

“Imagination or Delusion”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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I was both surprised and pleased when the topic and the title for this morning’s sermon first popped into my mind. I was surprised because coming up with sermon topics and titles is often a challenge for me. I was pleased because it seemed like my imagination had been exceptionally creative this time. As I began planning for today’s service several days later, I realized just how challenging it was going to be to find a reading, a meditation, a Story for All Ages, and hymns that would relate to the topic I had selected. It was at that point that I began questioning how I could have made the decision to speak about imagination and delusion. I wondered if, at the time I made the decision, I was in the midst of a grandiose delusion. We will likely find out by the time this service is over.

As I began reviewing possible options for the various elements of today’s service, I was especially concerned about whether it would be possible to find a Story for All Ages. When Sandy found the story *Horse*, I felt both relieved and delighted. As the story begins it is clear that the two characters have considerable experience with the game of basketball. They also have a talent for engaging their imaginations regarding what is possible in the game. Not far into the story it becomes obvious to all of us that the shots these two characters begin claiming they are going to take, and make, are beyond what is humanly possible. The claims, and the boasts, shift from being imaginative to being delusional. My guess is that many, if not all of us, can recall a time in our lives when we made claims or boasts about what we could do or had done that were imaginative at the least and possibly moving into the delusional realm.

Imagination and delusion have some important commonalities. Both relate to our ability to engage in complex thought that involves something which is not tangibly present in the moment. One definition of imagination is “anything imagined; mental image, creation of the mind, fancy.” Delusion often refers to what a person believes. Since a belief is a “creation of the mind,” a delusion may be considered to be contained within the definition of imagination I just cited. If we think about the idea of imagination being a “fancy,” especially if that “fancy” is a “foolish notion,” which is another definition of imagination, then delusion and imagination are, at times, one and the same. But there is an important element in one definition of delusion that sets it apart from imagination. That element is the maintenance of “a false, persistent belief,...in spite of evidence to the contrary.”

Over the course of the past several months, we have been witness to beliefs that fit the definitions of both imagination and delusion that I just mentioned. In spite of evidence to the contrary, many people in this country imagine and believe that the person who is currently our President did not win the election in November. Such beliefs led to a disputed Presidential election and the violent take-over of the Capital Building by a mob of people intent on making their beliefs a reality. Sometimes we have a great deal of difficulty letting go of what we imagine or what we imagine to be true.

As the announcement for today’s service stated, the word imagination is often used to describe a positive attribute of a person, while “delusion” is generally used to refer to a negative attribute. But I would suggest it isn’t that simple. I would suggest that each of these words, and what they allude to, have both positive and negative aspects. I would go a step further and propose that each of us have had experiences with both imagination and delusion. We might even have current-day experiences with both.

We use our imagination every day in making decisions about all manner of things. Because of that, it is probable that all of us can think of past or current instances where we engaged our imagination in both positive and negative ways. But when it comes to considering how we held or still hold a delusion, we might find it difficult to come up with an example, let alone a number of examples. I would ask you to think about some possible examples of delusions you held or hold. I will come back to this in a few moments.

I am reasonably certain that all of us can think of ways that imagination can be used in an inappropriate or harmful manner. For example, when we engage our imagination in thinking about all of the worst that could happen regarding an upcoming situation, we may prevent ourselves from seeing the good

things that might occur. On a much larger scale, the situation related to the recent Presidential election was the result of a person or group of people who used their imagination and their power in an effort to achieve their desires. Imagination, in this instance, would only be considered to be a positive attribute by a select group of people—those who would achieve what they wanted to happen. For everyone else, this use of imagination would be viewed negatively.

When we consider the word delusion, the definition I shared previously denotes a negative connotation. And our Fourth UU Principle speaks of “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Holding a belief that is untrue then, would be counter to that Principle. Yet there may be beliefs that we hold and regularly act on to which there is significant evidence to the contrary. Maybe you have, as I suggested earlier, thought of some delusions you have held or hold. Then again, maybe you weren’t able to think of any belief that might fit the definition of a delusion. So I would offer here some possible examples of delusions that are common.

Until just recently it is quite possible that many of us believed that our system of government was stable and secure. After all, our system of government has been around for more than 230 years. But the recent events related to the election, along with the attempts by foreign governments to influence the outcome of the 2016 election, demonstrated that our form of government is neither stable nor secure. Our form of government is resilient, but it is also fragile and vulnerable.

Another example of a belief that may be considered a delusion has to do with land ownership. Many of us believe that it is possible to own land. Some of us could even show a property deed as a way to prove that their belief in the ability to own land is real, therefore it isn’t a delusion. I would ask us to consider that owning property is something that is only as real as the number of people who believe such ownership is possible and real. And I would go a step further and have us consider what is stated at many graveside services as the deceased person’s body is lowered into the ground—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. If you think deeply and seriously about the idea of land ownership, you might arrive at the awareness that we don’t own the land, the land owns us. We come from the land, we are nourished and sustained by the land, and in the end, the land reclaims us.

And here is one final example of what may be a delusion that we hold. I say “may be a delusion” because this is a belief I have and am unwilling, or possibly unable, to let go of yet. While studying to become a minister, I took a course on Buddhist sacred texts. It was in that course where I learned about a teaching of the Buddha that is often referred to as “no self.” In several of the sacred texts I studied, the Buddha encouraged his students to meditate on the concept of “self.” And in their meditation he invited them explore what the “self” is and where specifically the “self” resides. From my studies of these scriptures it would seem that the Buddha was suggesting there is no self. In other words, the self is only an illusion. If that is true, then my belief about self is a delusion.

I hope you are still hanging in there with me. From my many years of work in the mental health field, I know that looking at and questioning our beliefs is hard work. It is work that can be unsettling and upsetting to us. It is also important work—work that is necessary if we are going to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Before I proceed, let’s pause for a moment and take a deep breath.

If you are still with me I want to go to the next step. The next step is to have us consider that there may be areas where maintaining “a false, persistent belief,...in spite of evidence to the contrary” may have benefits. For example, anyone who possesses a property deed knows some of the benefits that come with the belief that it is possible to own land.

There are many other examples of beliefs that might be worthy of maintaining, even though they fit the definition of “delusion” that I mentioned earlier. I offer here a few I have come up with. The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution states: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

It is clear to all of us that what is contained in this sentence is lofty and admirable. And yet it is also clear that what is stated here is not a reality in this country today or even at any point in the past. It seems to me that the “truths” which this statement asserts to be “self-evident” are not commonly accepted or agreed to by many of this nation’s citizens. I would assert that the recent attack on our Capital Building is evidence of what I am saying here. But should the rest of us jettison the ideals contained in this statement because they are not, and never have been, a reality that our country has been able to fulfill? I hope not. For if we do, we will acquiesce to those who would turn our country, and possibly the world, into a place where the phrase “survival of the fittest” would in actuality be survival of the most powerful, the most controlling and the most cruel. That is not a future I want to imagine, let alone be party to allowing.

And then there is the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is something that can be found, in one fashion or another, in many, if not all of the major religions of the world. In Christianity the Golden Rule is found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke where it is written, “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” One Jewish version of the Golden Rule, as stated by Hillel the Elder, says, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man.” There are multiple other ways that the Golden Rule can be expressed. Again, while this “Rule” is admirable, I think we can all agree that it is definitely not the current reality in the world. If it was the current reality, the world would be dramatically different than it is today. Even though I recognize the Golden Rule isn’t the current reality, I am going to continue to do my best to live by it.

Finally, on the eve of Black History month, I would have us consider something the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asserted in a speech he delivered at the National Cathedral on March 31, 1968. In that speech he said; “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” From my studies of history, and from my observations over the past four years, I see ample evidence that could make a person question the veracity of King’s assertion. In spite of the evidence, I continue to at least hold out the possibility that he was correct—that the moral arc of the universe does bend toward justice.

If holding onto hope and holding onto ideals makes me delusional, well, then so be it. I still believe it is possible that someday we, as a human species, can live up to our potential, the potential that is written about in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, that is stated in the Golden Rule and that is contained in King’s assertion that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. If enough of us share delusions such as these, and live as if each was true and fact, there might just be a day when they become a reality for all of us.

So may it be.