Sunday, September 23, 2001
THE GIFT OF IMAGINATION
Luke 16:1-13

Karl Barth was once quoted as saying that a good sermon is prepared by reading the Bible with one hand and reading the newspaper with the other hand.

Since the terrible, destructive, evil events of Tuesday, September 11, I've been doing that, and in addition to reading the Bible and the daily newspapers, I have found myself watching almost too much television news. It's easy to become overwhelmed by pictures and words. However, late one night last week, as I was going from channel to channel, I caught an interview with Thomas L. Friedman. He is a seasoned reporter, columnist, and author. His first book, From Beirut to Jerusalem, was a bestseller, as was his second book, The Lexus and the Olive Tree. Mr. Friedman was in Tel Aviv, Israel, while being interviewed by a news reporter from the United States.

Mr. Friedman said two things that stuck in my mind. First, in the events of that terrible Tuesday, we saw and met nothing less than total evil. The people who planned the terrorist attack and carried it out have no program to offer that will improve society in any way. Their only intent then and now is terror, chaos, destruction, and death. Their only motivation is hate.

Second, Mr. Friedman said, we should not play the "blame game." We too quickly want to find someone to blame for our being caught by surprise — the CIA or other lack of an intelligence apparatus, the previous administration, the fact that in the Gulf War we did not kill Saddam Hussein, lack of military spending, or some other villain. He went on to say that our failure, and he meant all of us together including himself, is that we were not thinking outside our usual categories enough to imagine such an attack, with terrorists using our own commercial airlines as weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the terrorist attacks were two or more years in the planning, while many of them were not in hiding but were living and working among us.

After hearing Mr. Friedman's comments, the next morning I was studying the Bible, and especially the story that Jesus told which is found in Luke's gospel — the parable about the innovative and imaginative manager. Mr. Friedman's comments were still on my mind.

It has something to say to all of us in our present situation. Sometimes it helps to understand a story like this one if it is recast in contemporary terms. Here's my version of the parable: There was an American businessman who had an executive vice-president running his various enterprises. As time passed, reports kept coming to the owner that his chief executive officer was not doing the job he was supposed to do. He was not following through on collecting the rent and managing the day-to-day business. In accounting terms, the "accounts receivable" were too high and the profits too low. The owner called him in and told him about the charges against him. He said, "You have two weeks to bring the business accounts up to date, and then your job here is finished."

What was this executive to do? One possibility was to quit on the spot instead of working two more weeks. Another option was to do his best to collect all the money owed the company and be as tough and demanding as necessary, even foreclosing on property if necessary. But since he had already been fired, that wouldn't do him much good.

Then he considered another possibility. His reasoning went this way: “Since I’ve been fired, if I make deals with as many of the debtors as possible so that they will each owe me a favor, my boss is already angry with me, why should I make more enemies? What I need is friends. If I reduce the amount that these people owe the company and make a deal with each one of them — maybe collect fifty cents on the dollar — some of these people might even give me a place to work or live if I need it. Most of these accounts are behind in their payments anyway, and fifty cents on the dollar is better than nothing at all.”

“I’m getting older, and my health is not good. It will be difficult for me to get another job. I can’t do physical labor.”

So, he carried out his plan. He met with the debtors one by one and made a deal with each of them. If each would pay immediately, he would discount what they owed. In his exit interview, he told the owner what he had done. It didn’t save his job, and he hadn’t expected it would. But the owner was impressed with the man’s ingenuity and innovation.

When Jesus finished telling this story, he said — and I’m paraphrasing—“The worldly and even those who are evil are very astute and clever in dealing with their problems. When they meet a difficult situation, they are not afraid to innovate. We who are trying to do God’s work need to be even more imaginative and creative. We need to be innovators. God has given us the gift of imagination. Let’s use it for good purposes.”

In telling the story, Jesus was not approving the economic arrangements that the manager had made, but he was saying to his disciples and to us that all too often we can be very creative in questionable dealings. If we were equally imaginative and innovative in our honest dealings, we would be more successful in meeting evil. He was not saying or implying that the end justifies the means. He was urging us to be as imaginative and creative as we can in doing God’s work in the world.

I’ve noticed, as you have, that many people are very creative in dealing with everyday problems and decisions in the secular world, but when they are faced with equally crucial situations in their relationship to God or in their spiritual journeys or in their church life or in overcoming evil, they are not nearly as imaginative or innovative.

In the local newspaper last week, there was a fascinating column by James P. Pinkerton on the history of warfare and the frequent lack of imagination on the part of military leaders. One of the oldest stories, of course, is in the Hebrew scriptures — the story of David and Goliath. David’s use of imagination with his simple slingshot conquered Goliath with all of his armor.

In medieval times, the knight on horseback was dominant on the battlefield. Then the British came up with a devastating anti-knight weapon: the longbow, which could penetrate chain mail armor at 100 paces. At the battle of Crecy in 1346, and again at Agincourt in 1415, charging French knights were mowed down in rows. Yet the use of horsemen in battle persisted for centuries, even as combat-mortality rates soared. As late as 1939, Polish horsemen attacked Nazi tanks; the result was heroic but tragic.

Jesus knew about the use of the gift of imagination for both evil and good purposes. He said in one of his teachings that “we are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” He also warned us to never underestimate how innovative depraved people and the forces of evil can be. Some of the worst evil is always done in the name of or under the cover of the good.

That's why the terrorist, and especially the religious fanatical terrorist, is so dangerous. He or she, while doing evil, deeply believes that it is good. The terrorist believes that he or she is doing God's will. Extreme religious fundamentalism of any form is essentially religion gone astray. It is good gone bad. There is an old saying: "The corruption of the best makes them the worst."

Religion at its best provides an orientation, a framework for doing good. It provides solace in times of despair. It provides guidelines for answers to some of life's most profound questions. It is a way of trying to make sense out of tragedy. It can be a powerful motivation for doing good. But it can also be used for evil.

One of the most extreme examples of religious fundamentalism I know of occurred among the Albigensians in the Middle Ages. They were known as "the smotherers" because they smothered people to death after they had been to confession and communion. The smotherers thought they were doing you a big favor by sending you directly to heaven.

The suicide bombers on Tuesday, September 11, had a similar conviction — a glorious eternity for those who bring death and destruction to the infidels. While we do not today easily find similar destructive fanaticism among Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, periodically we do encounter those who say, "Our little group constitutes the elect, everyone else is going to hell. We are the only righteous ones. We have all the truth."

What is it that drives people to this kind of self-righteous extremism in religion? Karen Armstrong, in her book on fundamentalism, The Battle for God, says: "At the root of fundamentalism are nihilism, hopelessness, and despair." Every fundamentalist sect, she argues, is founded by someone who feels he or she is an outsider, cut off from the mainstream, deprived of the benefits the rich or the fortunate have, and convinced that the blessings of life have been unfairly denied them. Desperate acts of some form destroy. So they use God's gift of imagination to accomplish evil ends.

This little story from the Bible in Luke's gospel tells us that we are to use God's gift of imagination, our resourcefulness, to further the work of God, to do things that bring hope and help to humankind rather than destruction. Do not be afraid to be innovative and creative.

The good news of the story is that when we use the gift of imagination for good purposes, it will, in the long run, always overcome those who use the gift of imagination for evil purposes. That's why I've given this sermon the title: The Gift of Imagination.

This story from Luke's gospel makes one additional point which applies to our situation today. It says, if you can't do everything, at least do something. The manager knew he couldn't collect all the money owed to his employer, but at least he did something. Jesus said it this way: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much."

Some years ago, a man named Millard Fuller was a millionaire attorney and a very clever and imaginative individual. He used his creativeness and ingenuity to make a lot of money in honest ways and to acquire everything many people dream of having one day — big houses, expensive cars, a cabin cruiser, and more. But he was unhappy. His marriage was coming apart. The meaning of his life had eroded. It was a crisis, and he acted in an imaginative way before it got worse. He and his wife went on a long religious retreat to re-evaluate their lives and their life together.

After much thought and prayer, and by using God's gift of imagination, they left their treasures behind and began a small organization called Habitat for Humanity. Now, in hundreds of places around the world, including Lincoln, volunteers are building good, solid, low-cost homes for and with poor people. Mr. and Mrs. Fuller knew they couldn't solve the housing problem completely. No one can do it alone. They couldn't do everything, but at least they could do something, and that's all God expects us to do.

The gift of imagination can be very useful in careful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. It is easy to be indifferent toward small obligations while sincerely believing oneself fully trustworthy in major matters. These teachings remind us that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities as well as larger ones. We need to use the wonderful gift of imagination in the service of God.

The fact is that in the midst of today's difficulties and challenges, terror and destruction, most of us this week, or even in the coming weeks, will not catch a terrorist or even meet one. We will not be able to go to New York City or Washington D.C. in person to physically extend our help. Most of us will not write a book that changes people's lives, or give a speech that gives hope to people who have no hope. We will not have dinner with the President or be a martyr. Our name will not be in a headline or even buried in a news story.

More likely, this week and the weeks ahead will present no more than the opportunity to do our work faithfully and carefully, help a neighbor who is in need, write a note or make a telephone call to someone who is lonely, teach a Sunday School class, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. While you are doing these things and more, use God's gift of imagination and remember the words, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much." Amen.