he carved it out of a marble block. Beethoven used his imagination to “hear” the fifth symphony before he wrote a note on paper.

Watch a group of young children playing, and you soon notice that each one believes themselves to be so much more than they appear are. With a bunch of pillows and blankets, they become mighty warriors constructing an impenetrable fortress. Tie a towel around their neck and they transform from a mild-mannered kindergartner into an invincible caped crusader. Give them a cardboard tube and suddenly they are a wizard, or a musician, or an astronomer scouting the stars.

What looks like simple fun is vitally important work in a child’s development. Imaginative play develops important psychological and emotional capacities in children, helping them to learn how to solve problems, create new possibilities, and perhaps most importantly, develop the belief that they can change the world. Imagination transcends the limits of the present physical world and the limits of a child’s inner world, opening new ways of seeing and being.

Imagination is critical for our spiritual life, too. We pursue knowledge of the Bible, of God, and of church doctrine, all of which are important things; but sometimes we become so enamored with such knowledge that we fail to cultivate an imagination of what God is wanting to do in us and through us. We need both a strong knowledge of God and a holy imagination to live out the vision for eternal life God has for us, both now and in the future.

I think this may be why John consistently refers to his audience as “children” in our text. John invites us to cultivate a childlike imagination for the kind of life God makes possible through Jesus Christ. Earlier in his letter, John lays out the difference between the accumulation of knowledge and a holy imagination that leads to action. It is one thing to know the truth and say, “I am in the light” (John’s metaphor for walking with Christ). But if we cannot use that knowledge to imagine and demonstrate love for our neighbors, then we are “in the darkness, we walk in the darkness, and we do not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness” (1 John 2:9-11).

John wrote to a community subjected to “Antichrists” who denied that Jesus is the Christ. John urged the community to refute that falsehood with their “knowledge” (2:20), but then to go further by activating their imagination of who Jesus calls them to be. “If you know that [Christ] is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him” (2:29).

We, who are born of Christ, are indeed “children of God.” We are the product of God’s own imagination back at creation when God formed humankind in God’s own image (Genesis 1:26-27). In John’s gospel, we read that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the perfect image of God, the one who has “made [God] known” to the world (John 1:18). Those who receive him are given “power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

All of this is at God’s initiative, out of God’s imagination, and through God’s love. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1). As God’s children, we are encouraged to imagine something more. John writes: “What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when [God] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (vv. 2-3). In other words, the children of God are to imagine that they can and will become like Jesus, the perfect image of God!

To put it another way, children of God must imagine themselves in the person of Jesus Christ and act accordingly. Like children wrapping themselves in the garb of the hero they want to be, we are to “put on Christ” (Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27). As a child might imagine being a force for pure good in the world, children of God who imagine that they can be like Jesus also “purify themselves just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

The real superpower for those who believe is this: the more a child of God believes that they are in the mold of Jesus, the more power they have over sin. “You know that [Christ] was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin,” says John. “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as [Christ] is righteous” (vv. 5-7).

John admits that sin is still a factor in life: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). But sin does not have to be the deciding factor. The more we imagine ourselves being formed in the image of Christ through disciplines like prayer, study of Scripture, relationships with other believers, and the regular confession of sin, the less sin becomes a problem in our lives. As D. Moody Smith puts it, “The work of Christ brings about the birth from God that is freedom from sin, but a freedom that must be ratified continually by willing and doing what is right.”

**Imagining a Better Way.** If we cannot imagine that we can have victory over sin, that is a good indication that we are not living as the children of God, but rather as children of the devil, who “has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). But if we believe we are born of God we can imagine a life that is not dominated by the constant cycle of sin because our lives are modeled after Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The proof of our imagination is ultimately found in the results: “The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters” (v. 10).

A child at play believes he or she can be or do anything. A healthy imagination breeds creativity, confidence, and a vision for the best of what life can be. We need to cultivate a healthy imagination to become the kind of people God created us to be, people modeled on Jesus Christ, who love God and one another, and then develop the habits and practices that get us there. That is how we change and how God uses us to change the world!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we know we are too often mere infants in the faith. We argue over big things and little things and justify our points of view as faith. Forgive us when we do this and fail to remember that our growth in the faith is a matter of acknowledging you and being your servant, working together with all other servants, in this world which is your mission field. Help us to imagine a better way, and to imagine our part in what you are doing in our community. Amen.

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**A Holy Imagination**

Sunday, April 18, 2021 1 John 3:1-7

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

There were two elderly men, roommates in a nursing home. One was blind and lived in quiet despair. He felt life held little for him. He wanted only to die. His roommate could see just fine, but he had trouble getting around. He rarely left his bed, which was next to the window of their room.

One day the man who could see began describing to his roommate what was going on in the world outside their window. He told him of the mail carrier making his rounds; of neighbors walking their dogs; of the teenage boy and girl who passed the window every day after school and who first held hands, then embraced, then argued, then reconciled.

The blind man lived for these updates from the outside world. His sighted friend seemed to take great joy in describing what everything looked like. Then one day his friend, who was much sicker than he imagined, died. Nurses soon wheeled in another patient. The blind man asked his new roommate if he would describe what was happening outside the window. “I’d be glad to,” said the roommate, “but I don't know how I could do that. There's nothing outside our window but a solid brick wall.”

The blind man, bewildered for a moment, felt betrayed by his former friend. Had he played him for a fool? Then he realized what a precious gift his friend had given him. He used his imagination to create an entire world. He dreamt up the mail carrier, and the neighbors, and the teenage sweethearts. He made those characters as real as if they lived outside that window, every day. In that moment of revelation, the man realized there are things worse than having no sight. It is far worse to have no imagination, no inner vision, no hope.

Our imagination allows us to go beyond what we see and hear and taste and smell and touch. Imagination is how our brains generate and process new ideas or images. Imagination allows us to be creative and resourceful. Albert Einstein used his imagination to envision the universe before he used his intellect to prove it with the theory of relativity. Michelangelo used his imagination to “see” the David figure before