



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “REIMAGINING THE CHURCH”

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 18:1-15; John 8:39-47

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, July 28, 2019  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 8:39-47

They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.’ They said to him, ‘We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.’

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If you have ever watched children playing in a schoolyard, then you have probably noticed that it takes absolutely no time at all for a slide to become the plank of a pirate ship, or a stick to become a wizard’s wand, or a chair to become a time machine. This remarkable ability of a child to see beyond what “is” to that which “can be” has been called any number of things, though most of the time we call it imagination.

Now, I used to think that losing that kind of childlike imaginative aptitude – losing that wonderful and multi-dimensional imagination – was simply part of what it meant to grow up - to become an adult. For most of my life I just presumed that this reality was part of what the Apostle Paul was trying to say to the Corinthians when he said: “When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways.” After all, you and I both know that slides are just slides, sticks are merely sticks, and chairs are simply chairs...but is that really true? I mean, what if we said that about the church? What if we said that the church is only what we can see with our own two eyes?

If that were the case, then I'm afraid that our image of Christ's Church would be little more than a reflection of who we presently are; I'm afraid that our understanding of what should ideally be God's provisional demonstration of that which God intends for the whole of humanity (cf. G-3) –would be incomplete at best, because while it would undoubtedly communicate something of what we see, it would not say nearly enough about what God sees!

Far too often we - like our ancestor Sarah - we face the various seasons of life and the challenges that this world presents to us...and we laugh. We laugh for any number of reasons, to be sure, but sometimes we laugh because we just can't imagine that God would do something new or extraordinary in our life. So you are telling me, God, that I am going to have a baby...I'm like 90 years old, God. And Abraham's pushing 100...yea, imagine that!

I suppose we haven't completely lost our imagination, though. Our view of life and ministry is not entirely one-dimensional. We believe, for example, that this building is not just an ordinary building – it is God's house. We also believe that there is more to the waters of baptism than meets the eye, affirming in faith that that which we see as we gather around the font is a sign of something going on that we cannot see; which is to say that such outward signs point us to an inward grace, whereby we are made spiritually clean and engrafted into the body of Christ. Oh, for us to be able to hold fast to those convictions and others should encourage us to know that the light of our faithful imagination has not gone out; though, I think it is safe to say that it has at least dimmed.

The 18th century philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard shares with us the following analogy for the church. "Many of us," he says, "have witnessed the migration of wild geese as they undertake their massive journey to follow spring and summer around the world. Characteristically, geese make a screeching sound as they fly. He goes on to say this: Do you know what you would see if you were to observe the effect of this wild call on tame barnyard geese, the ones who have given up on the dangerous journey in favor of barnyard food and security? You would see that as their wild cousins fly overhead, the tame geese run along the ground and flap their wings wildly, somehow trying to imitate the mad flight of the migrating geese. The squawking from above seems to awaken something innate in them." Kierkegaard calls it: "a memory of wildness."

Sadly, I believe that the imagination of the church today – any church – that it is but a fading memory of the dangerous, wild, passionate and instinctive imagination that was always intended to be a part of her life!

Just look back at our beginning...who could have imagined the inception of the church as we know it? A sound like a mighty rushing wind? Divided tongues, as of fire? Do we think for a moment that the disciples could have ever imagined that kind of miraculous event actually happening in the way that it did? Probably not!

Which leads me to believe that the same thing can be said of both ancient and contemporary followers of Christ alike: that far too often, we perceive the church as only that which we can see and little more, failing to notice, for example, that behind the power of any successful ministry there still lies a powder keg of potential...that beneath every successful stewardship season there still resides a virtual iceberg of impact for the world and for the sake of Christ!

So, how do we miss it? How do we fail to see the very grandeur of Christ's church that God intends? Why do we find it so hard to imagine the church's explosive and massive potential, that ongoing and redemptive and extraordinary work of God in our midst?

Well, there are probably any number of reasons for this, though I'll only mention two of them in our time this morning. To begin, like those barnyard geese, the church as we know it, has enjoyed a diet of comfort for far too long. In fact, since the time of Emperor Constantine, the church in many parts of the world, has experienced a privileged position, which is not to say that there are not places in the world today where we could be killed for worshipping God as we are doing here this sanctuary.

More to the point, it is simply that the church, wherever she is found, is probably much more inclined to imagine her way out of pain and suffering than she is to imagine her way out of a situation of comfort, one where our food has been generously spread out in the barnyard and we have been able to freely partake and to come and go with relative ease and security. While I'm sure that's had an impact, there's another reason I think this prevails upon us, something that has certainly impacted really our imagination; and that is that we have lived among the barnyard geese for so long, and in doing so, we have effectively allowed that which we experience in the world around us to determine who we are.

And this is no less true in our individual lives as well. I mean, how many times has the world told us who we are – and how many times have we believed it? How often have we just resigned ourselves to the idea that nothing in our life is ever going to get any better, that nothing about our circumstances will ever change? Oh, that may be what we see – that may even be in part what we experience, but that is not who we are. No! We are children of God...we are heirs of the gracious gift of life! Oh, friends, we are meant to soar in the heavens for the glory of God, not peck at the ground!

Consider again this morning's New Testament Lesson. Jesus offers a harsh and yet a loving rebuke to his audience; though, at the heart of what he is saying lies a very basic question: Are you God's children if you don't act like God's children? The characters to whom we are introduced in John chapter 8, they may look like God's children...they may even talk like God's children; but, if they truly were God's children, then they would love Jesus because Jesus came from God and was now in their midst.

But they don't...they can't...they just can't imagine! And we can speculate until the cows come home as to why that was the case, though I don't think the answer is all that complicated. It seems to me they were far too constrained by the realities of life to imagine the possibilities of life, that right there standing in front of them was the Messiah, the one for whom they had waited all this time – the very Son of God!

For the church and her members to rediscover the importance of imagination, several things need to happen. To begin, both literally and figuratively, we will need to see beyond our comfortable complacency. We will also need to recognize who we really are and humbly celebrate our intrinsic value as children of the living God - but we can't stop there. For we must

also – and, here again, by God’s grace – we must begin anew the task of imagining what God has in store for us and for the world, and we cannot stop dreaming about what that might look like – the real breadth and scope of the mission of God, that is. For when we more fully understand God’s drama of redeeming love, and when we begin to figure out our own unique role within it...we will find that, no longer, are we able to just go with the flow...no longer will we be able to move about the barnyard passively content with who we are.

Fred Craddock once described in some detail a nine-pound sparrow walking down the street in front of his house, and he asked the sparrow, “Aren’t you a little heavy?” The sparrow said, “Yeah, that’s why I’m out walking, trying to get some of this weight off.” And Craddock said, “Why don’t you fly?” The sparrow looked at him incredulously and said, “Fly? I’ve never flown. I could get hurt.” Craddock said, “What’s your name?” And the sparrow responded, “They call me, Church.”

A simple illustration, I know, but a church that does not risk and trust in the future and in the promises of God is a church that merely gets by...and that is not what the church is called to do. Only when we recover more of our dormant childlike imagination will we be able to come that much closer to bearing witness to the mission of God. Only then will we be able once again to see in those slides and the sticks and the chairs something more!

In the end when we reverently use our imaginations and when we put our trust in God, we will find that instead of talking about miraculous things, we will witness them happening; and instead of talking about all things are possible with God, we will begin to see what those possibilities are. Imagine that! Imagine that!

Let us pray...

Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for breathing your Holy Spirit upon your church and for the work of that same Holy Spirit in our lives today. Open to us again the very life and life abundant that you would have for your children, that we would always know both who and whose we are. Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*