

**First Baptist Church on Fifth**  
***Attending Church: Abundance* | Luke 12:13-21**  
**By Rev. Rayce J. Lamb**

If I told you a world without poverty is possible - would you believe me?

I grew up in a family that faithfully attended a small Baptist church in the mountains of Western North Carolina - a church who adamantly proclaimed that our Holy Scriptures were the literal word of God. In other words, if the Bible says it, it must be true.

The other thing you should know about me is that I grew up on my family's apple farm where I spent every summer working alongside my father and my mother tending to the work of our orchard.

Now, I know I look super young, but smartphones and airpods weren't quite a thing yet when I was growing up. In fact, this is something that Pastor Emily and I have in common even if I was only in the sixth grade when she was graduating college. I told her I would only crack one joke about her attending her 20th college reunion today and well that was it.

But back on the farm I didn't have that type of entertainment to pass the time during those long, hot, and humid summer days. So, as a result, I would find myself indulging my imagination - letting it roam freely from adventure to adventure to help me pass the time.

And oh, the things I imagined! From who I would be when I grew up - centerfielder for the Atlanta Braves in case you were wondering - to what I would do post my Major League Baseball career that would become my life's work - CEO of Dollywood that would of course lead to Dolly Parton and I becoming the best of friends. From businesses I would start, places I would travel, people I would meet - my brain ran wild even though I knew from an early age that the world wasn't necessarily made to accommodate the dreams of a poor gay farm kid like me from the hills of Southern Appalachia.

Still, I would share these dreams with my mother and father and they would chuckle and say something along the lines of "I wish we knew where you get this wild imagination of yours from. Just remember, if you aren't careful, one day it's going to get you in trouble."

They would say that and then they would take me to this church, this church that believed the word to be literal, and I would hear amazing stories that expanded my childhood understanding of what was possible.

I would hear how a great storm covered the globe and so much rain began to fall that everything on the face of the earth was doomed. But through Noah, an ark, and two animals of every kind the world was saved.

I would hear the story of Joshua, who marched around the walls of Jericho and without the use of a single weapon watched those impenetrable walls of a mighty city collapse.

I would hear the story of Shadrach, Meschak, and Abednego - whose faith was so dangerous their King threw them into a fire for the King only to see a fourth person protecting them from the flames.

I would hear the story of Lazarus - who died. Whose stench of decay filled the nostrils of those mourning his death. And yet, he experienced resurrection and the fullness of life once more.

Sunday after Sunday, Vacation Bible School after Vacation Bible School, Revival after Revival, I would hear these amazing stories and to think that my parents had the audacity to ask me where I got my wild imagination.

---

Now today, we take a brief detour away from the Gospel of Matthew to dive into a parable found in the Gospel of Luke. A gospel whose writer is renown for criticizing wealth and power and for centering the voices of the poor, marginalized, and the outcast.

So it should come at no surprise that today's parable is affectionately known as the parable of the rich fool.

In response to an inheritance feud, Jesus tells a story of a farmer whose harvest is abundant. So abundant in fact that the farmer's response is to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so that he may benefit from this harvest for years to come and as we read in verse 19 - 'relax, eat, drink, and be merry.' But God comes to the farmer – calls him a fool and says that very night would be his last; asking then the question of what purpose do big barns full of surplus grain serve?

Now, if you've heard this scripture in a sermon before, you've likely heard a sermon on money—whether it was critiquing wealth or asking you to increase your tithes and offerings. But before you go feeling for your wallets and purses, let me assure you that today, money isn't the point. Today's sermon is about something much bigger, more powerful, and much more likely to change the world than money ever could. Today's sermon is about our ability to imagine a world of abundance and to share in that imagining together.

---

As we get older, it is easy for us to believe that we have outgrown our imagination. For me there came a point in my life where I realized I was not going to be the centerfielder for the Atlanta Braves and that I was not going to become Dolly Parton's best friend. Now while those dreams had other factors at play, including things like my lack of athleticism, as I grew up, I found myself not allowing my imagination the freedom to roam quite like I used to and I'm sure many of you can relate.

For whatever reason, we have allowed our society to teach us that imagination doesn't have a place alongside reason. So as a result, we sharpen our dreams to become more realistic and practical. We read the news and look at everything going on around us through a pessimistic lens. And when we are asked questions of justice such as, "do you believe a world without poverty is possible?" we just shrug it off, letting the thought be a passing one because of how impossible we perceive that task.

The irony of this, based on research coming out of the University of Kent in England is that, contrary to popular opinion, the adult imagination is not only as vivid as that of a child, but even becomes more active with age. It is easy for us to believe that we have outgrown our imagination, but in reality our imagination is waiting on us to give it the freedom to roam once more.

In a way, we have allowed our culture to make us the rich fools we find in today's text. We have stored up our imagination because we know that if we are brave enough to dream of a world different from this, it may require of us a little more action, a little more sacrifice, a little more discomfort, a little more work than we are realistically willing to give. For storing our dreams and aspirations of justice in a barn (or our brains) is easier work than us making it a reality.

Albert Einstein famously said that "Imagination is everything, It is the preview of life's coming attractions." When we imagine something, its existence becomes a possibility. For proof of this, all we have to do is look at the world around us.

Look at things that once were impossible but now a common thread in the fabric of our society.

We look toward the sky, and remember that someone, somewhere had to first imagine that flying was possible.

We look at the plagues of diseases that wreaked havoc on our communities from Polio in the 1940s to covid in the 2020s - and someone, somewhere, had to first imagine a vaccine was possible.

Look at this very pulpit, a pulpit where someone, somewhere had to first imagine a time when the voice of a gay farm kid from Southern Appalachia would be honored.

**This is the work of the church.** To lean into what Walter Bruggemann calls the Prophetic imagination – to allow our minds to collaborate together and dream of a world full of abundant hope, abundant love, abundant justice! This is our work. If as followers of the resurrected Christ, we do not believe in a more just, more equitable, more hospitable world, then friends – what is our purpose?

The question for us as people of faith is what are we going to be brave enough to imagine:

Schools where our children's lives aren't threatened by gun violence?

A nation whose political system isn't dominated by white christian nationalism?

A city where 21% of our children are not food insecure.

A world where peace reigns. Where Palestines and Israels sit down for meals together. Where Russians and Ukrainians celebrate their shared traditions together.

What type of world are we going to be brave enough to imagine? Because as Monica Guzman, a Senior Fellow for Public Practice at Braver Angels says, "our curiosity is going to deliver us reality." So, what is it that we are going to long for, where is it that we are going to place our hope? In big barns we call our own or in a shared vision of a world where all people have the ability to partake in our bountiful harvest?

And Y'all I get it. Imagining justice and then bringing that justice to reality requires a lot of work. Yes, a lot of dreaming on our behalf, but also a lot of mobilizing, a lot of political

action, a lot of coalition building, and, yes, even a lot of money. And it is easy for us to not participate fully in this work because of how impossible it feels.

And you may be thinking well, I'm just a single individual, or you may be thinking we are just a single church. The odds are too stacked against us! But it is in moments like this, that I'm reminded of those stories I learned in that small Baptist church growing up, those stories bigger than life itself that come from our shared tradition. Those stories that as a child sparked my imaginative spirit and instilled in me a core belief that through God all things are possible.

So, when we find ourselves surrounded by mighty walls of denial and doubt, let us remember the story of Joshua, Jericho, and how those walls came crumbling down.

When we find ourselves surrounded by the flames of opposition to our faith in tomorrow, let us remember the story of Shadrach, Meschak, and Abednego and the presence of God in the fire.

When we find ourselves surrounded by war, death and destruction everywhere we look, let us remember the story of Lazarus and the resurrecting power of faith

And when those floodwaters of pessimism are rising around us and our visions of justice seem no longer to be a realistic possibility, let us remember the story of Noah, an Ark, and the hope that two animals of every kind brought.

---

In his Day of Affirmation Speech, Robert F. Kennedy reminded us that when a tiny ripple of hope that we send out into the world combines with the tiny ripples of hope of others, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

We have the ability to hope. We have the ability to imagine.

So Friends, If I told you a world without poverty is possible, would you believe me?