

“God’s Geometry”
Ephesians 3:14-21
12th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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I just mentioned the five pillars that I believe are essential to our vision of Open Minds Open Hearts.

And some of you may be asking yourself—why these five?
Of all the values by which we could ground our vision...why not faith? Why not peace? Why not hope? Why not love?

So I need to begin by offering a word of explanation.
To name five pillars is not to say that there are no other values that are important here at Westminster.

That’s not it at all.

I feel like perhaps we need, at the start of this sermon, something similar to the 9th amendment to the Constitution. Do you know what the 9th amendment to the Constitution says?

(I bet you didn’t expect THAT question from the pulpit this morning. The only reason I know is that I wrote my senior thesis in college on the 9th amendment, but that’s another story.)

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

In other words, just because the founders of our country named particular rights in the Bill of Rights, it does not mean that the people do not have other rights that were not named...

I feel like we need something today that says:

The enumeration of certain pillars of Westminster shall not be construed to deny or disparage other important values retained by the congregation.

Look, our five pillars are not intended to be an exclusive list. But they are an important list.

Hospitality
Generosity
Justice
Imagination
Joy

Those five provide a standard for how we will go about our business, determining our goals—as a staff, as a Session, as a congregation—so that everything we do will hopefully be in alignment.

Do you recall which pillar this sermon is about?
Imagination, good. You're still with me.

You see, I believe that a robust theological imagination is central to being a faithful church.

Without a vibrant theological imagination, I believe our works will wither and our faith will fall flat.

I believe that when God shapes our imagination—about who we are and who God wants us to become—I believe that when our imagination is shaped by God, our behavior will follow.

In our text from Ephesians, Paul writes:

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend...what is the breadth and length and height and depth...”

The length and height and depth of what?
The mind of God.
The heart of God.
The imagination of God...at work in the world and at work in
God's church.

Have you ever seen the imagination of God at work?
I have. You have too.
It's right here, in our church's history.

For example, when Westminster was meeting in a tent 75 years ago, do you think those charter members could have ever pictured that they were starting a church that would grow into a 2,000 member congregation with all the ministries that we have going on today?

I doubt that they pictured it.
But God—God could picture it.

And those charter members were willing to trust the imagination of God, without knowing where it would lead, by leaving the security of their home church, and spreading the good news of the gospel even unto the wilderness of Augusta Street.

That's why I believe imagination is a pillar of this church.

Our founding members trusted the imagination of God with open minds and open hearts.

Or how about in the 1960s, when a couple of stalwart members of our church presented the idea of Meals on Wheels to our church's Session?

And the Session approved the plan to start Meals on Wheels in our kitchen, and that ministry grew in our church for 22 years before it went out on its own.

That's an act of moral imagination.
To see the hunger in our community, and say:
God wants us to do something about that.

To be a church of Open Minds Open Hearts means trusting the imagination of God wherever it will lead us...

Now, speaking of where God is leading us, some of you may recall that last week, I talked about three goals for all of us here at Westminster this year.

Do you remember those goals?

Connect. Serve. Grow.

And some of you are already living into those goals.
I heard, for example, that the opening gathering of the Women of Westminster last Thursday evening was just a wonderful event—over 80 women attended.

Long-time members were there.
New members were there.

I heard that it was said in conversation that evening: Gosh!
There are so many people here who I don't even know!

Think about that.
That's not just a comment that occurs at Women of Westminster gatherings.

That's a comment I'm hearing about almost EVERY gathering.
We are a growing church!

You see, another reason I believe that imagination is a pillar of our church is not ONLY because of our past.

It's also because of our future.

As we grow, what will this church look like?

Will you do a little imagining with me right now, about our church's future?

When I picture the upcoming years at Westminster, I imagine so many good things.

I picture a church that continues to grow not just in numbers, but also sustains growth on its staff and grows in engagement...in its children's programming, its youth programming, its ministry to young and old and everybody in between.

I picture a church where service opportunities abound, so that our neighbors in Greenville who have never been to Westminster will know about God's grace...not because they've come to us but because God has sent us to them.

I imagine a church that remains CONNECTED to one another, regardless of political persuasion. I picture us ALWAYS being a purple church, and perhaps becoming a model, in our divided society, for how to follow Christ with differences of opinion about the issues of our day.

That's where my imagination goes.

And at the same time, I know I have to stay open.

Open to whatever might be in the mind and imagination of God.

You see, being a church of Open Minds Open Hearts means recognizing that our imagination is not as deep as God's, not as great as God's, and will not always get us to the places where God wants us.

A few years ago, I read a book published in 1884 entitled *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, by Edwin Abbott.

It's a book about the nature of reality.
The main character in the book is a square.

Square lives in a two-dimensional world.
And one day, Square has a dream.
It's a dream in which he pays a visit to Lineland.

Lineland is a one-dimensional world.
Which means that everyone in Lineland lives on a line.
Little dots, little points on a line.

Can you picture this?
If you're in Lineland, all you can see are points on this line,
because you live in a one-dimensional world.

The only way these points can see Square is when Square intersects with them on their line, thus becoming at that point—a point on their line.

In the dream, Square meets King Dot.
Square tries to explain two-dimensional living to King Dot.
King Dot says that this is a load of rubbish, and is going to have Square killed.

At which point Square wakes from his dream.

But THEN...

Square is visited by Sphere.

Sphere appears like a circle to Square.

But Sphere explains that he has come from a 3-dimensional world.

Sphere takes Square to the world of 3 dimensions.

And when Square goes back to his 2-dimensional world, he decides that he will preach the gospel of 3 dimensions!

But it doesn't go so well.

At one point late in the book, Square and Sphere are talking. Square wonders: What if there's a land of Four Dimensions?

To which Sphere replies, "There is no such land...it is utterly inconceivable."¹

Sphere could not imagine it!

Has that ever happened in your life?

I don't mean have you ever visited Lineland...

I mean, have you ever run SMACK into the limits of your own imagination?

It happened to me.

Have I told this?

¹ *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, by Edwin Abbott, 1884. For making me aware of this book, I am indebted to a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "What DON'T We Know...About God?", Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, March 11, 2018.

How one day in January of 2018, when my family lived in Dallas, I pulled up a voicemail from Roxanne Cromartie, who was on the Westminster PNC.

She introduced herself and wondered if I might be willing to schedule a time to talk with the committee.

I went home and I told my wife that I was scheduling a time to talk with a PNC in Greenville, South Carolina. And not knowing ANYTHING about Greenville, or about Westminster, do you know what the next words were that I said to my wife?

I said, “Don’t pack your bags. We’re not moving to South Carolina.”

Thank God that it is not my imagination that get me where I need to go in this life.

Do you know anything about this?
About having a limited imagination?

Peter knew about it.
Just look at our first text for today.

Jesus asks his disciples, “...who do you say that I am?”
Peter answers: “You are the Messiah.”
And Peter is the only person who gets the answer right!
A+ for Peter, right?
The Messiah is with us!
He’s going to get rid of the Romans!
He’s going to get rid of our suffering!

Not so fast, Peter, not so fast....

Jesus THEN goes on to tell his disciples what being God's Messiah is going to mean.

It means suffering. It means rejection. It means the cross.

And Peter cannot imagine it.

Peter hears that Jesus is headed to the cross, and he rebukes Jesus!
Peter cannot imagine the love of God showing up this way.

But let's not pick on Peter.

The question is really our question.

Can you and I imagine the love of God showing up this way?
Not in success of our church, but in sacrifices we are willing to make?

Not in caring about our own comfort, but in carrying our neighbor's cross?

I want you to do something with me right now.

Not a hard assignment.

This is, hopefully, a very easy assignment.

I want you to picture, in your mind's eye, a person in your life who means more to you than life itself.

A person who was there for you when life dealt you a blow.

A person who has carried you, who has lifted more than one cross for you, and has loved you through thick and thin.

Can you do that?

Can you put that person in your mind at this moment?

Now...who gave you that person?

Did you do it?

Are you responsible for that person being in your life—was it your imagination that conceived of that person intersecting with your life?

Did you deserve that person?

Did you earn that person?

Did you give yourself that person?

Of course not.

It was God.

It was God who sent that person to you.

The person you're thinking of right now—

is a result of the marvelous, unfathomable,
indescribable IMAGINATION of God.

And if God sent that person into your life, where do you think the imagination of God is sending you?

Let me put it like this.

How good were you at geometry growing up?

It's been a few years since I took geometry.

Our 7th grade son came home from school one day this week, and he described the math test he was going to have the next day.

I said, "Have you studied?"

He said, "It's easy, Dad! We're being tested on how you find the area and the circumference of a circle."

I thought for a moment—do I remember how to find the area and circumference of a circle? I know that pi is involved, and the number 2, but which one was area?

What was the formula for circumference?

I started second-guessing myself, so I decided to take the safest route possible.

I said to my son:

“Do you know how to find the area and circumference of a circle?”

“Sure,” he said. “Area is pi times the radius to the second power. And circumference is two times the radius times pi.”

Well...if I had just had a few more seconds to get my head together...I think I would have gotten there on my own.

I think I would have gotten there on my own.

But when it comes to life,
 when it comes to being the people God wants us to be,
 we can never get there on our own.

We depend on the people God sends us to help see us through this life.

Which is why, I think, God created this church 75 years ago.

It was God’s imagination that said:

I need a church on Augusta Street.

I need a church of Open Minds Open Hearts.

I need a church that will be committed to carrying crosses for my children, whoever that child of mine might be.

Do you remember our goals for this year?

Connect. Serve. Grow.

When it comes to those three goals,

how far, how wide, how deep can you imagine
the cross of Christ taking you?

(Amen.)