

## Moral and Immoral Imagination

### Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 31, 2025

*Readings:* Sirach 10:12-18; Psalm 112 ; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

*Sermon text:* The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations. Sirach 10:12-13

A lot of finger pointing in the wake of the Minneapolis shooting. [MAGA personalities blamed](#) the Minneapolis shooting on transgenderism (Robin Westman used to be Robert). Liberal activists [blamed the guns](#). Others pointed to [mental illness](#), or [to antisemitism](#).

“All that finger-pointing,” Peter Savodnik writes, “obscures a deeper point: Westman seems to have been driven by an all-consuming, destructive force, a nihilism—the conviction that life is meaningless; that words like truth, justice and God are empty slogans; that everything must be razed.”

Westman fits the model of what the FBI calls Nihilistic Violet Terrorists. They are the sort of person described in Bob Dylan’s song It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding):

While one who sings with his tongue on fire  
Gargles in the rat race choir  
Bent out of shape from society’s pliers  
Cares not to come up any higher  
But rather get you down in the hole  
That he’s in

Not a new phenomenon, Consider that the word nihilism and writing arguing for it emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century Russia; Lenin and Stalin with their heartless rule embraced the lack of pity. Consider the ideas of Nietzsche: the will to power and the ubermensch as embraced by the fascists and Hitler, leading to war and holocaust.

So we cannot assume this is a problem of single loners; it is also the result of an infectious disease of modernity: the loss of a meaningful world created by God, leavened by high ideals, tied together by countless threads of mutual responsibility,

Someone has written about this phenomenon working out among young people today, “Young people today are dealing with a crisis of purpose. They’ve lost sight of the big things to live for anymore, including not having religion. I think young people are looking around feeling as if their world is being tossed upside down. They are trapped in this existential state of worry about things like climate change and AI. And just as Jonathan Haidt writes in [The Anxious Generation](#), social media can influence kids’ minds, particularly those who are the most anxious and vulnerable, making these emotions stronger.

The writer Tara Isabella Burton has written about the contemporary attention economy—the algorithm driven scrolling as not only warping but actually taking away individual imaginations and substituting a formless stream of random images: “The modern internet, for all that it responds to our desires — and seems to reshape itself in accordance with our imaginations — is in fact not only a depersonalized space but an actively anti-imaginative one. Nearly everything about the desire-machine that is the contemporary attention economy – from the use of generative AI to the popularity of TikTok viral videos at bars – is predicated on the notion that we *don’t* want (or can’t handle) the kind of intimacy with our own imaginations from which technological and creative innovation traditionally spring..”

Summary: nihilism, a deliberate emptiness of purpose and transcendent value—becoming disconnected to the rest of society, including family and friends, a result of many forces today. But one is ancient and the deepest root of the problem. Here are words of wisdom from the intertestamental book called Sirach:

The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord;  
the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.  
For the beginning of pride is sin,  
and the one who clings to it pours out abominations.  
... Pride was not created for human beings,  
or violent anger for those born of women.

What can we do to reverse this separation and reweave the bonds of beloved community? Many things, but let’s focus on what we can do as church.

The newly elected dean of St John the Divine cathedral will soon be officially installed. Winnie Vargese, a remarkable person, and someone I have known since seminary—issued this concise understanding of the role of the church and her hope for her tenure:

The Church as an imagination shaping force.

“I believe the most important thing we do in the church is to share the good news of Jesus, who connects heaven to earth, and reinscribes the sacredness of all life by his life. As his church, it is our work to bear witness to the God-With-Us in our time.

The church can be an imagination shaping force, which is critical work today. It is the responsibility and gift of the church to introduce wisdom into the conversation, a gospel urgency, the great arc of history, a global, inclusive, and compassionate view, and an earnest search for justice and beauty to generate Christian imaginations for this time.

At our best we are among the institutions that equip the people of the community who make healing and justice real.

We can do that through the arts, our liturgy, and strategic use of the great buildings that are our heritage. I am eager to explore how the Cathedral could engage the great questions of the day in its vast forum.”

To summarize: our role as a church is to proclaim the gospel and bear witness. In doing so, if we so well, we can help shape the imaginations of our people and culture. through our witness, through our acts through our wisdom, through our art and through our acts of compassion and justice.

these acts of compassion and justice shape our moral imagination, allowing our innate feelings of sympathy and identification to be guided toward the good and the kind.

Consider the example of Jesus: teaching humility and radical hospitality in today's gospel lesson.

Consider the words of the letter to Hebrews we have just read, calling for the cultivation of compassion and empathy: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Hebrews 13:3).

Consider the call to care and welcome each other, including the outsider: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Beloved friends, let us practice mutual love, compassion and hospitality, resist personal pride and as we have vowed in our baptismal covenant to renounce Satan and all the forces of evil that destroy the creatures of God, let us turn to

God and Jesus, strive for justice and peace and uphold the dignity of every human being.

And since we cannot in our power save ourselves or the world let us pray with Jesus: that our most holy God might spare us from the time of trial and deliver us from the evil one.

In the name of the Holy One, Maker, Redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

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