

“Problem Solving or Dreams?”

A Sermon Based on Luke 6:17-26
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, February 17th, 2019
by David Oliver-Holder

What would a dream-come-true look like for you? Landing the best of all jobs? Seeing the Illini win a national championship? Would riches be a dream come true? I believe many would say so.

John Rockefeller defined riches as “A gift from Heaven signifying, ‘This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.’” Most may not say it that way, but many would agree. Or how about J. P. Morgan’s definition of riches: “The reward of toil and virtue.”

I don’t know about you, but when I contemplate his definition, I can’t help but wonder. “I work hard. I toil. And I think I’m fairly virtuous. Hmm. So why am I not rich?” It makes me think that Mr. Morgan might have left something out.

More than likely, when we imagine a dream-come-true, we see a state in which our great problems are solved. It has been so in all times. Clarence Jordan wrote well about the problems facing the people who heard Jesus.ⁱ These were their problems. Their country was occupied by the tyrannical military government of Rome. Race prejudice was so pervasive that the people hardly knew who their neighbors were. The staggering taxes, levied by the Romans, their puppet kings in Judea, and the Temple system, altogether amounting to more than a third of a person’s wages, forced the people to make choices about other things like what to eat or drink, or about whether to eat or drink on a given day. The middle class of people? There was no middle class. There were a few very rich and then there was everyone else. Slavery and servitude were widespread. These were serious problems. What would a dream-come-true look like to these people?

All kinds of answers were being proposed. Some people said, “It’s no use trying to do or expect anything. So just stop. Enjoy yourself while you can. Eat, drink, really drink, and have a good time. We’ll all be dead soon anyway.” Others said, “Grit your teeth and bear it. Show people how strong you are by never

giving in.” The Zealots said, “Resistance! Rebellion! Join the struggle to win our freedom.”

The Sadducees sympathized with the Zealots, but they were not as outspoken or violent. Their idea was to win from within the system. They were the great compromisers. Then there were the Pharisees, who taught that if you lived a pure, clean life, and trusted God, then God would do all the rest. They believed that if you fulfilled the Law, then God would bless you.

And they looked at the world that way. If you were successful, then you must be righteous. If you were poor and an outcast, then you must be cursed. Theirs was a view without mercy.

Finally, there were those who were waiting for the Deliverer. These were the ones who dreamed big. The trouble for them was that they were not so discriminating. And so they attached themselves to hucksters and charlatans, who were quite willing to take advantage of their desperation.

II

Into this noisy, unending melee of competing interests and concerns walked the Prince of Peace. He was the quiet, calm voice that embodied the experience of Elijah. Elijah had looked for God in fire, but God was not there. He looked for God in an earthquake, but God was not there. He looked for God in storm, but God was not there. Finally, Elijah encountered sheer silence, and he covered his face, for he knew then that he was in the presence of God.

Jesus entered the struggle of ideas and solutions and dreams and said things no one had said before. He spoke of a way of life that seemed to promise the exact opposite of a dream-come-true.

“Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the rejected.” He said that in losing your life, you will find it. It sounded as surprising then as it likely sounds now.

But our experience tells us that he is right. For we have known of people who are rich, but who feel that they can never be rich enough. We have known

people who had plenty of all sorts of things, but who acted like they would never be truly secure. We know of people who enjoy great favor and acclaim, but who live as if the accolades should be unending.

So they stayed tied to the treadmill. They feel boxed in like rats in a maze, laboring for more and more and more, more money, another promotion, something else to acclaim, to stay in the public eye and not become a has been.

Our experience tells us that what Jesus said is not really so surprising, once we can make ourselves stop thinking and valuing like the world thinks and values.

What would a dream-come-true look like to you?

I wonder if Jesus would have us understand how easy it is for us to be content with small, easy dreams. How easy it is for us to let go of our big dreams only to become content with our problems being solved. Do we still dream big dreams? Do we dream of making our communities better? Or are we content with something less?

The list Jesus offered of those who are blessed stands in sharp contrast to any set of small dreams. Jesus did not come to merely make a difference. He came to turn the world upside down, to change the world. And so he said that the poor shouldn't just dream about finally getting a roof over their heads or shoes on their feet. The dream-come-true for the poor that Jesus offers is nothing less than all the glory that is the kingdom of God. The kingdom is theirs.

The hungry shouldn't just dream about big, juicy steaks and thick slices of pie. The dream-come-true for the hungry that Jesus offers is that they will be forever filled and satisfied at the sumptuous table of Paradise.

The weeping and sorrowful shouldn't merely dream about their burdens being lifted. The dream-come-true for the sorrowful that Jesus offers is that they will bubble over with laughter and light-heartedness, that joy will fill their lives.

Jesus is talking about an entirely different kind of world. Compare its promises with the dreams we typically harbor. Could we be accused of starving our souls with wee-little dreams?

God's dreams are so much bigger than ours. God dreams of the poor and the hungry having what they need. God dreams of the sorrowful and oppressed being comforted. God dreams of prisoners not being forgotten or written off. God dreams of peace where it seems there can be no peace. And God dreams of life where death seems triumphant. This kind of dreaming comes from a different world, a different place.

III

One great example of this kind of dreaming rooted in a different world came in the person of a cellist named Vedran Smailovic. Vedran was born into a celebrated musical family, in the beautiful city of Sarajevo, now in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but which, in 1984, hosted the Winter Olympics. As Yugoslavia was torn apart in war in 1991 and 1992, Vedran remained in Sarajevo.

He was there one day in May of 1992 when a square in the city was hit with a mortar. Twenty-two of his neighbors were killed as they waited in a line to buy bread.

The next day at noon, Vedran brought a chair and his cello to that square and, in full view of the Serbian army, played Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*. He played in defiance of the Serbs who had fired the mortar. He played to honor the memory of one of his neighbors. He played to offer, as he said, a "musical prayer for peace." He returned again at noon the next day to play, and the next day, for 22 straight days, one day for each of those killed by the mortar.

When he was asked by a CNN reporter if he was not crazy to play out in the open while Sarajevo was being shelled, Vedron smiled and replied, "You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello. Why don't you ask if they are not crazy for shelling Sarajevo?"

Smailovic lived partly in the hellish world of war-torn Sarajevo. But his heart and his mind remained rooted in a different world, and it was from that different world that his vision and dream and prayer for peace arose. I think theologian, Paul Tillich, was right when we suggested that Jesus condemns the

rich because they know only one world, this world in which they have prospered by whatever means.ⁱⁱ

Jesus praises the poor because they know and live in two worlds, this world in which they suffer, and the realm of God's reign. It is from that other realm that dreams and visions come. It is that other realm that sustains our dreams and visions.

Big dreams, the kind that God dreams for us, are never self-centered dreams. We cannot realize a dream-come-true apart from others. God's dreams are collective dreams, dreams for the community. And they are realized when we stop trying to secure ourselves independently from everyone else.

Joy comes when we entrust our lives to God's way. When we do that, then poverty cannot beat us, hunger cannot beat us, and rejection cannot defeat us. Those things cannot beat us because we do not bear them individually in God's way, but we bear them together. When one hurts, we all hurt. When one rejoices, we all rejoice.

Joy is found in what cannot be lost. Wealth can be lost, or stolen, and will corrode. Food can become scarce. Our careers can take a nose dive, for no fault of our own. And life, in its arbitrariness, will steal our smiles, and break our hearts.

Placing your very being in the hands of God, and trusting in God's way, is sinking yourself in what cannot be lost. God will not become scarce. God is not arbitrary. What you find when you do that is that you stop being so preoccupied with only yourself. You begin to catch a glimpse of a different kind of world. You begin to dream God's dream. You begin to want to make that world a reality, here, now. And you find you are free to do the risky things that are necessary to make God's dream real.

So let us be clear. Jesus is not problem-solving here. He's painting a picture of a radically different world. It's a world that is within reach, by the grace of God. But we won't get there by merely problem-solving. We won't get there by a cheap patch-up here and there. We will only get there by making God's dream our dream.

What would a dream-come-true look like to you?

May God helps us to think big, to think beyond ourselves, to think of communities that work for everyone. AMEN.

ⁱ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount, revised edition*, Judson Press, 1952.

ⁱⁱ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, "The Paradox of the Beatitudes, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p.27.