

Sanctified imagination (1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

Life in Christ calls for a new kind of seeing and knowing.

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For as long as I can remember I have loved listening to good preaching. When I was a child, both of my parents participated in the worship service in ministry auxiliaries, which meant there were some Sundays when I would spend a significant part of the service sitting by myself. Instead of trying to escape to the balcony to be with my peers, I would find a space on the pew behind the choir so that I could be close enough to feel the music in my chest—and as close as possible to my pastor as he preached.

Pastor S. Amos Brackeen's bright, raspy timbre drew me in as he took his time to explore a text. He would not be rushed, and I didn't want him to be. He was a textual preacher who had high regard for the written word, but he also had a keen way of painting a scene, a conversation, and the inner world of a narrative that existed between the lines and punctuation. He invited the congregation along with him to use our sanctified imagination so that we could hear the possibility of the gospel in more robust, clear ways that were relevant to our lives.

The phrase "sanctified imagination" is a regular part of the preaching lexicon and practice in my Black Baptist tradition. Whether during Sunday services or on special occasions like revivals, preachers often utilize this phrase to invite us into the story

behind and in between the story. This kind of imagining is not meant to distance us from the text but to help us see through our contemporary and real-life lenses how our faith was meant to expand our understanding, to give us the courage to reach beyond the limitations that rigid, dogmatic renderings of our faith can impose. Sanctified imagination serves as a companion to interpretive methods and modalities; it gives flight and color to the text in our time.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul challenges a community fraught with discord to grow in maturity and discipleship. In chapter 12 he reminds them that their template for understanding the connectivity and unity to which they have been called can be seen in the human body. The gathered community is the body of Christ. Each part, regardless of the role played, is essential.

But Paul does not end his analogy there. He pushes the metaphor as he explains that just as each part is needed, so must each part be valued and cared for the same. In a world with established hierarchies that value the life and service of some over others, Paul is asking the community members in Corinth to use their sanctified imagination. Regardless of what they are used to, despite what is considered a reasonable way of being in the world, life in Christ calls for a new kind of seeing and knowing. It calls for each person to be cherished and honored in ways that don't just celebrate gifts but value being itself.

Christ calls the church to exemplify an ethic of mutual care and radical connection. In this community every member of the body belongs; no person or role is disposable. The community of faith is united through the waters of baptism and therefore knit together by God's Spirit—and because of this, as its members live and breathe and bear witness to the life of faith, there is no place for dissension or disregard.

This remains the challenge and call of our faith. In a world that presents us with many opportunities to embody mutual care and radical connection, we often struggle to read beyond the text and punctuation of the faith that we are comfortable in honoring. We love who we like loving. We tend to value those who make our lives most comfortable. We grieve the suffering of those we have affection for or for whose stories and struggle we can understand.

But pressing into our sanctified imagination ushers us beyond a faith that already makes sense to us. It helps us be honest about our weaknesses and limitations while admonishing us to construct a new worldview—and in doing so to participate in the

repair and healing of the world. Sanctified imagination is not imagination that has become sanitized or more restrictive. It is expansive and colorful. It helps us bear witness to the embrace of God that tears down the hierarchies we use to prop ourselves up and to make sense of the world. It offers us an opportunity to stretch ourselves and our hope beyond what we have known and into the possibility that exists on the other side.