

Rev. Bob Jensen
“More Than We Can Imagine”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 6, 2021

Proverbs 1:1-7

*For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Let us pray. God of grace, God of glory, you indeed walk with us in our lives. And so, we know you walk with us as your word is read and proclaimed. And through our very imperfect words and thoughts, we pray your spirit be present to open up to us your truth for this day and this time in Christ Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

I just celebrated my 70th birthday this past week. And I use that only as a point of reference because the story I want to share with you goes back many years, actually many, many, many years back before I went to seminary, back when I worked for 13 years for Commonwealth Edison Company which is the emirate of northern Illinois. One of the jobs I held for a time was as their customer service supervisor in their office in Freeport up in northwest Illinois. And there as a part of my job I supervised the meter readers, the men and women who everyday went out to record, at least in those days, to record with a pencil and a card the usage readings of hundreds of electric meters on their routes. They would come in early in the morning at least an hour before the rest of the staff. And they would get their route for the day. And then off they would go from house to house, from business to business as fast as they could recording those meter readers at every home and as I said, on those old-style computer punch cards. And then they'd be off to the next house, the next door, the next block. It was an entry-level job in the company and a physically demanding job. So, most of the readers were pretty young. They were 18 to 22 years old. And it was a job that I got to have the opportunity to do the one thing that I really relish about working in business

and that was the joy of hiring young people and giving them the opportunity to make good. Many of the folks I hired at Commonwealth Edison did in fact make good. They carved out a career with the company providing for their families. Then there was David Whitehead. David was a really, really nice young man, one that I really liked. He was personable, engaging, eager, capable. He had all of the makings of being a good meter reader to start and ultimately make that life for himself, that good career with the company. But David, you see, had one small problem. He just could not show up for work on time, at least with any regularity. See, David would go home from work on a given afternoon with all good intentions of being on time the next day. He'd set multiple alarm clocks to make sure he'd get out of bed. He would pledge to get to bed early. He would schedule people to make phone calls at the time he should get up so that he'd be able to make sure he was there the next day. You know how it goes. But then a friend would drop by later in the evening. Being a young single man, pretty soon the two of them would go off to a local watering hole or a movie or whatnot. And the next thing you know, time would get away from David without even realizing it. Suddenly it would be 2:00 or 3:00 AM and he would hurry home and get to bed still with all the best intentions in the world of getting to work on time. But David must have been a sound sleeper. And with little sleep, he would inevitably oversleep the next day.

Now, as you might imagine, as his supervisor, he and I had a lot of talks about this, talks about priorities and responsibilities and what it would take for him to be on time. We spent many hours together trying to help him because I really liked David and I wanted to see him make good. He had all the potential in the world. And I know he had good intentions because he was honest, he was earnest. He took instruction well. But day after day, he just couldn't seem to get there, to get to work on time. And it hurt, not only David, but it caused lots of hard feelings with the other meter readers on the staff because part of their pay was based on group performance. And they didn't like covering for David. He was costing them money. So, after warning David time after time after time after time, eventually I finally had to move to threats. "David, this now is an official warning." And we went through several of those until finally, "David, this is a final official warning. If you are late one more time, you will be terminated." Well, the very next morning, I showed up at the office at 7 o'clock, and all the meter readers were there ready and anxious to head off to work. All except one. You guessed it. David Whitehead. He didn't get in at all at 7:00. He wasn't there at 8:00. Finally, about 9 o'clock, he came dragging into the office, not even wearing his uniform. And David didn't try to argue. He didn't try to plead. He didn't try to beg for his job. All he did was lay his equipment and his uniforms on my desk and look at me with sad, sad eyes and say, "Thank you, Mr. Jensen, for the opportunity. I'm really sorry that I failed you.

Have you ever had that kind of experience that no matter how hard you try helping someone, that they won't accept the help and they end up collapsing in a heap of failure? Or maybe you've been on that failure side of the equation yourself. Facing a problem that's too big to handle, a mistake that's too big to overcome until you finally just give up. The Bible is filled with stories of people who hit the wall of human failure. There is Adam and Eve whose disobedience got them thrown out of the garden, and Cain, who killed his brother Abel and then tried to run away from the consequences of his action. There's Jacob, who stole his brother's rightful inheritance and then spent years running in fear of his brother. There was King David, who not only committed adultery but then arranged for the soldier husband, of the object of his affection to be killed in battle. The Bible is full of stories of people who have failed. People who have dropped out, or tuned out, or zoned out, or just plain copped out. But before we get too deep into the blame game, whether with David or with the people we see in the stories of the scriptures, we need to be clear with one another about something. All of us fit that role of failure, don't we? Of not living up to the highest ideals that God has placed before us for our lives. All of us, if we're to be honest, have collapsed in a heap of failure. Who of us hasn't found ourselves in the position of that one talent servant from that story in the Gospel of Matthew? The one who the master had given a talent to use and he was so afraid of what the master might do that he just buried in the ground and then when he came-- when the master came back and he dug that talent up and he gave it back to the master, when he was criticized for that, what did he do? He blamed his boss, his master, for giving it to him in the first place.

Does any of that sound familiar to you? I know it does to me. How often I've buried my gifts in the ground of self-interest and self-service and then blaming others, even God, for my shortcomings. Is this not why we take the time in worship each Sunday to confess our sins? After all, at its core, sin is failure. Failure to live up to the intention of

God for our lives. Failure to be our best selves. Not just to please God, but for our own benefit and joy in living. And all of us are part of sin swept by the things we do that we shouldn't and also by the good that we fail to do, by the suffering we inflict on others through our sin. Failure in one form or another, touches all of us. It's a part of the human condition. But then listen to the concluding words from our reading this morning from the New Testament from the letter to the Ephesians. Paul writes, "Now to him, who by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine? To him be the glory in the church and in Jesus Christ to all generations forever and ever."

The message that the apostle is trying to leave with us is this: victory over life's failures is won not through our own goodness but by the power of God who loves us, the power of God at work within us, the power of God that will never let us go despite our multiple failures over and over again. And I would share with you that I believe the greatest tool we have for overcoming failure in our lives is faith. Now, when I say faith here, I'm not talking about religion or doctrine or theology. Faith is not simply about believing abstract ideas. But let me give you a simple Bob Jenson definition of faith, and it's this, "Faith is godly imagination and then actively living toward what you imagine." Let me say it again, "Faith is godly imagination and then seeking to actively live toward what it is that you imagine."

The Bible tells us that we human beings are created in the image of God. Sometimes I don't think we go deep enough into understanding what that means. But not only does humanity reflect the image of God, we were created out of the mind and the imagination of God. The beginning of the scriptures tells us that God got an idea. "Let us make people," God said. And in that moment, at the very dawn of creation, we were formed in the mind of God. And then eons later, as your parents supplied the [gleam?], God provided the dream, and, voila, here comes you, here comes me, uniquely and wonderfully made, you. That's how God's world works. Every scientific discovery, every great achievement, every marvel of engineering, every great painting, every musical masterpiece, every good and precious gift, every wonderful thing that human beings achieve is born from someone's imagination, imagination that is traced to the mind of God.

Well, after that awful day of having to fire David Whitehead, I spent another year or so at that office in Freeport and then was transferred to another office and then finally, about a year after that, resigned to head off to what I heard as a different calling and go to seminary. After completing my first year in seminary, I found myself one day, now about three years later, driving by my old Freeport office on the way back from Rockford, Illinois to Dubuque and seminary there. So, on a whim, I stopped in at the old office to see my co-workers and my old boss, a fellow by the name of Gene. And in the course of our conversation, Gene said to me, "You know, Bob, it's kind of funny that you should wander into the office today after all of this time. Someone came to see you last week, and I had to tell him you weren't here anymore." He came to tell me that firing him was the best thing that ever happened to him. I thought right away, "David Whitehead." Gene told me David said it caused him to take stock of himself, that action, make some changes in his life, and now he has a good job with Kelly-Springfield Tires. He's on a career track and he's engaged to be married. And then Gene said to me, "David said, if I ever saw you, to say that he shows up for work on time every day. And he said to say thank you." Who could've possibly imagined that three years before? Well, I've got to believe God imagined it. And I've often wondered through the years just how big an imagination God had for David. I mean, by now he would be somewhere in his mid to late 50s. And I wonder about all the wonderful things he has accomplished.

See, God imagines for your life and for mine and then goes about getting to work to make it happen. That's what faith is, that godly imagination, being open to what God has in store for you and then following wherever it is that God takes you. God almost dares us to imagine what God imagines. Can you see in yourself what God sees? And then God challenges us to do what's needed to make that imagination come to life. We call it the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. So, what do you think? What do you think God imagines for you and for your life? What do you think God imagines for your church as you walk through this interim time? This, to me, is the task of faith in our lives and in our church to ever look for the ways that God is actively leading you today. It may well not be the way that God led you last week or last year or last century. God's kind of funny about always looking toward the future, but we can certainly follow him. For this one thing is clear and sure, God is ready and able to lead each

of us and our churches to a wonderful new day for this is a God who, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. To God be the glory in the church and in Jesus Christ to all generations forever and ever. Thanks be to God. Amen.