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Our annual clergy conference of the diocese was this past week, Wednesday Evening, Thursday, and Friday morning. The bishop expects us to attend.... He who must be obeyed. I'm always a little ambivalent about clergy conference. We have to hear financial reports from the diocesan financial administrator; endless updates from the diocesan staff... and then there's the sharing in small groups thing... you know, like Coffee Talk with Linda Richman, the Saturday Night Live skit, played by Mike Myers: "Welcome to Coffee Talk... I'm Linda Richman.... Talk among yourselves... I'll give you a topic." I'd like to have a conversation with the guy who invented the small group break-out session. I guess I'm becoming more and more of a curmudgeon. "Get off my lawn! "But I have to admit, it wasn't all bad. It's good to talk to other clergy, and meet new clergy in the diocese. Talk a little "shop." As always there was something to take away... a word. As always, I was glad I went.

Our presenter was LeBron Chance, a self-made biblical scholar... I say self-made because he doesn't have a formal degree in biblical literature; he's never taught in a seminary; though he has taught in our local school for ministry. And I admit I was a little skeptical of his expertise... but in truth, he had a lot to offer. I was impressed with his knowledge and enthusiasm, and intellect.

His topic was "Remembering Walter Brueggemann: Engaging the practice of the prophetic imagination." He had me at "imagination!" Walter Brueggemann died just this

past year. He was one of the greatest American theologians of the late twentieth century. He has written almost two hundred books and countless commentaries and essays. We were shown a video in which Brueggemann stated that for the first half of his life, like many of us, he thought salvation was personal, but discovered in his scholarly work that salvation is public; that salvation is a process by which God's alternative life on earth manifests itself up and against, what he calls, the "totalism" of society; that is to say that God's dream of an egalitarian and mutual society stands up and against the authoritarian and autocratic rule so predominant in our world. In short, salvation is political; it is about our common life. That tension, he says, has existed throughout scripture, as well as recorded history, and certainly that tension is felt painfully in our own culture today. For those of us paying attention, that tension is between the injustice of self-interested power, and the egalitarian way to live God intends for us. Read the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church, and you will see that our own government opposes unequivocally the Christian vision.

At the beginning of his presentation, Chance shared with us a quote from Dr. Brueggemann's important book, *The Prophetic Imagination*: In reading scripture, he says, one must treat God *as if* God is a character, a *dramatis personae*, of the biblical narrative. He uses the subjunctive, "as if." Being an unrecovered English major, I love the subjunctive mood... always have... because the subjunctive mood demands the engagement of the imagination.... One must imagine "what if?" One must imagine, "if I

were.” Brueggemann argues that scripture is at its most powerful, its most meaningful, when it is in the subjunctive mood... when infused with imagination. Through that subtle twist of language, we are opened up to the possible. We are more attuned to possibility by calling on, shall I say, our subjunctive sensibilities.

In our reading from Luke today, we encounter Jesus’s disciples experiencing a crisis of faith. Luke’s narrative uses the literary device of itinerary, the journey. Jesus and his following have travelled around Galilee, and Gentile parts east of the Jordan. Here, the fellowship turns toward Jerusalem, the seat of power in Judea. Jerusalem, of course, is occupied by Roman vassals and imperial troops; and the religious authorities are complicit. Out of self-preservation, perhaps, they have ceased paying attention to the plight of the poor and marginalized; they have ceased naming the injustice and violence among their people. Thus, at the heart of Jesus’s teaching is the scathing critique of corrupt power and injustice of the autocratic system in which they live. The fellowship will now bring that critique face to face with that system, and they know that the means of such a system dealing with such critique, is violence.

“Increase our faith,” the disciples say. This is no pious sentimental gesture. It is a cry of fear. The disciples don’t want platitudes, or teaching, or prayer.... What they are really demanding is certainty; certainty of survival. And who wouldn’t? Jesus gives them a word, a word that resonates for all of us who seek to serve God in this life: Faith is not quantifiable. Faith is the mere choice of acting “as if.” We live as if the ancient and sage

proclamations over our collective history are true. We live as if the way of justice, compassion, mercy, and welcome, and care for our neighbor are true. We live in the present tense, and subjunctive mood, open to possibility... possibility of the true and the good... possibility of the marvelous. Faith is living for what's possible. It is not a belief system. It is an imaginative predisposition.

Good sisters and brothers, we live as if it were possible for the immigrant to be treated with justice and dignity. We live as if it were possible that race, or the color of peoples' skin have no bearing on one's livelihood. We live as if it were possible that everyone have adequate and affordable healthcare. We live as if peace were our calling card as a people instead of thoughtless and callous violence. We live as if it were possible that all live in dignity and well-being, particularly for those who lack both. We live under the Covenant of "as if;" the covenant of faith open to God's creative possibility; a faith that diminishes fear; a faith that can withstand any treacherous turn life may take; from strife, contention, and destruction, as the prophet Habakkuk puts it; and indeed, we live in treacherous times. But there is no fear when all things are possible. Fear is the prison of certainty. Possibility sets us free.

Just a few minutes before our conference was to adjourn, Thack Dyson, Rector of St. Paul's Daphne, raised his hand to speak. There was an edge to his voice. The room was quiet. He said that St. Paul's for some fifteen years had been participating in *Sports-Up*, a church league sports program among a number of various churches on the Eastern

Shore, various denominations, sponsoring youth basketball and soccer. Several weeks ago, Thack said, that a gay person posted on the St. Paul's Facebook page a lament that his church had rejected him because he was gay, and wondered if St. Paul's would welcome him to their congregation. Of course, Thack said yes... that God loves all people; that all are, not just tolerated, but welcomed and embraced. Soon after, Thack got an e-mail from the convening pastor, who apparently got wind of the exchange on Facebook, kicking St. Paul's out of the league. Thack waited to call the pastor for fear, as he said, "I might cuss." But he called him just to say that we Episcopalians intend to act as if God loves all people, no conditions.... In a moment, a mere moment, he gave voice to the Gospel of as if. One more person called to live as if there is Love enough. You could feel the electricity, the solidarity and support in the room; and I thought that our witness as a community, as Episcopalians, as followers of Jesus, our words and our deeds, in the flesh, are empowering for each other. And we need each other's energy to live in the "as if." We live "as if" in community. We can't do it alone. Our very presence makes incarnate the possibilities of God. And I thought such mere action is nothing less than prophetic.

No matter what befalls us in this world; no matter the evil and anti-Gospel designs of the powers and principalities of our world, including our own; we live as if the gracious reign of God is among us, imminent. God's dream for the world is that we, all people, live in a marvelous abundance of praise; free from the institutional prison of fear. May one day soon we awake to find that the dream is true.