

*"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."  
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it  
for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before  
breakfast." (Alice in Wonderland.)*

Actually that would be a good exercise, a good spiritual discipline, for the prayer life of a Christian. Because a large part of what we are about is making possible what the world tells us is impossible! Three impossible things – maybe, Christ is risen, this world of ours is redeemable, and the Chicago Cubs will one day win the World Series. (“Okay,” you say, “but probably not that last one.” And yet some of us are believers!) We can imagine what is “not-yet” because we have the promises of God...what the author of the Book of Hebrews calls “the evidence of things not seen.” And that is why this empty chair is here at the communion table (and I will come back around to that).

Luke, in our Gospel lesson, describes a dinner party, at the home of a religious leader, where the guests are jockeying for the place of honor, kissing up in order to be noticed, one can imagine. And it says of Jesus “they were watching him closely,” and he told them a parable. It doesn’t *sound* like a parable, does it? We are used to parables being in story form. The point of Luke telling us it is a parable is that this is *not* advice about manners and etiquette. This is not Emily Post. Parables turn the world upside down. And Jesus is using a familiar truth about manners in order to make a theological point about what life is like in the Kingdom of God.

He has said this before... that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, and he says it again in this parable. ‘Don’t compete for the place of honor; take the lowest place. (Not just a lower one, but the lowest.) When *you* throw the party, don’t just invite those who will have to put you on their social calendar to repay you. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. As in social behavior, so in the spiritual realm – if you demand honor you won’t get it; if you honor others, you will. Paul writes in Philippians that Jesus himself is like this, “emptying himself, taking the form of a servant.” Jesus, whom they were watching closely at this meal, essentially says to them, Imagine that things are the opposite for what you think. Imagine that.

Our Hebrews passage could provide the grist for four or five sermons, but here’s the part I want us to hear right now. “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison *as though you were in prison with them*; those who are being tortured *as though you yourselves were being tortured*.” Imagine that!

Prison and torture were happening to members of the early Christian community, and happening to others, and here was a way to bind the community together in mutual love and support. Imagine that! It was a ministry of identification with others, of empathy. Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen used to say, “The Christ in me recognizes the Christ in you.”

In her book *Memory and Metaphor*, Cynthia Ozick asks something of the same of us. She picks up on an admonition that appears 36 times in the first five books of the Bible – treat the stranger who sojourns among you as one of your own; remember, you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

*Lev. 24:22 insists further: You shall have one manner of law, the same for the stranger as for the home-born. A similar injunction appears in Exodus, and again in Deut., and again in Numbers. . . 36 times in the Pentateuch. It is there because a moral connection has been made with the memory of bondage. Lev. 24 demands memory, and then converts memory into metaphor: Because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Bondage becomes a metaphor of pity for the outsider, Egypt becomes the great metaphor of reciprocity. And a stranger you shall not oppress (Exod. 23:8) for you know the heart of a stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt. There stands the parable; there stands the sacred metaphor of belonging, one heart to another. Without the metaphor of memory and history, we cannot imagine the life of the Other. We cannot imagine what it is to be someone else. Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger =s heart. @*

The power to imagine the stranger’s heart. That is what happens in knowing and claiming our own story, because it is also the story of others. This is why it is important for our children to learn Bible stories. Someone once said, “There are really only 11 stories, and they’re all in the Bible.”

I have a friend, Doug Huneke, who wrote his doctrinal thesis – indeed has made a life-long study – of the rescuers of the Jews in World War II. (Some of you may know the Taizé community in France, and we have sung some Taizé songs here. Its founder, Brother Roger, was one of those rescuers. He was a Swiss Calvinist who made common cause with local Catholic priests to hide Jewish refugees from the Nazis. That was the start of the Taizé Community.) Huneke was not studying religious professionals, though, but ordinary people who, for one reason or another, hid Jews from death at the hands of the Nazis. He has published books on this subject now – The Moses of Rovno<sup>1</sup>, and The Stones Will Cry Out<sup>2</sup>. He interviewed hundreds of people, both rescuers and Jews who had survived because of them. His question was, “What is the common denominator, in these rescuers?” Many were Christian, but some were not; some were even atheists. They were both old and young, single and in families, different nationalities.

Doug did come up with something like 10 characteristics they had in common, though. Creativity in the home when they were young, an experience of practicing hospitality, a close relationship with a morally clear parent, and so on. But one of the strongest was what Doug called “empathic imagination” or we might call “moral previewing.” The rescuers had in common the capacity to imagine the stranger’s heart. Imagine that! They could. They could imagine what it was like to be the other, to be the stranger, to be the Jewish neighbor in mortal danger. And that made it possible for them to act, indeed to change the world, in some ways.

Then Doug asked “Can you *teach* this?” He decided that you could teach it, and developed a curriculum that was in use in some Marin County, CA school districts called *Teaching Children to be Caring and Compassionate People*. (And isn’t that what we’re supposed to do in the church?)

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<sup>1</sup> Huneke, Doug The Moses of Rovno, Presidio Press 1990

<sup>2</sup> Huneke, Doug The Stones Will Cry Out, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT 1995

So why is this empty chair here at the table? (No, not for Elijah this time – that’s at Passover seder.) It is here for you to imagine some sitting in, someone you might imagine to be here at the place of honor, if we all take lower places. So *do* imagine that. Who is not here who ought to be, or who could be, or should be, or needs to be, or who we want to be or who we don’t? Imagine a world made fresh and new. Imagine if the rules were different? Or the patterns and habits were. Imagine a new Birmingham. Imagine a life with meaning and purpose.

We come every week to worship, and at least every month to the table, and in both worship and sacrament act out an alternate reality. We even practice the impossible. What we do here models the heavenly banquet. During the week you have heard all kinds of messages from the world about the value of human life (not much value out there), about what matters, about who is important and why (media stars, politicians and professional athletes, t seems), about how the world works, and even about how it cannot be otherwise than it is. Odds are you were told in several ways that you were not important, don’t matter much in the scheme of things.

This is moral previewing we are about to do, in this sacrament. Here we can imagine it differently, and practice living like it. So here we come to this table where Jesus turns the world upside down. And we practice an entirely different reality... where the dead are raised, the wounded are healed, and the poor are hearing the Good News. Where we practice the reality that God loves *you* so much that even the hairs of your head are numbered.

The table is set for this party.

And this chair is here for you.

Imagine that.

And praise be to God.