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*A Moral Imagination*  
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*Deuteronomy 30:11-20*

We've been exploring the role of imagination in our life as followers of Jesus. Faith relies on a lively, healthy imagination – the capacity to see beyond the limits of our vision. Faith rests not on certainty, but on trust, and trust is like love in that it cannot be forced or proven, only attested to and affirmed and lived.

Like love, genuine faith is enacted. It's more something we do, and less something we feel. Faith is a verb that prompts certain behaviors and commitments and choices – and rejects others. Love and faith lead to light and life; lovelessness and fear lead to gloom and death.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today,” God says, “That I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

Human beings have the innate capacity to distinguish between choices that lead to life and those that lead away from life. As people of faith, we understand this capacity not to be of our own making. It comes with our humanity, already installed and ready to be used, and it provides the wherewithal for us to live as moral beings, able to distinguish between right and wrong and act on it – what Deuteronomy calls “choosing life and blessings” over “curses and death.”

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today,” the Creator says, “Is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away...The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

A moral imagination is akin to faith itself. It leads us to embrace our vocation as Christians, which is to claim...  
...that love is the highest calling  
...that caring for the most vulnerable among us is an outgrowth of religious commitment  
...that working to end injustice and dismantle unjust systems is how we show God’s love in public  
...that generous living requires sharing and sacrifice.

We have agency in life, you and I, even when the odds are stacked against us. Our God-given moral imagination helps us in our commitment to choose life. We need not be limited by the way things are in the world but instead can look beyond them to see how God intends them to be. We can see blessings even when they’re hidden by curses.

This past weekend we celebrated the life of Melba T. Elston, a member of this church for the last 20 years. She was born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1915 and was blessed with 107 years of life. As an African American woman growing up in the Jim Crow south, whose grandmother had been born into enslavement, her family had long been on the receiving end of the brutalities of American history – all those choices made in this nation that led away from life.

She described the many demeaning and cruel things she endured over the years, yet Melba never gave in to bitterness, never lost her dignity, never let spitefulness gain an upper hand in her heart. She did not cede the moral high ground. The word was in her heart, and she stood firm on it.

One of her favorite scriptures was from Philippians, chapter 4:

“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Melba exercised her moral imagination and held fast to her trust that God was at work in the world despite all the evidence to the contrary. She chose life and blessings as her path.

The problem with our humanity is that just as we have the power to choose life and blessings, we can also choose their opposites. Within every one of us resides the capacity for evil, the wrong decision, choices that lead away from life, a struggle between love and hate. Our imagination can too easily take us out of the light and into the shadows. We see that every day in the world around us; sometimes we see it in ourselves, if we are honest.

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion,” Nelson Mandela said. “People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” (Long Walk to Freedom)

The word is very near to you. It is in your heart. I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

The exercise of moral imagination is not limited to individuals, nor solely to religion. Communities are formed with a vision about who they might be as a people. Our nation’s founding documents codify our shared moral imagination.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Justice. Domestic tranquility. General welfare – what we would call today “the common good.” Blessings of liberty.

Our nation was founded on those principles. They were the values, the good we told ourselves and the world we had chosen to embody collectively. However imperfectly implemented, our nation’s founding documents contain within them the seeds of a people’s best aspirations.

But sometimes assumptions about underlying values and commitments are no longer mutually held. When that happens, a community or nation is headed for trouble. We find ourselves in that place today. We are a house divided against itself. America suffers from a lack of shared moral imagination about what’s right and good and true.

The theme for the Westminster Town Hall Forum series this fall is Healing Our House Divided. Jonathan Reckford, the CEO of Habitat for Humanity International, was the first speaker this past week. He supports a mandatory year of national service for 18-year-olds in order for young people to work with those they might

never otherwise encounter to discover the original purpose of our life together. As an evangelical Christian he lamented how the Church has been drawn into the fractured chaos of our time. I would add that, unfortunately, it has often been the cause of it.

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

What would a renewal of the moral imagination of America look like? As people of faith and as citizens, what are the choices that spring from our core religious values and lead to life and blessings in our community? Scripture is replete with indications of what God intends for human community.

Blessed are the poor, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, pointing toward equitable economic opportunity.

Let the little children come unto me, for of such is the Reign of God, Jesus says, pointing toward the well-being of families and children as a priority.

And God said, let us make humankind in our image...and let them have stewardship over the earth, pointing toward our responsibility to protect, preserve, and sustain creation.

Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, and healed the hemorrhaging woman, and appeared first to

the women at the resurrection, pointing toward the equal place of women in the world and the good impulse to include those the world shuts out.

It's incumbent upon us as people of faith and in communities like Westminster to cultivate and communicate a moral imagination based on conviction about what is good and right, and stand on it, as Melba Elston did in straining forward and pressing on toward the goal that was God's word in her heart. When we all do that, we contribute to the well-being of society and its succeeding generations.

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In a moment we will install the Rev. Margaret Fox as Associate Pastor for Adult Ministries. In what sense is responding to a call and being installed as a pastor in a church choosing life?

Margaret, by accepting this call you have chosen to give yourself to this people, to co-mingle your life with ours, to worship the God we worship, to go where we go. When we choose life with a community, that is what we do.

Westminster, by affirming the call to Margaret we have chosen to follow where she leads, to open ourselves to her teaching and preaching, to join her in seeking ways to love

and serve God and God's people. When we choose life with one who will minister among us, that is what we do.

Together, our job now – our shared calling, our vocation as a people – is to fire up our moral imagination as followers of Jesus, for the sake of a world needing more light and life, more blessings, and love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.