

A Dream Embodied

From the Lenten sermon series: The Dream

Text: Luke 23:34; 1 Peter 2:23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Lent 1995, remembering Jesus. The way he was. The way he lived. The life that he lived leading to the death that he died. During these Lenten weeks we are seeking to retrieve the dangerous dream, the dream that he declared in his home synagogue, when he said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, giving sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." A dream that he declared because he had struggled and wrestled with his own ministry, his own calling, and came out of the wilderness filled with the Spirit of God, with an image of God imprinted indelibly upon his heart, an image, a dream - a dream of the heart of God which he would begin then to embody in his ministry.

Jesus had a dream. It was the dream of a different kind of world. It was a dream that was characterized by compassion and mercy, in which every person was attributed human dignity and valued as a child of God, created in the image of God. It was a dream in which there were no outsiders and insiders, but only all God's children embraced in the grace and compassion and mercy of God.

That was the dream that he dreamed. And dreams shape the world. Dreams too bold create fear and elicit anger and can issue in violence. But the dream that Jesus dreamed he continued to embody in the way that he lived, the style of his life, and the teaching that he offered. Jesus had a dream. And dreamers die, but dreams don't die. Because God keeps raising up dreamers to keep the dream alive. Because the dream is a mirror of the heart and the purpose of God.

Wouldn't it be fascinating this morning if we could have the charter members here with us? If we could ask them what was in their hearts 125 years ago? What were their hopes? What were their dreams? Certainly they must have been people of faith and people of vision and people of devotion and people of courage. And they founded in this village a community of people for the worship of God and the ministry of Christ. I wish we could have them with us this morning and let them tell us of their dream. I cannot this morning relate the history of 125 years, but I can relate the history that I have lived in the last 25 years. I can tell you of the

dream that was born, the new vision that captivated us 25 years ago, 1971, when I returned to this place. It was a dream of a different kind of congregation, rooted in a fine traditional Reformed congregation. We dreamed of becoming an ecumenical community where the blending of traditions would enhance and enrich, and where diversity would be celebrated. We dreamed of creating here an oasis of grace, where the bruised and the broken could come and be healed by the grace of God. We dreamed here a wonderful dream and, of course, there were some who said it was an impossible dream. But at the Institute for Successful Leadership in April of 1971, at the final communion service, I was deeply moved as Robert Schuller told the story of the Man from LaMancha, and concluded with those moving words of the song, "The Impossible Dream." It became for us somewhat of a theme song. An appropriate song it is for the story of Jesus - one who would fight for the right and who, though covered with scorn and scars, would march into hell for a heavenly cause. It's a stirring song, and the impossible dream became the dream that together we committed ourselves to realize here and, in many respects, we've realized the dream. It was a dream that captured our imagination and energized us and caused us to move out into a bold venture, for then 25 years ago, it was a radical dream.

Jesus had a dream. And he lived out that dream. He lived it out in the manner of his life, and he articulated it in the teaching that he offered to the people. But a dream too bold elicits fear, which moves into anger which can issue in violence and tragedy. And so, when he stood by his dream, they conspired against him and they arrested him. They tried him and condemned him, and they crucified him. And as he was being crucified, suspended upon the cross between heaven and earth, receiving the torments and the taunts of those who mocked him, he prayed, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In the midst of the excruciating extremity of power, Jesus prayed thus, a prayer almost too much to take in. But in praying thus for those who were murdering him, he was embodying the dream, the dream that he had portrayed in the word picture of the parable of the father who waits to receive his prodigal son and beckons his elder son, as well, to join the party. If he painted in unsurpassable strokes the portrait of the love of God in that story, then in this prayer that he offered, he exemplified that love supremely. In his prayer for those who were murdering him, for their forgiveness, we see the supreme embodiment of the dream. He had taught his disciples and the people gathered around him to love their enemies, for he said in loving your enemies you will be imitators of God, children of God. And he taught the disciples in response to Peter's question that they ought to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven, saying thereby that forgiveness is not an occasional act, but a permanent state of spirit and mind and heart. And when he was crucified and put to the test, the life that he had lived and the teaching that he had articulated gave supreme embodiment to the dream. And he could do no other, really. Such was the nature of the dream. You see, it was the dream that had permeated his whole being. A dream that mirrored his understanding of the nature of God. And believing as he did, that God was like

that, well, we could have understood if he had done any less but, in order to be true to all that he had claimed, he had to respond out of his depths believing that it was the response out of the depths of the heart of the love of God. "Father, forgive them."

Incredible. Amazing. Defying every human instinct resident within the human heart. Possible only by one transformed by love, by the love, which alone can so transform that one can so pray. Can you believe it? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They know not what they do. It was not a statement of arrogant superiority. It was a sad recognition of human reality. Jesus was saying "Father, forgive them," because they're not really evil people. They're not really bad people. They are, for the most part, sincere people, but they are ignorant, they're blind to the deepest truths that emanate from the depths of your being. Forgive them for they don't understand, they don't know. It wasn't some statement of arrogant superiority. It was a sad recognition of human reality that has been repeated over and over again throughout the course of history. Appalling blindness. A feeling of threat. The rising of fear. The engulfing of anger, and the consequence of tragic violence.

Dreamers die. But dreams don't die, because God keeps raising up dreamers in whom the dream comes alive again because the dream can never die, for the dream is a mirror of the heart of God.

It was a dream in 1870 when some Dutch immigrant folk founded here a Christian congregation. The dream took a dramatic turn in 1971. We changed our name to Christ Community, and opened our minds and hearts to fresh winds of the Spirit, celebrating diversity, being marked by grace, beckoning all of those who were broken and bruised and weary and despairing. But now, it's 1995. One hundred and twenty-five years have passed. And it's time for the dream to take on a new dimension. It is time for the dream that has been realized in this community of grace where so many have found healing to become a dream that now moves outward in ways we've not yet dared to do. To those of us who have been beckoned in by grace, it is time for us to be turned inside out. To this community and to the world. It is time for us to pray.

Jesus, in the hour of his extremity, with his body screaming with pain, said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is time for us to pray, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is sorrow, let us sow joy; where there is hatred, love; where there is brokenness, wholeness; for it is in giving that we receive. It is forgiving that we are forgiven. It is in dying that we are born again to eternal life." God calls us on this anniversary year to dream the dream and to embody the dream in order that finally, ultimately, the impossible dream may become the reality of the whole earth.

Dream with me.