

Sermon for August 8, 2021—“Livin’ the Dream”

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B—Texts: Psalm 105:1-11, 16-22; Genesis 37:1-28

“Dreamer, you’re nothing but a dreamer...” That’s a line from a song from many years ago, *Dreamer* by the group Supertramp. Rarely meant purely as a compliment, a dreamer, according to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, is someone who lives in a world of fancy and imagination. One who has ideas or conceives projects or plans regarded as impractical.

The implication being that while we can dream, the realities of life eventually find us, usually killing those dreams we dreamed. Does anyone know anyone who’s a dreamer? Are any of you, perhaps, dreamers? Were any of you **ever** dreamers? I used to be. I used to dream of being a rock star. I used to dream about having fame, and fortune and everything that goes with it. Eventually, reality set in, and I was forced to follow a more “conventional” path.

There was a movie, a few years back called, coincidentally, “Rock Star.” It told the story of a young man who went from singing in a tribute band to singing in the actual band whose songs he covered. The movie showed how he went from being a dreamer to actually “livin’ the dream.” Ultimately, of course, reality set in and therein lay the problem.

As most of us know, as I learned fairly early, that dreamers can have difficulty with the harsh realities of life. Joseph was, as we know, a dreamer. Our second reading this morning highlights a couple of amazing dreams that he’d had, both of which seemed to hint that he would one day be exalted to a position of great authority. In the beginning, it would seem that Joseph was, in fact, rather cocky about his dream. But his dream took him to places he never dreamt of as a young man. The Psalmist had an interesting way of putting it, “**...until what he had said came to pass, the word of the Lord kept testing him.**”

I think the idea here is that Joseph’s vision put him through a refining process that he’d never have imagined when he had the dream, which—at the time—probably gave him the illusion that he’d had it made. The reality—however—would be much more difficult. Initially, Joseph’s refining process was a matter of humiliation. Because of his arrogance, his brothers hated him so much, that they sold him into slavery. I guess that was better than killing him, which was their original plan. Suddenly, Joseph went from being the favored son of a wealthy man to being a slave with no rights. Nothing! Talk about humiliating!

In point of fact, however, Joseph was apparently so good at serving in the house of Potiphar that he quickly learned how to run the whole place and was elevated to head steward. The humiliating experience of being sold into slavery refined Joseph, by preparing him with skills he would need later. Unfortunately, things didn’t work out so well, because his master’s wife accused him of trying to seduce her. So the “Word of the Lord” kept refining Joseph, this time in prison.

But while Joseph was in the dungeon, some of Pharaoh’s personal attendants spent some time there. They too had dreams and Joseph interpreted them. When Pharaoh had a dream, one of them told him about Joseph—and Joseph wound up as the equivalent of a Prime Minister of the most powerful nation in the ancient world! It was a long and winding road for Joseph, from being a young dreamer, to becoming the chief administrator of Egypt. Why did Joseph have to go through such a long and painful process?

Why did it take years of suffering to prepare him for “livin’” the dream that he had in his youth? Besides the obvious answers, it would seem to be built into the nature of what it means to commit oneself to a dream; that we might, in some way, have to earn it. In a very real sense, this is part of what “livin’ the dream” means. It’s how the dream gets inside us. Now, until that happens—until that dream gets inside us, so that we live, eat, and breathe it, we’re really in no position to try to go out and see that vision realized in life.

We cannot hope to bring compassion to the world, if we don’t have compassion in our hearts. We cannot hope to bring peace to the world, if we haven’t yet become peace towards everyone around us. What am I talking about? Well, looking back, at the earlier part of the text it seems to me, as I said, that to some extent, Joseph, through his arrogance, brought at least some of this on himself. I mean seriously, he knew his brothers resented him, why in the world would he tell them about his dreams of ruling over them!

Anyway, in response to the injustice perpetrated against them—real or perceived—Joseph’s brothers conspired to kill him. Certainly, this solution is extreme, but for one reason or another they felt there was no alternative to achieving justice, than to pursue unjust means for eliminating Joseph. Did they compound injustice by choosing fratricide, rather than a more peaceable means? Absolutely. They wanted an **unjust** justice.

Now, was it because of jealousy and hatred that Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, or was it due to the injustice they experienced from their father? Probably both—so we can’t help but feel at least some sympathy for Joseph’s brothers, for the obvious favoritism that Jacob lavished on Joseph. And such injustice shouldn’t be indulged. We Christians ought to be concerned about and act on behalf of justice. However, we ought not to use unjust means for pursuing it. And so, like Joseph and, to an extent his father and brothers, we may have to go through a refining process to get there. It may be frustrating for us to continue to try to hold on to our dream, only to keep being disappointed with the way life actually works.

So, one of the lessons we learn when we’re undergoing this refining process is that it is a gradual one, and the first step toward “livin’ the dream” is to surrender our expectations of what that’s going to look like; to accept life and the world as it is; to accept others as they are, that’s the only way we can ever hope to learn how to respond to real human beings in a real world with compassion and peace.

It seems to me that we Christians have, at best, a spotty record in terms of how we’ve acted on behalf of justice and peace. Everyone’s aware of the classic acts of oppression and violence committed by Christians against others. You know—things like the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. Even in more modern times, there are groups like the KKK—who we tend to forget consider themselves Christian, and whose history is well-documented. There are groups that target abortion clinics and, of course, churches like the Westboro Baptist Church. Remember them? They picketed the funerals of fallen soldiers in an attempt to spread their hateful, homophobic message.

Still, there’ve been notable examples though perhaps getting less media attention of Christians who acted faithfully and courageously—often dying—for the sake of the gospel. Men and women who became advocates for justice, acting compassionately on behalf of those who suffer. Men and women who sought to change religious, political, and social structures that systematically marginalized, oppressed, and persecuted others.

Some well-known, like Martin Luther, who began the Protestant Reformation, or William Wilberforce, who worked to abolish slavery in England. Some less known, like Oscar Romero, an El Salvadoran priest who was murdered for speaking out against the torture and persecution of his countrymen, and Raoul Wallenberg in Switzerland, who helped Jews escape from Nazi Germany.

Here in the United States, Dorothy Day, Margaret Sanger, and Walter Rauschenbusch, all advocated, and worked for, social change. And then—of course—there was Martin Luther King, Jr., whose most famous speech, as it happens, was “*I Have a Dream.*”

These are just a few, and the lesson they teach is that Christians must continue to show compassion and advocate for those whom Jesus describes—in chapter twenty-five in Matthew’s gospel—as “...the least of these.” Why? First, because we’re commanded to love our neighbor and when I say commanded—I mean it isn’t optional. Second, because of the great need for justice and peace in so many places. We are to “...**bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.**” We have a distinct advantage in this regard, in that we live in a free society.

We have—in this country—the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But even more importantly, especially as Christians, we have a responsibility to get involved, and have many avenues to help others enjoy those same rights when they are systematically denied. I think it begins with our right to vote, but it doesn’t end there. We have opportunities to volunteer in our communities, and even run for public office. However, what often hinders us is that things like advocacy, activism and social justice aren’t always valued by churches. In fact, for many, they’ve become derogatory terms, bringing to mind violent protests, shop windows smashed and fires set on city streets. I get that. I really do.

Now, to be fair, what begin as—and are intended to be—peaceful protests are often co-opted and hijacked by those who espouse violence. So, I understand the difficulty people have. with those terms and I’m not surprised at their reluctance to get involved in a cause, however worthy it may be. Then, of course, there’s the whole “separation of church and state” thing, so difficult to navigate in a time when every aspect of our lives seems to be politicized. But that doesn’t mean that we can just walk away, turning our backs on those who need our help. That option—as I mentioned—isn’t open to us. So—what do we do? How do we begin to live the dream?

Well—as I said earlier—it has to start with wanting it. It has to be something that we desire within our own hearts. We start by examining our lives and acknowledging that change is necessary. It is, as mentioned, a process and I believe that—like charity—justice and peace begin at home. We start by acting justly and peacefully in all of our relationships. From there we move to the church, since injustice can occur anywhere. It involves having conversations, difficult conversations, on topics we’ve previously ignored and shifting at least part of our focus beyond our building.

A moment ago, I mentioned Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 25. I did that on purpose because for those that don’t already know, Westwood First is a Matthew 25 Church through the Presbyterian Church (USA). As a Matthew 25 church, we’re called to actively engage in the world around us, to enliven our faith, and awaken us to new possibilities.

We're called to act boldly and compassionately, to serve people, to become a more relevant presence in our community. We're called to be a church of action, where God's love, justice and mercy shine for all to see and becomes contagious.

There's so very much more to this and we will revisit it very soon. But let me say this for now and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: While it's not easy being a dreamer in this world with all its harsh realities, this is the dream to which we must become committed.

It is, after all, God's vision for God's world and when—not if—we stake our lives and the life of our church, on a vision of our church and our community transformed for the better, God—through God's Word—will, as the psalmist said of Joseph, keep testing us. It is, as I said, God's vision after all! It will mean laying aside our arrogance, our belief that change isn't needed and that we have no role to play in making that dream, that vision, a reality. It will mean surrendering our expectations, the insistence on doing this on our terms. It will mean accepting people as they are, not as we wish them to be, realizing and accepting our obligation to be our brothers and sisters keepers. It will accepting the world, and the church, as they are and realizing that change is needed. It will mean allowing the time for the vision to really get inside us, inside us to the point where we become the change, as Mahatma Gandhi once said, that we want to see in the world. But when we do—when this happens—then we'll truly be “livin' the dream.”

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.