

A Home without Locks, A Table without Chairs

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Americans, it seems, do a lot of dreaming. I'm not sure we're any different than others around the globe, but we certainly express openly our desire for a better state in life.

We dream big when it comes to success and achievement. We fanaticize about better jobs, larger houses, and nicer cars. We envision growing businesses, getting our children into top colleges, and being among the best in our field. We gamble our hopes on winning the lottery or going for the hole in one or expecting our favorite teams to make the playoffs. We longingly imagine having children, or grandchildren, and then look forward to a comfortable retirement. At any age, we dream of having good health, good minds, good company, good fortune, and a good life. We are country of dreamers; we look ahead to the future with anticipation, with all of its prospects, with all of its challenges, and with all the hopes and aspirations we can muster.

I think I'm accurate in making this claim: that nearly all of the dreams we have over the course of life are directly related to our private welfare and status. We dream mostly about ourselves—what will happen to us personally, individually, or to those who are close to us, whose own success and welfare matter to us. Nothing is wrong with that; it's natural to do that. Personal dreams motivate and entertain us; they inspire ambition, determination, and focus—the very qualities that help us achieve our places in life. As the sage of

Proverbs once wrote, without dreams, without vision, people simply perish.

That said, last Wednesday, I thought about the dreams that typically motivate Americans today while watching part of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington, the setting, of course, for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. I was only seven years old when he delivered those stirring words, but Dr. King's life and message have resonated deeply in my soul even from my youth because his was a dream that really seems to matter; the aspirations of the Civil Rights movement went far beyond the dreams of a private individual, though they have always impacted us personally.

As I reflect upon it, Martin's dream was truly the American dream for so many people in this country, if you take our American myth seriously—one for freedom, yes, but also social equality, for economic justice, for peace among the nations—one that brings people together, one that stirs the imagination, one that we share with others around the globe. It's a collective dream for a better state in life, not just for certain advantaged or privileged people, but for everyone. Those are the visions that inspire social movements where entire classes of people rise up and together aspire for achievement, for justice, and for a hopeful future.

I must say I was moved when I heard once again the entirety of Dr. King's speech; as historic as it was, its rhetoric was as relevant as any proclamation for our times. That was evident in President Obama's reflections, who eloquently echoed the aspirations of the Civil Rights movement in its quest for racial justice and respectable

jobs. Honestly, half a century later, I don't know if our society is continuing to move toward fulfillment of King's dream or away from it. It all depends on the day, I suppose; most days, I see evidence of both trends. The truth is, so much of it depends on building trust and cooperation in society, not exploiting our divisions between races, between classes, between ethnicities, between genders, and the like. Frankly, progress seems apparent and noteworthy on some fronts but less so on others. Though we've overcome many of the barriers related to racism, economically, there's a wider gap between the rich and the poor today than in the 1960s, even though you could say many more in the middle class have achieved their personal dreams of a beautiful home and material wealth compared to the average household fifty years ago. At the same time, though, it has created more distance between the upper middle class and the plight of the poor. The average person doesn't seem to care about those on the lower end of life nowadays as people did when I was growing up. Add to that the fear and awareness of crime, which has altered our social consciences to the point where many might not even trust their neighbor who comes knocking on their door, let alone have a desire to help a complete stranger.

What has happened since the days of my youth is that the prevailing and compelling narrative of our society has changed from a collective dream for a better world to merely an individual aspiration for a better life. We've privatized the American dream to where the main objective of our lives is to make our personal lives more satisfying and accomplished. At the center of our cultural consciousness, we've replaced the dream of a better society with a

more privatized dream to achieve our own place in society. It's an individualized pursuit of happiness to the neglect of building trust between people. In fifty years, as much as we have achieved racial and social justice on some fronts, today it may be even harder to build trust between races and classes than when I was a youth!

Think about social trust in this way. Trust exists when you don't need to lock your doors—when what you have inside your house is less significant and important to you than those who come through its doors. That has a lot of ramifications on so many levels of life. The truth is, we're losing that sense of social trust in this country, even in a bucolic setting like Noank. It's not just because of crime, because crimes rates actually have gone down relative to the past. Instead, it's psychological; we feel more threatened by the reality of crime nowadays because we typically view it graphically on television, instead of merely read about it in the morning newspaper. That awareness affects us emotionally and perceptually. We also have more possessions to protect so our homes and properties have taken on a value they wouldn't have in generations past. A trend that seems evident to me is that instead of dreaming of and working toward a social trust in our society, we are giving into its fears and protectiveness and privatism. People are far too willing to fight someone over protecting their property than they are willing to generously share what they have. In effect, possessions and property have become more valuable than people.

For that reason, I'm proud of the fact that this meetinghouse is one of the last holdouts in this area by virtue that we never lock the doors. What may have been a matter of convenience in an earlier era

is now a powerful statement for our times. We're willing to take risks for the sake of trusting and sharing with those who enter these doors, friend and stranger alike, than to protect whatever it is we value inside these walls. The symbolism of this spiritual stubbornness is far more significant than we might realize—certainly more than the convenience of not having to possess and find your key to get into this place.

What we are conveying to everyone who comes into town is that we are willing to gamble on trusting them in order to make them feel welcome and affirmed for who they are as persons created by God, regardless of their status or means in life. We are authentically an “Open Door Baptist Church.” This well-maintained and beautiful spiritual home where we worship the greatest Dreamer of all is one where we don't exclude or give status to anyone because of who holds a key and who serves as its gatekeeper. It operates on social trust—if you want to use the building, take care of it; if you want to borrow something—fine, just return it in a timely fashion for others to use. That is one of the most profound theological statements we can make as a church in these times! Our insurance company notwithstanding, we are gambling on the dream—that what unlocked doors represent and what this congregation aspires to is to help foster a society that is more open and trustworthy and valuable to each other than our material possessions and sacred spaces!

When you take it a step further, our theology—as thoroughly Christian as it is—will be just as startling if we are loyal and faithful to that vision—that inclusive, welcoming, hospitable, trust-building dream. To put it another way, we would betray this dream if we held

onto the old Baptist beliefs that claimed that God somehow requires a person to possess the right key to gain entrance—be that the right set of beliefs, the right status in life, the right lifestyle, the right religious formula, the right social agenda—whatever it might be that so many religious people like to claim they possess that somehow excludes others while giving them special access to God! Those who believe they are the gatekeepers for God, who alone possess the Truth—the keys to the kingdom, as it were—that tell everyone who comes to their spiritual home that they have to think and act just like them or else they’re destined to hell—make God out to be as bigoted and as narrow-minded as the racists who didn’t see a problem with separate water fountains, separate neighborhoods and schools, and separate jobs and statuses for people of color!

You can’t do that; you can’t claim to believe in the dream of freedom and justice for all people if you still present God to be some surly old religious racist willing to divide the world’s population into moral “blacks and whites”—those who are deemed spiritually superior and those who are rendered inferior—a so-called divine Savior who is still unwilling to let everyone through the doors. That doesn’t work for me! The God I believe in is one who is generous and loving beyond all human measure, who keeps the doors to heaven unlocked and accessible to everyone, regardless of when and how they find their way there! Anything less only serves to justify fears and bigotry that exist in us as people, not in God!

Look at Jesus here in Luke’s Gospel. Do you think he was handing out keys to a few people when he was proclaiming the good news of deliverance? Or do you think he was letting folks know that

the doors weren't even locked—that God's generous hospitality was extended to them, too? You tell me, what do you think builds trust in this world and in God—doors of a home and of a heart that are closed and locked or those that aren't?

Even the table where Jesus went to eat required some social and theological rearrangement. Judeans, like the Romans, had tables without chairs; every diner lay prostrate beside the low-standing fixture, reaching with their hands for food set beside them. No chairs were needed. But that didn't mean there wasn't a social pecking order in play. Guests were arranged around the table according to their status and their relationship to the host, or to head of the table. Of course, people competed for status at meals of privilege, jostling their way into a position for what they assumed was their place. Some were perceived as more worthy than others. Jesus took note of that in our text for today and criticized the arrogance of those who exalted themselves, while he espoused the benefits of humility, where you start low that you may be raised in status. The moral of the story was, humility is better than humiliation. That was the set up for his proverbial insight: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Another takeaway for us would be much the same, though it's a little less obvious. It's less about positions of status around a table, than being included at it. You see, our tables do have chairs. A set number of chairs will fit around a table, affording those sitting there a measure of comfort while dining, but excluding those who cannot find their place at the table. Of course, those who like to host gatherings in their homes know all about this. You invite guests according to the

number of chairs that comfortably fit around your dining room table. If you don't have much room, you simply don't invite people over, lest you will create an awkward setting where some have places to sit, while others don't. That said, if you want to increase the numbers being invited and fed, then you remove the chairs from the table and let people stand or sit accordingly.

Now my point is not about the etiquette of hospitality, it is about the ethics of inclusion—social and theological. Just like keys to a locked building, the chairs at a table symbolize the limitations of access to our hospitality. If we are open to receiving everyone to our home by keeping the doors unlocked, then we can't betray that intention by then placing limitations at our table. If you follow what I'm saying, when we break the bread and share the cup, this can't simply represent the gifts of God to Christians, or more specifically to Baptists, or even then, to those who were formal members of the church, or baptized by full immersion, as was once the custom in past generations. We're well past that now, that's changed over the past fifty years, but we might still place some psychological limitations in subtle ways by perceiving the forgiveness and blessings of God as only directed toward those deserving of it. Or we might limit the welcome to our table—be that communion or be that in our sense of community—to those who are more like us, those with whom we're already comfortable, those we wouldn't mind inviting to our home.

You see, even though our communion table has no chairs for sitting at it—meaning, our table is open and accommodating for all who enter this sanctuary—there are still those who do not feel comfortable in joining us at this meal because of comments made, or

attitudes perceived, that make them feel unwanted or undeserving or estranged from our community. Again, it's hard not to be tribal and protective about things that matter to us in life, including our sense of community. So in order to fulfill the dream of God, as revealed by Jesus time and time again, we must reckon with whatever words, or actions, may have displayed anything short of a generous welcome and embrace of those who desire to experience the love and mercy of God.

You see, it has to do with building trust among people—social trust—whether it's the dream expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr., or the dream of the good news of God's realm announced by Jesus. Our true intentions are revealed more by our daily actions and customs than by our liturgical words. Much has changed over the last fifty years, and much has not. But one thing holds true: unlocked doors and open tables are more a sign of hospitality and grace, of open hearts and generous love, than any doctrine or religious practice could ever express. If we are still dreaming of a better world, if we still want to be part of a movement to make it happen, then we must live the dream in all aspects of our lives, lest we forget it.

When we live in the generosity of God, we will embrace what is truly valuable and precious in this world and we will not give up until everyone in our power is able to experience it. When that occurs, then it will be far more than just a dream; it will be our lived reality.

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