

Sermon Notes from the Induction of the Reverend Steve Black as Rector  
St. Hilda's Anglican Church, Sechelt BC  
The Feast of St. Bartholomew, 2021.

I want to speak with you tonight about the role that imagination plays in ministry. Human imagination is amongst the most important powers that we possess; indeed, it's our capacity to imagine that makes so much of life possible. Imagination is central to the life of the church since so much of what we proclaim is dependent upon our ability to sense the invisible. If you think about it, many of the values of church are not seen, values like love and justice, and kindness and compassion. You can see them when they're active but they don't exist like a chair does, or a tree or a building. Even and perhaps especially the key proclamation of the church that there is a God refers to something not seen except, Christians believe, for a very few years in Jesus.

We don't shy away from this: indeed, the central statement of the church catholic--the Nicene Creed--affirms that we believe in 'all things seen and unseen' or in the quaint language of the Book of Common Prayer, 'visible and invisible.' So, when you are part of a body that believes in invisible things, you need to exercise your imagination.

Tonight's as good a night as any to think about the imagination because about St. Bartholomew, whose feast day it is, next to nothing is known. Sure: there's some accounts of his travels to Turkey, Ethiopia, Armenia and maybe even India; sure, he's one of the names of the 12 disciples listed in the New Testament; sure, there are stories of his martyrdom and attributions of miracles but most of these are the stuff of legend not the hard facts of history.

Imagination is kind of baked into the very nature of Christian believing—engaging imaginations is the task of preachers as we seek to offer an alternative narrative into our consciousness. In some ways it's what Jesus was doing in the gospel appointed for this evening when he invited his disciples into a different way of thinking about what constitutes greatness: he inverts their worldview and engages their imaginations when he says, "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." Over and again in the gospels Jesus confronts the assumptions of his disciples by inviting them to imagine a different way of being in the world. Using rich images and telling stories he engages imagination, and their lives are forever changed.

The church believes that this invisible power continues to this very day and the parish community is the laboratory where new possibilities of being human are imagined and practiced--which brings us to this night and this celebration. With Steve's arrival as your priest, there's a new beginning, and all new beginnings are filled with imaginative possibilities.

Leaders and members of this congregation have their own hopes and dreams as you imagine the future; Steve certainly has his as he begins his first stint as a Rector. What's crucial in these first months together is seeking to align the parish and priest's thoughts about the future, to listen to each other deeply and in that process of listening to find how you're being called to be together for the good of the community by the grace of God.

Steve asked that this night be not just about him, but about the parish as well and he's right. In its 85 years of ministry this place the people have been imaginative in myriad ways: from the founders who had the foresight to begin a congregation which, in its earliest days because it was the only church in town, ministered to all who came regardless of their denominational affiliation. Over the years this has been a place where the progressive stream of the church has been celebrated: from its affirmation of women and LGBT folks in ministry and leadership to being part of efforts for reconciliation with the indigenous people to finding ways to put into practice good environmental stewardship. Long may St. Hilda's

continue to be a beacon within this diocese for change—long may the theological imagination flourish here.

And with Steve as your priest, you have someone who has great enthusiasm and a vibrant imagination. I mean, here's a guy who travelled for a time with the Grateful Dead, who fell in love with Jesus and disenchanted with the simplistic theology of an evangelical sect explored the Anglican way, went to seminary, got so turned on by Biblical Studies that he pursued and earned a doctorate in that field. You will be inspired by how he will open Biblical texts for you moving beyond your current imaginings to see the dynamics of a complex ancient world bursting forth with insights about our lives today.

As I think about this appointment it seems to me that you have so much to offer each other as congregation and priest: as a parish you will teach Steve about what this community values and stands for. I know you will welcome him and Rhonda and their family into the community of Sechelt and surround them with your love and care. And as priest Steve will offer you his enthusiasm, insights but most of all his imagination about what might be. In his beautiful book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* the late Celtic philosopher John O'Donohue describes how a new leader's imagination can help transform an organization. He writes: "Frequently the imagination can bring completely new eyes to a...situation...as a new person comes in and takes...leadership. He refuses to inherit the bank of dead perception which preceded him...refusing the old descriptions...His fresh imagination enables him to see beyond the accepted freeze...when others begin to glimpse it, new possibilities awaken."<sup>1</sup>

That's my hope this evening—that as you continue to get to know each other, with Steve's fresh eyes and rich imagination new possibilities will awaken and St. Hilda's will once again embrace its place in the household of the church as a sign of the possibilities of inclusion and justice that show forth the love and mercy of God.

For that enterprise, the gift of the Holy Spirit is what's needed: the invisible energy that enlivens us all. As we let God's Spirit penetrate our imagination we can be transformed and energized to be the instruments of the grace of God known and revealed in Jesus Christ. It's a poem by D.H. Lawrence that captures this most beautifully and succinctly and I offer it to you as both a prayer and way to close this reflection: it's called *The Song of a Man Who has Come Through*:

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!  
A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time,  
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!  
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate a winged gift~  
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed,  
By the fine, fine wind that takes its course through the chaos of the World..."<sup>2</sup>

Preached by the Very Reverend Peter G. Elliott  
August 24, 2021

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donohue, John. *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. New York: Harper, 2003, page 139 (edited)

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Richard Holloway's *Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2021, p. 212. Full text of the poem can be found here--<https://kalliope.org/en/text/lawrence2001060906>