

September 3, 2017
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Can You Imagine?”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 12:9-21 ~ Matthew 16:21-28

Can you imagine? One moment, Jesus is saying you're "the rock on which I will build my church" ... and in the next he's calling you "a stumbling block." That's not just great word play ... from cornerstone to stumbling block ... but such a reversal of relational fortune that it had to be incredibly painful. Can you imagine?

When Jesus announced to the crowd that he would build his church upon Peter and give to Peter the keys to God's realm, Peter must have felt that he had fallen face forward into the good life. Can't you see Peter's chest swelling with pride too wonderful to disguise? He had left his livelihood to take on a new life with Jesus. He had left the simple comforts of home to take on a tough life on the road. He had left a familiar well-worn routine to take on the uncertainties of a whole new life. And, now, finally, the pay-off comes ... as Jesus rewards him with his own set of keys. Ah, at last, the good life.

Then Jesus ruins the moment. He tells Peter and the other boys, "Look, the road to Jerusalem is filled with nails. They'll pierce me and put an end to me ... but after

three days God will reclaim my life." Peter takes Jesus aside and says, "Come to your senses, man. Don't you remember I just pronounced you the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God? These things don't happen to God ... and God forbid, they must never happen to you." What goes unsaid is, "Because, of course, that would mean that they would also happen to someone who followed you. Someone like me."

Seemingly, Peter's brief taste of the good life came to an embarrassing halt when Jesus barked back at Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal, a stumbling block, to me for you have set your mind not on divine things, but on human things." The rest of the air escapes from the balloon of the good life as Jesus goes on to say, "You want these keys? Then deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me. Those interested in saving their lives will lose them and those willing to lose their lives for my sake will find them." Can you imagine?

And perhaps that's the difficulty. Peter couldn't imagine. He couldn't imagine that Jesus had come not just to comfort people ... but to free them. Comforting isn't that hard ... just give them a little more of what they already had ... and tell them it will be alright. But freedom is different. Freedom requires that they see that what they have isn't life-giving in the first place.

The common assumption is that when Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, he had in mind a warrior-king like David ... one who would drive out the Romans and liberate the Israelites. When you stop to think about it, that's a pretty understandable ... even reasonable hope. The Romans were foreign occupiers ... not only imposing Roman law but taxing the people to support their occupation ... and backing up their occupation, order, and taxation by violence. The problem with Peter's expectation is not that it's unreasonable ... but that it doesn't change anything. Rome is there in force and by violence. The hope would be that Jesus, the warrior-king, uses greater force and violence to drive them out. Eventually though it stands to reason that someone with even more force ... or willing to do greater violence takes over yet again. Who's in charge may change ... but the wheel of force and violence keeps revolving.

Jesus knows this. He knows that by introducing a different logic ... one that runs by forgiveness, mercy, justice and love ... rather than retribution, violence, domination and hate ... he is challenging the powers that be. Moreover, he knows that the wheel of force and violence will not tolerate his obstruction ... but run him over. And this Peter just couldn't imagine.

It isn't surprising ... when you stop to think about it ... that Jesus was killed.

From the moment of his birth, he was such a threat to the rule of force and violence

that Herod was willing to slaughter all children under the age of two in the hope of destroying him.

No, it's no surprise that Jesus was killed. What's surprising is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection reinforces ... indeed, establishes ... that Jesus' life, love, and sacrifice will ultimately prevail. It's hard to imagine, I know ... considering how prevalent force and violence seem in the world. But it is just what Jesus invites us into ... lives shaped by love and forgiveness and actions shaped by compassion and hope.

It's all so very hard to imagine. Like Peter, what we most often want is a little more of what the world already offers ... be it force or security or wealth or status or popularity or whatever. But Jesus didn't come to comfort us with a little more ... but instead to free us! And freedom first means realizing that we've settled for something that isn't life giving ... so that we can hear God's promise of not just more of the same ... but something different. So that we can hear God's promise of life ... a promise that means something ... only after what we'd previously accepted dies. Notice that Peter never had any hope of understanding the good life until Jesus told him to get behind him. That's the only position from which you and I will ever learn about the good life that Jesus intends for us ... and models for

us ... by standing behind Jesus ... listening to him ... watching his every move ... and trusting in God ... despite the most lively critics within and outside the church.

I don't need to tell you that the world has disappointed you or that you've settled for less than God hopes. The evidence is all around. The disappointing relationship ... the illness that returned ... the career that ended ... the untimely death mourned ... the disappointment looming. My job isn't to tell you what's wrong, but simply to ask ... to whisper even ... the question of whether you are ready for something different ... for something more. And then to help you imagine the life that Jesus promises.

And that's the hard part. Because giving someone another chance instead of writing them off ... forgiving someone who has wronged us instead of seeking retribution ... being open-handed and generous with the resources we've been blessed with instead of holding onto whatever we can ... offering our future to God rather than planning each step ... seeking joy in service rather than acquisition ... because we've accepted that what the world has offered is all there is ... these different things often feel at first like death ... even like dying on the cross ... before God uses them to raise us to new life.

It's an act of imagination. But as we take even these small steps forward, God is at work ... giving us a taste of life we'd never thought possible ... and multiplying

the impact of our actions far beyond what we'd dreamed. Until suddenly, just as it felt like we'd lost our lives, we find them!

“*Can you imagine?*” *Can you imagine* that God is at work in and through your life for the good of the world? *Can you imagine* that this congregation has something of value to offer our community? *Can you imagine* that when you befriend the lonely ... or encourage the frightened ... that heaven rejoices? *Can you imagine* that, though afraid, when you stand up to those who spew hate ... that God is with you? *Can you imagine* that even small acts of love and generosity challenge the world order and introduce a different reality? *Can you imagine* that God wants for us not just comfort but freedom? *Can you imagine* that love is more powerful than hate? *Can you imagine* that God raised Jesus from the dead?

In 1971 John Lennon wrote "Imagine," a track on the album of the same name. The song's lyrics encourage the listener to imagine a world at peace. And that must have seemed unimaginable, because in 1971 the U.S. was just entering the second decade of involvement in Vietnam. Eighteen-year-olds had just gotten the vote, though they had been drafted into that war before they could vote. Carroll O'Connor was offering a gallows humor version of an all too common sexist racist on the CBS sitcom *All in the Family*. It was just three years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That year the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the use of

busing to achieve racial desegregation in schools. Several major cities experienced incidents between police and ethnic minority citizens that sparked riots. While a majority of Americans identified themselves as Christian and as church goers, the song *Imagine* apparently appealed to a growing dissatisfaction with rigid governmental, religious, and social authority, and it became the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed album of Lennon's solo career. The song ends by Lennon inviting listeners to join him so that the world may live as one.

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will live as one

Well, I can imagine. I can imagine a future in which people realize that their wisdom is limited ... and that they need to be in dialogue with one another to discern God's will in the world. Because our hope for the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ is not that Peter nor the rest of us will magically get better, clearer, louder, quieter, more trusting, or less cowardly ... but that God will keep revealing God's merciful and just rule to human beings ... quite apart from our goodness, clarity, trust and courage. That future sounds a lot like the kingdom of God to me. That community sounds like what the church could be.

So, I invite you to imagine this ... seeing, tasting, and believing the life-giving promises of the Messiah who came not to give us what we want ... but what we need. And then go forth and live this proclamation. It matters more than you may imagine.

May we pray?

Loving God, you are not the culprit in our violent, greedy world. You are not irrelevant in our superficial, individualistic, acquisitive culture. And you are not the cure for the woes of our world ... not without the response of human beings who allow you to work through us ... healing our craving for power ... and encouraging us to support one another in communities of care that are attentive to the pain of those on the outskirts. Help you to accept your invitation of a life of freedom ... so that we can live lives shaped by love and forgiveness and actions shaped by compassion and hope. Amen.