

The Death of a Dreamer

From the Lenten sermon series: The Dream

Text: Mark 15:34

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Palm Sunday, April 9, 1995

Transcription of the spoken sermon

In addition to the scripture, we hear a contemporary reading on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged 50 years ago today outside the Flossenburg prison camp in Germany. One of his companions of the last days, an Englishman, Payne Best, who had been captured and was also incarcerated, wrote,

Bonhoeffer was different. Just quite calm and normal, seemingly perfectly at his ease, his soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison. Bonhoeffer was passing the last landmarks in his spiritual journey. The struggles of the Tegel prison days had ended in victory, and he seemed to have attained that peace which is the gift of God and not as the world giveth -the struggle to abandon to God his rich and treasured past, the struggle with the last vestiges of his pride, the struggle to suffer in full measure and yet in gratitude, his human longings and to remain open to others in the midst of his pain. All this had led him to that experience of the cross in which at last, through a grasp of reality so intense that it fused all the elements of his being into a single, shining whole, he learned what life can be when we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but the sufferings of God in the world. Out of this death to the last vestiges of self Bonhoeffer seems to have been raised up quietly, unspectacularly into the last stage of his life in which he was made whole, made single, finally integrated in Christ in a way more complete than any that had gone before. The Christian had become the Man for Others, the disciple as his Lord.

From his own writings toward the end of his life, *Stations on the Road to Freedom*, Bonhoeffer gives four stations - discipline, action, suffering, and finally death. Of death, he writes:

Come now, Queen of the Feast, on the road to eternal freedom. Oh, Death, cast off the grievous chains that lay low the thick walls of our mortal body and our blinded soul, that at last we may behold what here we have

failed to see. Oh, Freedom, how long have we sought thee in discipline and in action and in suffering. Dying, we behold thee now and see thee in the face of God.

This, too, is the word of the Lord.

It was a cold day in January when I was trying to figure out what I would preach in this Lenten season. It was the Thursday before we left on vacation that I ascended to my loft early in the morning and descended from my loft at eleven o'clock in the evening. I realized that the worst case scenario would be that I would ruin the whole day and still come up empty. And that's exactly what happened. Eleven o'clock at night, blurry-eyed and not a word on the paper. But, wonder of wonders, and it has happened before, I awakened on Friday morning and went to the loft again and within a matter of a few minutes, wrote out the themes and the texts for the Lenten season, and THE DREAM was born. And in the unraveling of this dream, I have found that perhaps as never before, the series has preached itself. It's been an experience of the sermons almost writing themselves. And as I come now to this Palm Sunday celebration, I realize in all of the themes and the texts, there is just one word that I would change. And it is a word in the title of today's message, "The Death of a Dream." The thing that has really struck me in this time of reflection on the theme is the fact that dreams don't die. Dreamers die. But, dreams don't die. And so, were I to publish the series, there would be that one minor but very significant change. The title of this message should rather be, "The Death of a Dreamer," because Jesus died. And so many of those throughout the course of human history who dreamed the dream have died, as well.

It is one of those great, profound truths that has washed over me again and again in these days that, though the dreamer die, the dream does not die. As I have reflected on this course of messages, I have come to a deeper sadness, I think, than ever before. I've come to a sadness about things that are not new, for I have known them, but a deeper sadness because I seem to be struck more and more with the fact that in the human story we do kill the dreamers. We crucify those who dare to dream too boldly. It's not a new fact, of course. We've known it all along. We can go back into ancient history and we read the story of the great philosopher and human being, Socrates, who was condemned at a public trial as an enemy of the people and drank the hemlock and died. And we know that Jesus was fully aware of the fact, for on one occasion he said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem that kills the prophets!" He was not unaware of that into which he had moved. And during the course of these weeks we have mentioned some of the contemporary dreamers of our century - our century, the most violent and the bloodiest century of human history. We know, for example, of Gandhi, with his revolutionary, non-violent resistance, gunned down, Dag Hammarskold, the Secretary General of the United Nations, a great Christian visionary who was brought into an "accident," Martin Luther King, who led the revolt of his own people claiming their rightful place.

No, it's not really anything new. It's ancient history. It's as current as yesterday. We kill; we crucify dreamers. But I think I've come to a deeper sense of that, somehow. It makes me sad. I wonder why. And the anger and the violence of the human family is so, so sad. Because it could be so different, and it's so sad because it doesn't seem to change. Even in the 2000 years of Christian history, the Christian Church itself has been implicated in the violence itself! It doesn't change. It's so sad, because people suffer. And it's so sad, because the very best of humankind reaches a violent end through appalling blindness, ignorance.

Jesus dreamed a dream of a different kind of a world. Dreamed a world of compassionate community. He declared his dream and portrayed his dream of that marvelous picture of the father who received his children home. He lived out, he embodied the dream and, in what he taught and in his concrete behavior, he went right to the center of the establishment, right to the temple court itself, and in symbolic action cleared the court of those who were conducting commerce because they were supportive of a system, the system itself, the established system of Church and State that was responsible for the excluding of some, of growing the divisions between people, of saying who was in and who was out, a system that was violent in its abuse of those who were voiceless and powerless, a system that in the name of God was denying the very dream of God.

And they killed him. They crucified him. And I suppose that, when I entitled this message "The Death of a Dream," I was thinking of the way he died. The way he died - it was an awful death! Luke and John modify a little bit, but if you readjust Mark, the earliest account, followed by Matthew, Jesus cries with his last words, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" I guess when I was thinking about that in the first place, it seemed as though, indeed, the dream died! "My God, my God, why?" I wonder if Jesus died with such dereliction, such desolation, such despair. I wonder if it was because Jesus so believed right to the end that even then God would intervene. Did not Jesus believe that God would create newness? Did not Jesus believe that he was absolutely called and compelled by God to announce the dream, and was he not confident that it would happen? I really think that probably was why his death was so awful. I think Jesus died trusting, but trusting in the midst of the darkness and trusting with his dream crushed.

So, it's a very sad realization. It's sad because it's about me and it's about us; it's about the world, it's about humankind. It's not about some ancient episode. It's about an ongoing story, which we're still writing. But if I have been saddened by that, and I really have, the more I've thought about it this year, I've also come back again and again to a wonderful realization that, though dreamers die, the dream doesn't die. That's the amazing thing - the dream doesn't die. The dream won't die! Jesus may have died thinking that the dream was dead, but it was in the very act of his dying, in the very faithfulness to the end in his having lived it out fully, it was in that very action, that very concrete action in the midst of our history, that that dream was born again. Born again and again and again. The

dream that won't die. And that's been encouraging to me. In fact, it is a wonder - the dream will not die. And I have to believe because God authors the dream, because the dream is indeed the reflection of the heart and center of reality, that the dream bespeaks reality at its center. The dream is a dream of what will be, because God will not abandon Creation. It is God Who puts the dream in the human heart, and though the dreamer may die, the dream will not die.

I've been struck by the fact that the great dreamers are drunk with God. They are drunk with God! Oh, there have been certainly noble people with high ideals and great programs who have not claimed the authentication of God, but I sense that, if it is simply a human program, if it depends on human imagination and human passion and human commitment, it will run out of gas, it will run out of steam. But if there is one who is truly a dreamer - that one is drunk with God, compelled by God. That one has a sense of destiny that will not let go. It was certainly that way with Jesus. We are reminded in the contemporary research. Jesus is called a holy man, a charismatic figure. That doesn't mean that he simply had a powerful personality that sparkled but, rather, that Jesus was in touch with another dimension of reality, that Jesus was filled with the Spirit of God. There was something about Jesus that was permeated with God and that radiated God. Jesus was drunk with God!

It was true, as well, of that French Reformed pastor, André Trocmé. I've mentioned him - he resisted the collaborationist French government; he created a safe place for Jewish refugees from the Holocaust; he was responsible for the saving of thousands of Jewish lives. Out of his obedience to Jesus, and in his existential moment of decision he decided not to be complicit with a plot to assassinate Hitler because it might separate his soul from Jesus. His obedience took that form. But it was true, as well, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. If you read his *Letters and Papers From Prison*, you will find that this man was drenched with God. He was a truly, truly spiritual man. He read his Psalms and his scriptures; he said his prayers, he sang his hymns, and he loved to worship. He was a man whose life was filled with God, God-consciousness; he lived before the face of God.

I'm convinced that it is God who puts the dream in the human heart. One does not choose to be a dreamer. Oh, in the old mystical days of my youth, my dear father would speak about his prayer that I would go into the ministry, and he would always add, "But I know that God must call," and I have to admit that I've become a bit cynical about that. I see all too many in my profession who are choosing a profession as much as they may, with pious platitude, say they are called. And I realize the temptation of a dreamer like myself is to get my own ego all tied up in the business, to build a great church, to build a great empire. Egocentricity so subtly sneaks in so that one thinks and, even in the name of God, makes all kinds of pious sounds when down deep one simply needs to be successful, to be a hero or something like that. But I see Jesus, and I see Bonhoeffer, and I know that when it's the right thing, one doesn't choose it!

Bonhoeffer resisted it. He was a fully human being, he was full of humor, he was full of wonderful cultural background, he loved life! He resisted. He took aggressive action, political action in his day in the name of Jesus Christ. He was a wonderful human being. As Payne Best said, "You felt something different when he came into the room." Those imprisoned with him said he was a source of strength, of comfort, of joy. He couldn't help himself. He was chosen.

Bonhoeffer said, "I learned that you don't try to make something out of yourself." A pious person, a religious person, a churchman, or whatever. No. Too many of us try to make something out of ourselves. Too many of us get captivated with some kind of self-serving dream or profession. Too many of us get too self-important. We get puffed up. We think somehow or other that the world depends upon us and that the kingdom of God depends upon us. And I want to tell you - it doesn't work that way. The real thing is to be resisted. And the real thing cannot be resisted, because it is given by God. God chooses. God makes dreamers. And when God lays God's hand on one and the dream is there, one cannot get loose from it.

The dream doesn't die, because God won't let it die. God takes some and God says, "Dream!" And this, too, I've learned - that if one lives faithful to the dream, if one lives in integrity with the dream, then thus to live is enough. To live true to the dream in this life is enough. And that, too, is an insight that is not always apparent. It's certainly not apparent in the Church; it's certainly not what we've done with the Christian Gospel, for we've gone throughout the world promising the Christian Gospel and calling people to have faith and to be obedient because there would be death and there would be judgment, and then there was heaven or something else. We have spoken of the immediate response to Jesus Christ in terms of the future, some future reward. And I want to say it's wrong!

When I see Jesus, when I see Bonhoeffer, then I know, if one has a dream and one is true to the dream, then one has lived true to the dream, and it is enough. Jesus did not stay faithful to the dream because he knew that Easter would follow Good Friday. He followed true to the dream because it was true! He was true to the dream because it was right! There's no other reason to do it than if it is right. If it is true, then you do it! You walk that path; you don't ask "What if?" Bonhoeffer did the same thing. True to it because it was right to do it. He realized in his terrible suffering that it was in suffering in this life that one finds communion with God. It is in this life when I have given up myself and joined in the sufferings of God in the world that I find communion with God. In other words, the cross was not the end of Jesus' life. It was at the beginning. The cross was not in Bonhoeffer's martyrdom; it was in his beginning when he followed the path of discipleship. If one is called and follows the path of discipleship, if one with passion lives true to the dream, then at the end it's enough. We don't need more.

At the end of his life, with the Gestapo at the door, when they called Bonhoeffer's name, he said to the Englishman, Payne Best, "This is the end. For me, the beginning of life." And Bonhoeffer believed that. And I believe that, too. But I want to say as forcefully, as passionately, as seriously, as I can say to you - that if it is only Easter that beckons us on, then we haven't yet learned the Gospel. If it is only a promise of resurrection that keeps us faithful to the dream, we haven't yet followed Jesus. Jesus didn't go through Good Friday because Easter was coming. And Bonhoeffer didn't live faithful to the dream because there was heaven by and by.

It is enough to know what God calls one to do here and now and to do it, and to do it with all one's heart and all one's passion, and having done it, it is enough. It is enough. That's what it is to follow Jesus. And it is such that God continues to seduce with a dream, to compel with a dream. And it's not sad. It's really, really wonderful, because suddenly one wakes up and says it's not some future reality - it's here and now, it's communion with God, it's freedom. My God - it's joy!