

Imagining with Lars

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*“There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death”*  
(Romans 8:1-2).

This is a mind-bending declaration. For Paul, freedom does not come from legislation, a social program or a better moral instruction kit. Freedom is achieved by the saving act of God in Christ, who dealt with sin by taking on human flesh. This is an act that has inaugurated a new world order for human liberty for all who are in Christ. It is only living *in Christ*, says Paul, that we can experience freedom from what ails humanity. This is not a freedom *from* relationship but *to* relationship. It is this relationship that allows us the freedom to live anew.

Paul presents an agonistic polarity between those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:5-8). Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh—meaning their lives are shaped by selfish passions. In contrast, Christians are called to think with the “mind of the Spirit.” Those who are in Christ, think with the mind of Christ. In every situation we are to use our minds to imagine the love of Christ for others. (Samuel Well’s wonderful book *Improvisation* comes to mind as a resource.)

An either/or sermon might be framed around this polarity between the flesh and the spirit. Or try constructing a sermon where you depict a situation first using the mind of the flesh and then using the mind of the Spirit. How would the situations be different? What might this contrast look like in your community?

It’s not hard to look around and find empirical examples of what’s wrong. We know the pulpit temptation to wag the finger. Seeing the possibilities in a way that inspires grace is a lot harder, because it requires us not to reason with common sense, but with the sense of the Spirit. It is more difficult to portray goodness than evil.

Illustrating a mind that has submitted to God’s law of intensified love requires a disciplined imagination. I find story helpful as an aid. Is there a concrete story in

your congregation that embodies what it looks like to think with the mind of the Spirit?

A beautiful picture of what it might look like for a church—or pastor, brother, doctor or friend—to imagine with the mind of the Spirit appears in the movie *Lars and the Real Girl*. It's that rare movie that displays goodness without falling into sentimentality. *Lars* shows us a community that saves a struggling young man whose life is crippled by anxiety. The community uses its freedom to move towards Lars, not away from him. Who is Lars in your pew?

We all have artificial ways of trying to cope with real life. Lars's way is a just little more odd (well, a lot more). We all need those who can see, with the Spirit, past our habits of self-protection. As Philo of Alexandria said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle"?