of learning to see the world, each other, and ourselves as God sees us, and to live as if God’s reality were the only one that mattered. (42)

C. S. Lewis invokes a similar idea in his sermon *The Weight of Glory*:

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour’s glory [in the world to come] should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.

Discuss the way your imagination and creativity should play a role both in the cognitive renewal Paul speaks of and the awareness of our eternal destinies Lewis describes.

3. Using parables, Jesus conveyed the Gospel by drawing people into worlds where the tax collector is more righteous than the Pharisee, the Samaritan fulfills the law and not the Levite, the prodigal son outshines the older, faithful brother and Lazarus sits in heaven while the rich son of Abraham roasts. Apprehending this message required both the Spirit (1 Cor 2:9+) and the ability to think outside the box. In this chapter BBT makes the case that imagination is central to this:

Look at seeds, weeds, coins, sheep, nets, pearls, birds; look at parents and children, stewards and laborers, farmers and fishermen; look at women sweeping and baking bread... [The kingdom] may be hidden, but it is there, if we will look not once but twice... [Revelation] is a shocking gift

of new sight [that turns us around] so that when we are set back down again we see everything from a new angle... Over and over again, the human imagination turns out to be the place where human beings encounter an inner reality with power to transform the other realities of their lives. (45-46)

As an example, BBT says:

Reading the newspaper, I see a map of the world with symbols denoting war, earthquake, famine. There are black lines separating this country from that, this people from that. I note with some relief that the area in which I live is free from symbols. I look once and think, "Thank God I'm an American." I look twice and think, "God help me, I'm an earthling," and in that imaginative act my relationship to the world in which I live is changed. (45)

Think about the way the Spirit uses creativity, visualization and the other elements of imagination to enable us to see the world differently, and to see the Gospel. How is this same process active in your growth as a believer?

4. BBT explores at length the role of imagination in reading Scripture. The process she describes—reading Scripture and putting ourselves into it—is called Ignatian meditation, for Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth century founder of the order of the Jesuits. In his *Spiritual Exercises* he taught use of visualization in Scripture study, in which one imagines one's self in the narrative of the passage, exploring the physical experience of it.

For Ignatius this was part of a discernment process, especially used when one is trying to discern one's vocation. Immersion in the experience of the narrative serves as a gateway to interaction with God and Jesus by the Spirit.

- a. Have you ever tried to imagine yourself within the narrative of a passage? What did you think of the examples she gave (Peter trying to walk on water, Lazarus emerging from the tomb, the feeding of the 5,000 families, etc.)?
- b. For Ignatius the process of discernment was a crucial part of his meditation. Taylor agrees:

When imagination comes home and empties its pockets, of course there will be some sorting to do... There are no treasures without some trash, and the Holy Spirit can be trusted to go with us when we wander and to lead us back home again, with eyes far wiser for what they have seen. (48)

Consider a passage such as Jesus and Zacchaeus (Lk 19). You might imagine yourself as Zacchaeus or someone in the crowd—a disciple or a passerby. What types of things might you learn by such visualization, and how could you discern if it is from the Spirit, or a mere flight of fancy?

5. BBT sees imagination in such spiritual experiences as revelation, faith, and even sanctification and discernment. She adds that imagination has a somewhat bad reputation because of our fallen nature, and because of its similarity to the "graven images" condemned in the Decalogue.

Now that you have discussed the chapter, what was your gut reaction to Taylor's many references to imagination?

Fun quotation: "Reason is the natural order of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning" (C. S. Lewis).