

# Imagine



A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**  
*Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula*  
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John Lennon felt different from others all his life. His father left the family when John was only five. His mother, overwhelmed by single motherhood at a time when this was not “done”, sent John to live with her sister. All through his school years, John felt the stigma of not having a mother and father – a regular family like all the other kids. Early on, he learned what it meant to not belong.

John’s mother was not entirely absent though, for she visited John, and in fact it was she who gave him his first musical instrument, a banjo. At age 17, John was with his mother when she was killed in a car accident. Later on in life, he would say that he’d lost his mother twice, once when she sent him to live with his aunt, and again when she died. Out of the trauma of his young life he discovered art and music as an outlet for his pain – as so many artists do. This loss connected him more deeply to his friend, Paul McCartney, who had lost his own mother at age 16.

John fought a lot with his aunt about his music. She worried about his artistic, imaginative temperament. She feared he’d never settle down. He wondered too – for he never got over feeling different, left out. But he kept doing what he did – and when he found rock and roll, through Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley, he knew he had found an art form, and a way of life that would not let him go.

His aunt said to him once: “The guitar’s all right for a hobby, John, but you’ll never make a living at it.” Years later, when the Beatles were at the height of their fame, John had a plaque made with those words on it and sent it to her as a gift to hang in the house that he’d bought her, with the money he’d made from his “hobby”.

John Lennon had an artist’s mind. He imagined a better world than the one he saw around him. Even in this, he felt different, saying once to a reporter: “I seem to see things that other people don’t see”.

But he stayed true his vision, and the Beatles would go on to become the greatest rock group of all time. Their songs were sung by millions of people all over the world, and their fame knew no bounds. They were so popular that on March 4, 1966, in an interview for the London Evening Standard, John made the following statement:

*"Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink...(The Beatles are) We're more popular than Jesus now.*

This comment went unnoticed in Britain, but a few months later it caused a backlash in the United States by conservative religious groups. Radio stations banned the Beatles’ songs, and their albums and other products were even burned and destroyed. The government of Spain and the

Vatican officially denounced Lennon's words, and South Africa refused to play Beatles any of their music on the radio.

Even though he felt what he'd said was true, especially in England, John was unhappy about this conflict. He later admitted that he regretted doing *anything* to bring more hate into the world. Later on in 1966, he held a press conference in Chicago in which he told reporters "I suppose if I had said television was more popular than Jesus, I would have gotten away with it. I'm sorry I opened my mouth. I'm not anti-God, anti-Christ, or anti-religion."

The Vatican accepted his apology. And America's adoration of the Beatles continued, save for a few pockets of the religious right in the Bible Belt.

John Lennon did see things that other people don't see. And he wanted others to see what he saw – that's why he wrote his songs. It was his way of being and of belonging in the world. Many of the tunes were about relationships, about the challenges and the joys of human love. He believed this was central to life. His own relationship with his second wife, Yoko Ono, bore witness to this truth, and his love for her is the stuff of legend.

In 1964 the Beatles struck a nerve in the international mass consciousness that lasted for six years. America, and the world, was hungry

for their message, and their medium. And their supremacy as rock icons, as the Lords of Rock & Roll, remains unchallenged to this day, decades after their breakup in 1970.

We are talking today in the Building Your Own Theology Class about religious experiences. Can music be a religious experience? As I understand it, the answer is yes. For some of us it would be the classical pieces, the music of Bach or Beethoven, Mozart or Tchaikovsky, that rouses the soul to a higher plane. But for others, especially those under a certain age, it might be the Beatles. It might be a memory of walking in a peace march, to protest Vietnam, or nuclear power, and singing *Give Peace A Chance* with a moving mass of people bearing witness to the hope of a better world. Music and religion have always gone together. The Vatican was afraid that people would find a better way to God than the one they offered. Rightfully afraid.

*Imagine* was, many say, John Lennon's greatest song. It was John's vision for the world he loved. He knew that he would be called idealistic – he responds to that in the song – *You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one...* But this was 1971 – it was a world where the young people ached and yearned for change, and this song became their anthem of hope. In throngs they marched, holding true to their vision, daring to question the establishment as no generation had done before.

Even now, *Imagine* is one of the most widely sung protest songs in the world.

In the early 1990's the Unitarian Universalist Association established a commission to develop a new hymnbook for our congregations. The commission wanted the song "Imagine" to be included in this new hymnal. But they were intent on having songs that were not gender-biased, and the estate of John Lennon refused to let them change the words "the brotherhood of man" to a less masculine phrase. So the song was not included.

Personally, I think we should have taken the song, as is. And when I told my teenage daughter this story, she said, "Oh, Mom. How ridiculous. They should have done whatever they had to do to include that song. Then at least," she said, "there would be *one* decent song in our hymnbook!"

*Imagine* is a song that Unitarian Universalists like to sing. For we, too see things that other people don't seem to see. Early on, as I told the children, we saw the full humanity of African-Americans; later of women, and the mentally ill, the imprisoned, and those of different sexual orientation. And not only did we see, but we acted. We stood up for people who could not stand up well for themselves. We stood up, sometimes singing that beautiful song, "How Could Anyone?", and we stand up still for people who are pushed to the outskirts of society, who are penalized for

being different. This is who we are as religious liberals, and who I hope we always will be.

John Lennon would have been 65 years old this week. Had he lived to see the world today, I suspect he would have been disheartened. If he worried about his comment about the Beatles being more popular than Jesus creating a division in society, he would have been horrified by the polarized condition of his adopted country today. He might have agreed with what author Bill Moyers' said last month in a speech about America that he gave to religious liberals at Union Theological School. Here is what Moyers said:

“The radical religious right has succeeded ... God is being used as a battering ram on almost every issue: crime and punishment, foreign policy, health care, taxation ... and so on. Their viral intolerance – their loathing of other people’s beliefs, of America’s secular and liberal values, of an independent press, of the courts, of reason, science and the search for objective knowledge has become an unprecedented sectarian crusade for power. They use the language of faith to demonize (their) opponents, mislead ... voters ... censor writers and artists, ...and marginalize the poor. <sup>i</sup>”

Yes, I think if John Lennon were alive today he would reunite the remaining Beatles in the sheer hope that once again they could threaten the growth of a separatist religion that is tearing apart the very fabric of this country. He would sing still of “no religion” but what he would mean is that there be no religion which ranks people into good and evil, saved and unsaved, blessed and damned.

His would sing still of hope, and he never would have stopped his brave act of imagining a world free from hate and war, poverty and greed. But his would be a more realistic hope now, an imagination chastened by the condition of this country, by the great and growing divide between the wealthy and the poor – where last year alone 1 million more men, women and children joined the 36 million already living in poverty in America.

If John Lennon were alive today, he would have wanted us to do more than imagine, he would want us to rise up and act for the good of this country and this world, especially for the good of those who in their power plays for wealth the politicians would mark as losers.

He might, with us, imagine the creation of a moral global economy, one in which there are no real losers, not when to lose means to go hungry, to watch your children be enslaved, or your wife die from a curable disease. I suspect John Lennon would be aware of the real human consequences of corporate globalization, and out of this sorrowful knowing would he once again see things that other people don't seem to see. Perhaps he'd see that ancient Jewish vision of Jubilee - a Sabbatical year that calls for a complete redistribution of land and goods back to a basic equality and equity once every fifty years. He might see it and sing about it, hoping that we see it too.

There is a cost in seeing things that other people don't seem to see. Sometimes that cost is high. John Lennon was killed by a crazed fan when he was only forty years old. But his vision lives on. It lives in us, and in people of good will everywhere. It lives on in the seminarians and professors of Union Theological school and others who call ourselves religious liberals – whatever our faith tradition. Being liberal, religiously, means nothing less than being relentlessly open to the search for truth, and the way to a better world. It means seeing what others do not see, then daring to speak, and to act for change.

Spiritual growth, the journey to wholeness for liberals, begins with the individual, but it does not end there. It ends only when the world outside each one of us also grows and changes and learns to do better– for everyone, and especially for those who are “different”.

John Lennon's song “Imagine”, is one of the greatest songs – and protest songs - of all times. Today, a quarter of a century after his untimely and tragic death, this anthem of hope lives still in the collective human heart. Even the religious right knows this song; though they choose not to embrace its vision, and consciously or unconsciously, work to destroy it. But “Imagine” is the vision that we, as the religious left, inherit.

It is not a new vision. Nor did it begin with John Lennon. It is the same vision that the Hebrew prophets preached of when Israel was in Egypt's land. It is the heart's desire of that young man who taught the people so long ago on the shores of Galilee. It is the meaning of the utter oneness of the Tao, and of what the Buddhists describe as "Inter-being". It is the guttural life-filled chanting of *Om*, over and over again without end. It is our own sacred interdependent web.

"Imagine" is the vision we inherit. For we are now the keepers of the dream. "Imagine" is the ability to see things that others do not seem to see. It is the determination not only to see, but to hold true to this vision, to hold it and nurture it in spite of a world breaking all around us. Imagine is the dream of the past, the present and the future. It is the kin-dom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Imagine is the strength of the song, and the courage to sing it, to sing it like we mean it, to sing it like we believe it, to sing it like the world depends on it, and to sing it like we've never sung before.

Will you please join me in singing John Lennon's song, *Imagine*.

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<sup>i</sup> Bill Moyers, Invocation Speech, Union Theological School, September 2005.