Through the Eyes of Imagination
Greg Wolfe

Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 'Go,' he told him, 'wash in the pool of Siloam.' ... So the man went and washed, and came home seeing."
John 9:6,7

In this Gospel passage, Jesus heals the blind man in a way that stands out from many other accounts of Jesus' healing. He mixes his own spit with dirt to make a clay poultice for the blind man's eyes.

I don't think it's stretching things too far to see this as a metaphor for art. Art, after all, is a mixing of something that emerges from deep in the artist using the materials of the world around us — materials like words, pigment, clay. From that mixture comes something new, something that, when it is well-made, can help to heal our blindness.

Nor is it a stretch to say that Jesus is the consummate artist, the model for all artists. If you go back to the magnificent beginning of John's gospel, in which Christ is spoken of as the Logos, the creative Word, you will read John's claim that "without him was not anything made that was made." Christ the Word is the agent of creation, the model for artists and writers. His preferred form of teaching, after all, was that complex literary form known as the parable.

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The parables are brilliant verbal constructs, traps for the unwary. They begin with common things: workers, masters, mustard seeds. But each parable moves in a startling way from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Workers who labor for an hour are paid the same as those who've worked all day; a despised outsider shows more compassion for a mugging victim than do members of God's chosen people.

The parables catch us out, force us to admit our petty, unimaginative ways of thinking. They cannot be absorbed passively; we must participate in them. Our response literally completes the story by making it our story.

If we stop to think about it for a moment, we will realize that the entire Bible is full of stories, poetry, prophetic vision. While it is wrong to consider the Word of God to be "merely literature," it is never less than literature. God's revelation is mediated not through a set of logical propositions but through the artistry of language.

But in the history of Western civilization, the imagination — which lies at the heart of art — has often been given short shrift. There has been a tendency in the West to speak of faith and reason as the two great faculties of the human soul. The imagination has often played the role of Cinderella, taken for granted, or at least left implicit, not fully celebrated.

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A closer inspection both of the Bible and of the greatest theologians — from Gregory of Nyssa to Dietrich Bonhoeffer — demonstrates that the imagination is an indispensable aspect of both faith and reason. Imagination is like faith, in that it dares to see meaning that is buried beneath the surface of things. But the imagination depends on reason, too. Without reason, art would not achieve complexity of form or vision.
In a more complete picture of the human soul, imagination shines forth in a trinitarian relationship with faith and reason. We might say that art is incarnational: a union of form and content, flesh and spirit. Author Flannery O'Connor speaks of the need to bring mystery and fact into harmony. Those who try to enshrine the mystery without the fact become vague and abstract. Those who choose fact without mystery are left with an inanimate lump of clay.

So it is vital that we see art not just as fancy decoration around what is otherwise a set of rational propositions. To think that way is to reduce art to nothing but sugar coating around the pill of truth.

No, many of the great Christian thinkers have held that art is its own way of knowing the world. To do without it is to diminish our awareness of the world, to become literalists who can't see the wood for the trees, to allow blindness to gradually cloud our sight.

"As we enter the imaginative world, we become vulnerable. But it is precisely in that vulnerability that we become open to grace, to the touch that can clear our vision."

Yet throughout history, there have been Christians who have feared the imagination. In the name of holiness, images have been smashed, canvases shredded, books burned. True, the same impulse that might create an icon could, in a sinful mind and heart, fabricate an idol. But as the medievals used to say, the abuse of a thing does not nullify its proper use.

The imagination stirs fear because it possesses a visceral power. It can lead us to places we can't foresee or control. And yet that is precisely what Jesus does, to our inestimable benefit, in his parables. Those stories were the cause of scandal. They undermined the complacency of many in Jesus' audience.

Imagination involves risk, but without risk our spiritual lives become hollow and inert. An encounter with a work of art involves something akin to surrender. As we enter the imaginative world wrought by another, we become vulnerable. But it is precisely in that vulnerability that we become open to grace, to the touch that can clear our vision.

God's Imagination and Ours

By Kerry Dearborn,
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The power of the Christian imagination is that it not only transforms the way we perceive the world, but it can also transform who we are in our innermost being. What is the basis of such a dynamic imagination?

Distinguished 19th century author George MacDonald showed profound insight in this area: "It will help much toward our understanding of the imagination and its functions in man," he said, "if we first succeed in regarding aright the imagination of God, in which the imagination of man lives and moves and has its being."

Our imaginations find their source of creativity and insight through the very life and creativity of the Triune God of love: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not only have we been created in the image of this God, whose creativity never ceases to astound us, but our imaginations have also been baptized by Christ through his life, death and resurrection. Without this cleansing, the imagination tends to remain bent and self-centered, creating infectious illusions and a false sense of reality, like the false prophets who cried "peace, peace where there is no peace."
There is always the temptation to turn stones into bread using even the imagination, in order to satisfy our self-absorbing appetites. Lilly, a character in Charles Williams' novel Descent into Hell, depicts such a temptation. "Cross my hand with silver, and I'll not only tell you a good fortune, I'll make you one," she entices. "Give me your hand, then come and dream. ... You'll never have to do anything for others anymore."

If our imaginations are to echo God's own creativity, they must be unbent, cleansed and opened up toward God, rather than turned in on themselves. God's penetration through Christ into our dark despair opens us up to God's embracing and liberating light. God has come in Christ to anchor our lives and imaginations in God's own self-giving nature. Williams calls this the "terrible good," for it calls for a death to self.

Where do we find the ongoing power for such a terrible good — the ability to die to self in order to penetrate fully into others' despair and yet bring light? This power is a gift to us from the Spirit of God, who is at work to free us from our insatiable egos and to draw us into God's own story. The Spirit invites us with baptized imaginations to see what God sees — like MacDonald's portrayal of Diamond, who climbs on the back of the North wind and is given her vision of reality. An imagination that would be empowered must be humble and childlike enough to jump on the Spirit's wings, go where the Spirit would go, see what the Spirit sees, and feel what the Spirit feels.

A godly imagination can handle despair, because it continually embraces hope. It can go into the darkness where people feel abandoned, because it perceives that even the darkness is as light to God. It needn't capitulate to saccharine portrayals of "peace, peace, where there is no peace," nor yield to the other side of the tension where all is despair. Such an imagination is liberated to communicate truth in all of its present struggle and in all of its glory, to "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Through the imagination we enact the fundamental principle that Jesus came to teach: we must learn to see through the eyes of others. In allowing ourselves to be transported into the experience of others, art takes us out of ourselves, teaches us compassion. And because compassion means "suffering with," the imagination has to take into account the whole of reality, including the existence of evil, death and human folly.

That is why art is not, and should not be, a matter of mere "uplift," to quote O'Connor again. To treat art as uplift is to reduce it to mere entertainment. While it can serve that purpose, that is not its highest end. Great art makes demands; we have to work to grapple with its picture of reality. In that sense, the greatest art is like the parables of Christ: It demands our inner response, our completion of the story.

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Too many Christians have essentially despised of the faith's ability to renew culture. That despair is ill-founded. There is, in fact, a true Renaissance of art and literature going on now, one that incarnates the Judeo-Christian tradition of faith.

In the face of modernity, many Christians have preferred to retreat into a subculture, but to do this is to retreat from the Christian call to be stewards. The Romantic image of the artist as being aloof from the community has done terrible damage in our society. Art must exist in a dialogue with the community, with the Church. Art can perplex and occasionally scandalize, but there are risks in any form of expression.
May we all draw closer to God through his precious gift of imagination, the gift that, at its best, helps us to capture glimpses of mystery through fact. May works of art — those we make and those we encounter — become vessels of grace, ways in which our blindness is healed.