

A Word from our General Presbyter Ed Thompson

Prayers That Sing & Stir the Heart is a collection of prayers by W. Sibley Towner, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary. The seminary is sending out excerpts from his book every Monday and Wednesday during Lent. Sib Towner was one of my professors, and while I could have told you that he offered a prayer at the beginning of every class, to be honest I don't remember his prayers being all that great. Apparently, I should have been paying better attention.

The prayer that was sent the other day really caught my eye. It begins, "O God, the elector, who chooses aged women and ruddy faced shepherd boys to enact great chapters in the history of our salvation and who decided upon a peasant girl of Nazareth to be the Mother of God, we praise you for your choices....O God, choose us, too – unlikely as we may be."

Somehow, God chooses us. We are a part of God's plan. To me, that is simply amazing as well as incredibly humbling. To me, that serves to illustrate God's great imagination. As part of our ordination vows, we ask those willing to serve, "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" (W-4.0404h) All four qualities are important.

There are some pastors who seem to have an energy deficit and some ruling elders in their 80s and 90s who don't have as much energy as they used to. Overall, though, our energy level doesn't seem to be that much of a problem, except in isolated cases.

I suppose intelligence, like beauty, is a relative term. More than once, I have attempted projects that didn't work. Some failed miserably. In each case, I could lament, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." I don't think – and I may be biased – that what tripped me up was a lack of intelligence.

While we can certainly learn a lot from reading and while we all could and should read more as well as more widely, that doesn't seem to be a big problem either. We would also be better served if every pastor would use all the time and money that's been allotted to them for continuing education. However, while doing that would make us smarter, I'm not sure it will help solve our problems. It's more complicated than that.

Nor is it a lack of love. Well, maybe sometimes, it is. Sometimes, pastors think and act as if they are bringing the gospel to a bunch of heathens or as if they have to teach their congregation how to do church. They seem to think that what they learned in seminary is the ultimate, if not the only, way to worship God and engage in Christian education. That reflects arrogance, not love. To be fair, sometimes, ruling elders can be stubborn, cranky, and occasionally downright mean. While we could all be more loving, most of the time, that's not the problem.

For the most part, it's our imagination or rather lack of imagination, that's holding us back. Our imagination pales in comparison to God's imagination.

So this Lent, rather than giving up chocolate or fasting on Fridays or using a special devotional booklet to begin the morning, maybe we could set aside five minutes each day to imagine what we could be doing differently, how we might care for our neighbors or what we could be doing for the children in our community.

One, I would hope that we could be thinking about how we can better connect with people outside the church rather than caring for the people inside the church. All things considered, we do pretty well caring for one another. All things considered, we tend to turn a blind eye toward outsiders.

Two, I would hope that we could imagine taking on some of these opportunities for ministry *instead of* rather than *in addition to* what we're already doing. For the most part, most churches are doing too much. For the most part, our people seem to be tired. What we're doing seems to wear them down rather than lift them up. I would hope that some of what we do would end up being inspiring rather than demoralizing.

Maybe in addition to being a season of prayer, Lent can be a time to dream, a time to imagine, a time to ask God to open our eyes. Imagine what God could have us do.