

Dream On!

From the sermon series: The Dream

Text: Acts 10:34-35

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Throughout these long weeks, if you've walked this way with me, you've heard me say repeatedly that dreamers die. And that's a sad and tragic fact. Dreamers die. But, we've also discovered as we've looked at the dreamers that the dream, the vision, doesn't die. The dream doesn't die because the dream is rooted in the heart of God, and Jesus gave expression to that dream. Being confident that he was expressing the deepest intention of God, Jesus dreamed of another kind of world. Jesus dreamed of another kind of society. Jesus dreamed of a world that was a community, that was laced with compassion, a community that had no barriers, so that there was no inside and outside. There was no inclusion and exclusion. There were no lines drawn, but rather, a circle that embraced all God's children. This was Jesus' dream. And Jesus brought that dream to expression in a way that brought him to death, but in a way that has also enabled us to continue to dream on.

If I were to ask you what was the central symbol of Jesus' ministry, what would you say? Well, I suppose because we're a part of the Christian community, you would say, obviously, the Cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith. And that's true. But it's also not true that the Cross is the central symbol of the life and ministry of Jesus in the days of his flesh. You know what it was? It was the Table. Table fellowship. You've heard me say many times in these past weeks, Jesus' ministry was marked by table fellowship. The meal was central in the ministry of Jesus. That sounds so innocent. It sounds almost innocuous. That doesn't really sound like something substantial enough to be the central symbol of the whole life and ministry of Jesus. Let me see if I can establish that from the scripture itself.

Jesus had a vision of a different kind of world, a world in which there was no division, in which there were erected no barriers, and so in his life and his culture, for him to have a meal and to invite all comers was a radical statement. It was a statement of social protest. It was a political action. It was a religious act. It challenged the structure of the society of his day that was reinforced by the temple cult and was guaranteed by the occupying Roman power. That society was

structured; there were custodians of the tradition; there were guardians of the law. They were the responsible and the respectable people of the society of which he was a part. They were all invested in that system that was able to demarcate very carefully who was in and who was out, who was pure and who was impure, who was given access, who was excluded. And for Jesus to have a meal with just anyone was, therefore, an action of protest.

You might say, "Well, still, a table? A meal? Is this whole thing about with whom one eats?" And I want to say, "Yes." Because social protest and prophetic actions are that which become catalysts for transformation. You see, it was no big deal when Rosa Parks sat down in the front seat of a bus in Alabama. No big deal: just one black woman. Why didn't they simply disregard it? Why didn't they just let her have her nickel's ride and be done with it? But, you see, they couldn't. That is, those who were invested in maintaining the status quo of a society that was oppressive, of a society that was not founded in truth, of a society that denied the dream in the heart of God. For Rosa Parks to sit there had to be dealt with, or the whole system would become exposed. And isn't that precisely what happened? Was not that the action that became the catalyst for the whole Civil Rights Movement? Was it not then Martin Luther King who paid with his life, who led that people to call for their own rights and dignity in the human story? Just a black woman who sat in the front of the bus. Social action of protest, when the time is right and the Spirit of God moves, can change the world.

Ask Robert McNamara. I really don't want to do a commercial for his book but Robert McNamara in a vibrant old age reflects, in retrospect, on the 60's. Do you remember the 60's? Well, some of you are young enough to have been a part of the 60's. And some of us are old enough to have been very angry with you! Wasn't it during the 60's that the world started to unravel? Wasn't it during the 60's, with flower children and hippies and young people marching on campuses, marching at the White House, and the Vietnam protest – wasn't that the time that our society began to unravel, to deteriorate, to degenerate? Aren't all of our problems now because there were some of you in the 60's who sat in and protested and maybe burned things? I think so. That's the problem, you see. In McNamara's book you'll see an elder statesman who looks back on the 60's, who in his interview with tears in his eyes, says, "I was wrong. We were wrong. Those of us that stood in the center of power, we were wrong. We were full of arrogance and pride so that we would not hear logical argument. We would not hear ethical appeal." And so now, in his vibrant old age, a very comfortable Robert McNamara says, "I was wrong. And we were wrong."

I want to say, folks, they were wrong. And the kids are often right. Those of us who are settled and steeped and stuffy and stultifying - it is we who maintain repressive structures. It is we who defend with self-righteousness that which is, maintaining the status quo in a world that knows no justice and has no compassion and is not at all a community. We support and reinforce and perpetuate a world that continues to kill the dreamers.

Robert McNamara justifies his not criticizing Lyndon Johnson when he left in '67, though he himself was coming to understand that the war was wrong, because *of protocol*. This is what the good and the proper and those in power do - they don't say anything. Unless you're a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and then you raise your voice, then you act, then you see your government going in the wrong direction. You see the powers that be leading the world toward destruction and death, then you take your stand. You do your political thing; you act and you give your life.

Jesus did what appears to be almost an innocuous, non-threatening, simple act - setting a table and sitting with all sorts of people. And it is that action that is the very center of his ministry, which is the expression of a dream that could change the world. If you don't believe me, this afternoon take the Gospel of Luke and find that, more than any other activity, Jesus is at meal. He is at meal with sinners. He goes with those who invite him. He's going through a tax office one time and there is Levi, and he says to Levi, a tax collector who was on the outside, "Follow me." And the guy follows him, and Levi is so thrilled about it that he throws a party, and whom do you think he invited to his party? Others just like himself.

And the leaders, the guardians, those who were invested in establishing and maintaining the status quo, grumbled at him. They said, "Look with whom he eats." If you go again to the 15th chapter of Luke, you will find that he was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, and they grumbled at him, and he told a story - The Prodigal Son - which is really the story of the waiting father who waits simply weeping, watching, hoping, eagerly anticipating the return of all his children. That beautiful story comes because Jesus was eating with those with whom one ought not to eat. And in response to the grumbling, he told the story. Or, if you would go to the 14th chapter, you would find that he was willing, as well, to sit at table with the Pharisees, those who were devout and serious and deeply concerned and, when he sat there at table with them, he saw that they were vying for the top seats, for the best seat in the house. And he said, "Don't do that. In fact, when you have a feast, don't invite your friends and your relatives, don't invite the rich; invite the poor and the lame and the halt and the blind. Invite the people that'll never have a chance in the world to pay you back."

And someone said, "Oh, my, wouldn't it be wonderful to break bread in the Kingdom of Heaven?" Jesus said, "You know what? The Kingdom of Heaven is resisted by those who have obviously received the invitation." And so, he tells the story of the lord of the house who sends his servants out into the highways and into the byways, out in the bush, out in the street, and he said, "Find the riff-raff of society and tell them to come in, compel them to come in because I want my house filled!"

You think that the table wasn't central to Jesus? Do you think that was not the central prophetic act by which he embodied the dream, which was a dream rooted in the heart of God? That was it, you see? And throughout that Gospel,

he's always eating, drinking with somebody. He gathered with his disciples on the night on which he was betrayed, when the shadow of the cross hung heavily over him, and he took bread and he blessed it and he broke it and he said to them, "This is my body, and when you eat bread, remember me, and don't let the dream die." Is it any wonder, then, that on Easter eve the risen Lord, joining two disciples on the way to Emmaus, invited to come into their house as a guest, proved to be the host at the table, who took the bread and blessed it and broke it and shared it with them and was gone?

Then they looked at each other! They said, "Did not our hearts burn within us? Oh, my God!" They said to each other, "He was made known to us in the breaking of the bread." It was in the breaking of the bread. Because *that*, Luke says, was the link, the hinge. The dream goes on, Jesus was saying. Luke was saying in telling the story - all those meals back there - they're not over! The meals continue to be the symbolic moment at which the world becomes community. And Jesus on the evening of the Resurrection once again came to table, broke bread, blessed it, gave it to them, and he was known to them. His presence, his power, his transforming, dreaming power was known to them in the moment of the breaking of the bread.

The Gospel of Luke was written by Luke and so was the Book of Acts, and if you move on to the Book of Acts, you find that the Jesus movement was characterized by community, a community of the Holy Spirit, a community in which there was no human need; every need was ministered to. We are told that they went from house to house, breaking bread, singing hymns with great joy! That was what it was all about! It was about table fellowship! A meal that was the symbol of community laced with compassion.

And if you want one more instance, there's old Peter. Peter would have thought that he understood. But, as a matter of fact, Peter didn't have a clue as to the dramatic dimensions of the dream. So, one noontime on a rooftop, he fell asleep and had a vision of a sheet or something like a magic carpet coming down and there were all sorts of animals. In the temple system that was a social system and a political system, as well, they knew which animals they could eat and which animals they weren't to eat. And the voice said, "Rise and eat." And Peter said, "Not me. I am a Jew. I stick to the tradition. I am observant. I have been obedient to the fathers of the faith. I have followed every prescription. No, I will not rise and eat." And a voice said, "Rise and eat." And Peter said, "I cannot." And the voice said, "Don't call unclean what I've made clean." And just then there was a knock on the door and there was a delegation from Cornelius, the Roman centurion, a military man from the occupying power, a Gentile, one from the nations. There were two kinds of people in Peter's world - Jews and those who were not Jews. The Chosen, the elect, the community, and the rest. Now here's one from the rest!

And behold, this guy is a dreamer, too, because when Peter finally cannot resist and goes to Cornelius' house, Cornelius tells him of a dream. He saw a bright and shining angel and the angel said, "Your prayers are heard. Your alms are received." Here's one from the outside whose prayer God hears, whose offerings God receives, and is blessed now with the presence of none other than Peter, and Peter says, "I shouldn't be here. This is against the catechism, against the Bible; this is against everything I've ever been taught; this is against the tradition. I am breaking the tradition. In breaking the tradition and going over this threshold, the whole tradition is shattered!" But he did it. And he told them the story of Jesus. He told of Jesus' mighty deeds and all that he did, and how he was crucified and raised and made manifest. And the Holy Spirit fell with power and they were drunk with God together! Peter, the Jew, follower of Jesus and Gentiles - they were all drunk with God together.

Ah, do you believe me? The Table. This central motif for our life, this central image for the ministry of Jesus. To follow the way of Jesus is to take up the cross by embodying a ministry of inclusivity.

Do you remember where we started in Lent? The first week, also around the Table? You remember, the meditation was "Retrieving the Memory: A Dangerous Dream." Do you remember that I pointed to the Table and I said, "Dear friends, there are Tables in Christian churches to which I'm not welcome." Do you remember? The Table, which Jesus used as a central symbol of community, has become in the Christian Church, a symbol of division. When the World Council of Churches tried to celebrate Holy Communion for the first time in Sweden, in the 50's, they could not have just one Table. The World Council of Churches had to set up *three* Tables. Some went to one room and some went to another room, and some went to yet another room!

I want to ask you, where are you activists of the 60's? Why do you tolerate it? Why do we allow the Church and its ecclesiastical leaders, its arrogance, its dogmatism, its blindness, why do we allow it to go on? This Table, this Table that Jesus set in the middle of the world, inviting all, this Table has become once again the instrument of the old temple cult! This Table says to some, "You may come." And to others, "You're not welcome!" *It is a scandal!* A scandal of the Christian Church! And if there's a scandal in the Church, there's a scandal in the world of religions. Japan is on the alert because the fundamentalist Buddhist cult may attack again. And there are Israelis grieving because Muslim fundamentalists have once again struck with their terrorism, killing, killing. And tomorrow we may read of the retaliation of the Jewish fundamentalists, and we will read, as well, of the violent actions of American fundamentalist Christians.

The scandal of the world of religion that has made this world dangerous, filled with violence, doing precisely that which denies the dream of Jesus, which he believed was rooted in the heart of God, that there be no inside and outside, no exclusion and inclusion. There is a scandal of those who, in the name of God,

while saying their prayers to God, continue to *play God*, saying who is in and who is out! It is a disgrace!

But, it's Easter. And when we have admitted that scandal in the Church and in the world of religion, then let me go on to say that today is a bonus. You see, it was in the breaking of the bread that they recognized him and knew his presence. It was Luke's way of saying that now, post-Easter, the living Lord will be made known in the breaking of the bread. It was Luke's way of saying that this feast is not really a feast that focuses on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. There is no day in all the Christian year when it is so important to celebrate this feast, which is really a feast, not of crucifixion, but of resurrection. This is a feast that says, Dream on!

I know that there are those of you who are celebrating your first Easter since having loved and lost a while someone so dear. And right now you can't even think about the scandal in the Church or the scandal in the world of religion. Your heart breaks because of the loss you've sustained. But let me be very clear - the Lord lives. We, too, shall live. And those who have moved through death have passed into light eternal. And for them all is well. All is well.

But for us, the presence, the recognition, the manifestation of the living Lord does not come as we passively try to get through unscathed, hoping for heaven by and by. This is the insight of Bonhoeffer - for us who are still on the way, though we take up this cross, it is at this Table that we follow Jesus. And it is in the following of Jesus, living out the dream, embodying the dream that paradoxically we find communion with God. This is what Bonhoeffer learned - it is in joining God in His sufferings in the world that one finds oneself in the arms of God, communion with God. Recognition of the living Christ who is crucified and raised again - this comes to those who follow the dream, who follow the way, who walk in the steps, who risk, who commit, who dream and will not quit dreaming until the dream is realized in the eternal purposes of God.

Dream on, believing that Easter assures us that all will be well and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. Thanks be to God.