

“Wisdom for Living a Different Life”
Isaiah 58:1-12; 1 Cor 2:1-16;
Matthew 5:13-20

February 5, 2017
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I have a dream. Martin Luther King gave a speech by that title: *I Have a Dream*. We celebrated his day not too long ago.

I was thinking about having a dream. What is our dream for our lives? We also talk about having the American Dream, and so often when we think about the American dream it is somehow filled with stuff.

So I wondered, what's the biblical dream. What's the dream that comes out of scripture for us? One description for it, I think, is at the end of the Isaiah passage today. It's about being a watered garden or a stream that never runs dry. If you lived in that parched environment, it makes a lot of sense. I was trying to think what my dream might be today. It might be a room with a fire in the midst of the cold.

The idea of a watered garden, of a spring that never runs dry, is a place where it's green in the midst of what seems to be dead. It's life in the midst of death. It's a place that enables life and gives life. That biblical dream makes a lot of sense to me as to what it's all about—to be a watered garden, to be a stream that never runs dry, a place that enables life and gives life, and to both live in that place and to be part of that place.

The struggle with that is as we create our dreams, we begin to shape them and give them shape in particular ways. What I was thinking about is how we have done that over time as people. We have set up a dream and tried to make it happen, make it real. What struck in me was a remembrance of some of the people who first came from England to get away from religious persecution and to set up their dream here on this continent. They were called Puritans. They believed they could set up a place that would be a beacon on a hill, a shining light, a Christian society.

They believed that if they could just get here and be free of all the constraints everybody else was putting on them and could just live with their own, they could make it all work. So they outlawed things like celebrations and dancing. They made it a law that everybody had to be in church on Sundays. What they found was that as they prescribed their dream, it no longer was so much of a dream.

People started to struggle with it. People like Roger Williams who says, “Forcing people to worship stinks in God's nostrils.” They weren't too happy with him and they drove him out. And there was Mary Dyer who became a Quaker. She kept coming back into Massachusetts and they kept throwing her out. They said, “If you keep coming back, we're going to hang you,” and they did, because she wouldn't leave. Then the witch trials came, because they had prescribed ways of doing things and thinking somebody who did things differently was a witch.

They came, I think with great idealism and hope. They had a dream. But they turned that dream into something that began to close down and prescribe. What's hard about that is that it feels so much like the way I try to make things happen. If I can just get everything set, it will just be smooth sailing from there on out. That is probably the problem—if I can get everything set it will be smooth sailing from there on out.

It's what Paul is approaching the Corinthians with when he says, "None of you were brilliant. None of you had this all figured out. It is the wisdom of God that helps you go through life. And we know how this wisdom came to us—it came through Christ." The interesting thing is God didn't go away. He keeps coming to us. The Spirit is with us. The trouble is I might try to prescribe it. I might set up lines around who can be in and who is out. It feels to me that I am continually invited to let go and to trust in Christ, to pay attention to the authority of God in loyalty to him.

So when we hear Paul inviting us to listen through the Spirit to what Christ says, I then get to the Gospel for today where Jesus is talking about how not one iota of the law will change. Of course, I think we have to be a little careful about how we think about that word "law," because I have a sense of a set of statutes in books up on bookshelves. It was often the idea that when somebody said "law," that it pointed toward the Torah in Jewish religion. The *Torah* can be translated as the teachings of God. So what we're really looking at is the will of God, the moral structure of the world.

Jesus doesn't stop with the law, with the will of God, but also includes the people who helped tell us what it is—the prophets. He invites us to hear them and to think about what they have to say to us. It is in the ambiguity of life that I am reminded that it is listening to Jesus as he invites us to hear, to remember the word for us. The wonder of what Jesus is doing continually is that he is inviting us into life. The hard part of that is that life is ambiguous. It's not always clear, so we are invited to trust in Jesus, to trust that God will lead us and guide us through. He will be with us on the way.

Sometimes it feels like things are overwhelming and that I don't understand all that's going on. I don't even always know my way exactly. But I am reminded by Jesus to listen to the prophets and to hear again what they say. If we want to move and live in the biblical dream to be those who are a watered garden, a spring that never runs dry, if we listen to what Isaiah says, it's not about working to get everything for ourselves, but it's learning to care for one another, to break bonds. To break the bonds or the yoke—both the words are used in Isaiah. It's when the yoke is broken, when the bonds are broken—the bonds of poverty, the bonds of homelessness, the bonds that we create by making it one group versus another, the bonds of the oppressed.

It's so easy for me to live in my own little world and not see the very bonds I make by doing so. I let the yoke of someone else pass by without paying attention. It's when we care for one another that we become, as Isaiah says, a watered garden, a spring that never runs dry. Jesus is pointing to that as he says it's not only God's will, the moral structure that he wants to fulfill, it's listening to those who have talked about it and told us about it. It's about the prophet inviting us to care for one another and the ways that

the world keeps us apart, the ways the world leads to oppression, the ways we struggle with caring for one another.

Instead, he says we're invited to a table. God invites us all to gather, to be together, to care for one another, to know that sustenance comes from God and it is for all of us, and not to be afraid of where it's coming from, for it's from God. So we are invited to gather, to come, to be at the table, and to know that God's grace covers all of us. As he's leading us into the dream, it is as we follow and break the bonds, as we break the yokes, as we let ourselves be open to new ways, that God might show us how to care for one another, to enter into new situations.

Our world is full of divisions. Our world is full of struggles around how we live and who we can like. As we follow Jesus, we recognize that it is God's world, God's people, God's children, and God loves them all just as he loves you and me. We are all invited to gather around a table to be children of God. He invites us to let that be the way we enter into life as we follow him.

Sometimes it feels a little like I can just say a bunch of stuff, but you know it is when you make a connection with another person and you hear their story, and their story touches you and your life touches them and somehow in the midst of that, the Spirit of God is at work. Somehow when we quit being face to face and let things get further and further away from us, we forget our shared humanity. We forget what it's like to be face to face and to hear each other's' stories and to know that all our stories are held by God's story.

As we come to the table, it is a reminder, I think, that what Jesus is inviting us to do is to not try to make a dream by forcing it to happen, but by learning to simply do the things of our daily lives in a way that is open to the grace of God at work, to see how God's love can be shared, to see how the person beside me, in front of me, beyond me is a person, a child of God. It's almost mundane, but it's in the real life, it's in the stuff beyond the speeches, beyond the pronouncements. It's when we take someone's hand, give a hug, help somebody out, or somebody helps us out, it's in those moments of shared experience. It's in those moments that in the other, we can see Jesus.

It is the struggle of the preacher to want to try to say it all, and yet what I just said is I can't, because it's in your lived life that it really happens. It is in our life together that it really happens. It's in the life of all God's children in his creation that it really happens. It's in the very taking of a piece of bread and dipping it in a little juice and tasting what is good that we know the goodness of God is in the midst, at the center of the creation he's given us, and he wants us to know that we will be sustained and that we can join in so that the whole of creation is a watered garden, a spring that never runs dry. Amen.