

The Imagination of God's Offspring  
April 27, 2008  
Psalm 66:8-20 & Acts 17:22-31  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

In order to introduce you to this year's confirmation class, I think it might be helpful to tell you a few riddles they shared with me. Let me begin with this one:

How do you put a giraffe in the refrigerator?

You open the door and put him in.

I think some people must have memories of their confirmation process making them feel like that giraffe in front of a refrigerator. I say this because I've noticed that when I mention to adults that I am teaching confirmation class this spring, they often get a glazed and fearful look; they pause until I tell them that I am having a really good time and that the youth are asking great questions. They then look a little startled and often change the subject, not sure I think what to make of this information.

I'm sorry that some people remember confirmation as being a restrictive time in their faith. Confirmation is a very important time of exploration. Some of you have told me how you grew up with the questions of the catechism as your confirmation process; for those of you who are not familiar, catechisms are basically a list of questions and answers that are meant to briefly summarize Christian life and faith. They are actually a long-standing part of Reformed tradition, although somewhere along the line, memorizing the answers became more important than asking the questions or thinking about the answers.

The questioning spirit of the catechism can get lost easily, so we use a different kind of process that is adapted material from a curriculum called Making Disciples, which was written by William H. Willimon, as a one-on-one mentoring program. I like adapting this curriculum for our small groups of youth in the confirmation process, because it allows us to really develop a relationship together over the weeks when we meet. We focus on our faith journeys, the sacraments, how to read the bible, how we would describe God, who Jesus was, the history of Presbyterianism, the history of this church, what prayer is about, and numerous other topics that emerge. Questions are always a big part of the confirmation process to me, and the class this spring really got into the spirit of asking questions.

I know Sarah has already shared some examples of the kind of questions the class asked during her visit with them, but let me try to explain a little more what it was like fielding their questions. Whatever questions I was prepared for them to ask about faith, about religion, they let their curiosity flow a step beyond my expectations. The words of Billy Collin's poem, *Questions about Angels* might help give you the best illustration.

Of all the questions you might want to ask  
about angels, the only one you ever hear  
is how many can dance on the head of a pin.

No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time  
besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin  
or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth  
or guiding a boy and girl across a rickety wooden bridge.

Do they fly through God's body and come out singing?  
Do they swing like children from the hinges  
of the spirit world saying their names backwards and forwards?  
Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?

What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,  
their diet of unfiltered divine light?  
What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall  
these tall presences can look over and see hell?

If an angel fell off a cloud, would he leave a hole  
in a river and would the hole float along endlessly  
filled with the silent letters of every angelic word?

If an angel delivered the mail, would he arrive  
in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume  
the appearance of the regular mailman and  
whistle up the driveway reading the postcards?

No, the medieval theologians control the court.  
The only question you ever hear is about  
the little dance floor on the head of a pin  
where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly.

It is designed to make us think in millions,  
billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse  
into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:  
one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,  
a small jazz combo working in the background.

She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful  
eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over  
to glance at his watch because she has been dancing  
forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval theologians did not control this confirmation class. The questions started around the second week of confirmation. I began the confirmation process in a somewhat unusual way and gave each of the youth a bible at our first meeting, rather than waiting to present them with bibles today. We agreed to read through together as much as we could of the gospel of Mark. During the second week we read about the man who was paralyzed whose friends lowered him through the roof of the house so that Jesus would heal him. The Gospel of Mark tells us that some of the people who witnessed this scene took issue with the fact that in healing this man, Jesus told him "your sins are forgiven." These witnesses thought this was blasphemous because no one can forgive sins but God alone. Like Luke did so often, Jesus

responded to them with a question: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:1-12)

“Which is easier,” I asked the confirmation class, “to do something yourself or ask someone for help? Which is easier, I asked the youth, to stand up for what you believe or keep silent? Which is easier, to forgive someone else or to forgive yourself?” Somewhere in the midst of that day, their questions erupted and continued through the ten weeks we spent together. The youth asked me, “how big is heaven? Should you kill someone to save someone else? If someone is about to kill you and you kill them in self-defense, is it a sin? What if you hurt someone and you aren’t sad about it?” Of all the questions you might want to ask in confirmation class, the only one we didn’t talk about was how many angels can fit on the head of pin.

Maybe this is good time for another riddle that they told me. All the animals are called together for a meeting, which of the animals doesn’t show up? The giraffe, he’s in the refrigerator.

Paul’s speech in Acts 17 that Colin and Taylor read for us this morning has been described by some commentators as a riddle. It is likely that Paul is dealing with a hostile audience in Athens, and the subtlety of his speech is less revealing than we would expect from him. However, he is clear about a few things. He counters this famous inscription “to an unknown God” with some very concrete things we can know about God. It reads a little like an affirmation of faith.

God made the world.

God made everything in the world.

God is the Lord of heaven and earth.

God does not live in a place made by human hands.

God gave human life and breath

God made all nations and the boundaries where they would live.

And just when all of this information is starting to sound a lot like God is either too big for us to get close to or too big to get away from, Paul starts to sound a lot like Billy Collins asking questions about angels. Paul says it is our work to search for God. Paul says it is our work to grope for God. We are to feel God’s nearness. There are several ideas about who of the Greek writers he is quoting when he says “In God we live and move and have our being,” but the ‘who said it’ is much less important than the feeling it evokes. Our lives are woven together with our God who made the world and everything in it. Our love of life comes from the power of that creativity, of God’s imagination.

Since we are God’s offspring, Paul concludes, we ought NOT to think that the deity is like gold, silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” Good old Paul. He sets us free to use our imaginations, but then warns us quickly of the limitations. But the image is already out of the bag; our imaginations are vital to our faith. We cannot live and move and have our being in the refrigerator! We are made in the image of the one who is ultimately creative, and so our imaginations are as vital to our faith as our feet and hands and any other part of ourselves that we bring to the table of faith. The problem, I imagine Paul would agree, is when we think only our way of imagining God is right.

This confirmation class has had a lot to share by way of imagination. You have already heard about our chips-ahoy induced theological conversations and about the kinds of questions they asked, but you should know these youth are a lot like you. They each have a great sense of humor, they know the stories of their own faith journeys, some of them pray every night before bed, but not all of them. They want God’s help with the basics like test-taking, and they want

God's help with the more challenging ethical decisions around life and death. They like being with each other; and when they are alone in this sanctuary, they head right up the stairs of this pulpit. They have a lot of imagination to share with you, and a lot to learn from your imaginative outlook on faith.

They did tell me one more riddle:

You need to cross a river, you have no boat or raft, it is narrow enough to swim across but you are warned by a sign: DO NOT ENTER: HUMAN EATING ALLIGATORS. How can you get across the river? Swim across, the alligators are at the meeting of the animals. Who knew alligators were Presbyterians!

The Psalmist in Psalm 66 that we heard this morning praises God, "who has kept us among the living" in the face of many tests of our spirit. These youth have tested their spirit and have arrived now at this "spacious place." The Psalmist uses this phrase, "a spacious place" but it is footnoted with the information "to a saturation." Imagine these youth like sponges that have taken in all the questions and information their souls can hold for now; like us, they are the offspring that Paul refers to and what imaginations they have to share with you. Do not leave them with the giraffe in the refrigerator, shivering and wondering where everyone is at. Tell them what you imagine for this community. Ask them to read scripture and serve on committees. Ask them what they think about how to cross the rivers we come to together. Tell them what questions you have and how many answers you have come up with for those questions.

My favorite question that Billy Collins asks about angels is: "Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?" My favorite question that the youth in confirmation ask is anything that starts with, "If I ask you this can I still be confirmed?" because then I know we are getting to the important questions and their honest answers. And that question allows me to convey the most important message of all: it is alright in church to ask questions. Confirmation should not get mixed up with *conformation*. Confirmation is about strengthening. Confirmation is about asking questions of your faith, of your community of faith, of your ministers, of God. And while the answers may not always be as crystal clear as any of us would like, God's answer of love and forgiveness is clear. Confirmation is another step along the way in learning about who we are with God and who we can still become with God. Everyone in this congregation is really still in the confirmation process, I hope. Everyone is still asking questions, still learning, still strengthening their faith.

So for everyone today with questions, but especially for you, Colin, Grant, Laura, Taylor, Mellora, maybe I can answer your question about if you can be confirmed with another poem. It is by a poet named Kaylin Haight, and the poem is called "God Says Yes to Me."

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic  
and she said yes  
I asked her if it was okay to be short  
and she said it sure is  
I asked her if I could wear nail polish  
or not wear nail polish  
and she said honey  
she calls me that sometimes  
she said you can do just exactly  
what you want to  
Thanks God I said

And is it even okay if I don't paragraph  
my letters  
Sweetcakes God said  
who knows where she picked that up  
what I'm telling you is  
Yes Yes Yes<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Collins, Billy. *Questions about Angels*. In Sailing Alone Around the Room. (New York: Random House, 2001).

<sup>ii</sup> Haught, Kaylin. *God Says Yes to Me*. In Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry. (New York: Random House, 2003).