

Leacock Presbyterian Church
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2016
Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-5, Revelation 21:1-6, and John 13:31-35

GOD'S DREAMS

Much of religion has always been the attempt to persuade God to give us what we want, whether it be security, prosperity, victory in warfare, peace in our homes, or eternal life. The primary task of faith, however, is being moved to want what God wants for this world and all its people and, yes, its non-human creatures as well. I grow in faith and discipleship if I am learning to want for myself what God wants for me and to want for others what God wants for them. Jesus does not tell me to love others rather than myself but to love my neighbor—the one God stands before me whether that person is a friend, a stranger, or even an enemy—to love that person *as I love myself*. No self hatred is required. Some sacrifice of self-interest may indeed be required, but we are to love others because we are learning to know ourselves as people God loves. We matter to God, but we need to grow into the family business, so to speak, which means learning to care about what God cares about, to be hurt by what hurts God, to work for the changes God wants in human life and societies, and to long for the day when God's longings will be satisfied.

Jesus called blessed those people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice: not vindictive justice which wants to see rewards and punishments meted out as each person deserves, but redemptive justice which wants to see healing for the broken, reconciliation for the estranged, hope for the despairing, freedom for the enslaved, dignity for the shamed, and love for the unloved. Redemptive justice, restorative justice – that's the kind that equates to righteousness. Jesus has taught us that God is not interested in giving people what they deserve but, rather, what God wants for them. That's crucial because we are trained from childhood to think in terms of reward and punishment, of deserving and undeserving, even of winners and losers. That's what we call justice, but Jesus does not. Love rejects the kind of justice that seeks truth in judgment. Love finds truth in restoration to wholeness and life for the individual and also for the human community. Alone, completely alone, I am no one. To live is to love, and to love is to live.

Our reading from Revelation shows us, in symbolic form, the dream of God. Revelation was given to encourage people threatened with torture and death by an empire too powerful to fight. It was spoken to the vulnerable. It was not meant to give us divine secrets or cryptic schemes for spelling out an "end time." It is a call to the powerless to be faithful, to trust God even when hope drops off into darkness. Before fighting in the arena, gladiators used to say to the emperor or whatever official represented the emperor, "We who are about to die salute you." Revelation was written to give the followers of Jesus faith's courage to say, in effect, to the emperor, "We who are about to die put our trust in the God whose love is infinitely greater than your cruelty. You may kill us, and you may imagine killing us shows that "Romans always win," but you will not win.¹

What we are shown in symbolic form is the vision of a new heaven and a new earth—the earth God wants and means to have. Here is no world-hating, escapist Christianity. The Creator has loved the creation from the beginning and will love it to its fulfillment. As one writer declared: “It is really about God’s abiding commitment to this world. God is as committed to the life of this world as that cross [of Jesus] is stuck in the earth, and precisely in the place of the skull—symbolically, the place where death is apparently victorious.”²

The Gospel of John gives as the one reason for the hope it offers us that, “This is the way God loved the world, by giving (God’s) only Son.” Today is the fifth of seven Sundays of Easter. Jesus’ resurrection does not put behind us the agony, shame, and death he suffered; quite the opposite, his resurrection sets his cross forever before us. Just there, on that cross is the truth of God and the one true glory of God: not in power, not in prestige, not in judgment, but in the self-giving of redemptive love for this world. In John, when Jesus tells his disciples God is about to be glorified in him, he’s talking about his execution. And, yes, his resurrection. Jesus’ crucifixion is not the end of the matter, but it is the heart of the matter. That’s why the apostle Paul tells the proud Corinthians that he determined to know among them only Jesus and him only as the crucified Christ.

God’s glory is not the triumph of the winners over the losers, whether we see those winners and losers in religious terms, political terms, or economic terms. Not the rich, not the powerful, and not the virtuous or pious, either. Jesus stands with the losers, always until there are no more losers. He gave himself to being a loser. That’s the message Rome proclaimed by crucifying someone: *“Romans always win,” and this man you see nailed up there and writhing on that cross is a loser! A disgusting loser!*

When we find ourselves vulnerable and running out of hope, the vision of a new heaven and a new earth and of a holy city where God is right there among the people, with them and for them forever – that promise! – calls us to new hope, even if we cannot see how it can possibly come true. When we still have hope and security of our own, maybe even comfort and pleasure, when we’re feeling quite successful, the vision calls us to stand with the powerless and vulnerable, wanting for them what God wants for them.

I know our second hymn³ was difficult – minor key and unfamiliar words. I know also that its words come from a time of over-optimism, from the Protestant Liberalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We Christians thought we would build that city without injustice, poverty, or tears. We would achieve God’s dream on earth. Well, no, we would not and cannot. The over-optimism crashed and burned in the reality of two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Holocaust. The milk of human kindness was not enough, and Christians had to turn back to the bloodshed of the cross. But the vision of a new heaven and a new earth is neither an excuse to stop caring about this world and leave it behind nor an invitation to avoid the messiness of human society to keep ourselves pure. Jesus Christ does not allow us just to sit back and wait, let alone to live selfishly until God finally gets around to making all the bad stuff go away. The symbolic vision of what God wants for this world calls us day after day to do what we can in faith to move life in the direction of God’s promise. As the hymn says, there are countless people crying out in one way or

another, from disappointment with life, from grief and shame, from bitterness at their misfortune that “Christ has died in vain.”

When I was a teenager we had a *Hymnal for Youth*, and I still have a copy. In the back were poems meant to inspire us, one of which is called “God’s Dreams.” It’s language is outdated since we came to realize later the two-faced trick we played by pretending the words “man” and “men” included women but when women stood up to be included, saying, “Oh no, not you, ladies.” With that corrective, I conclude with “God’s Dreams.”⁴

Dreams are they – but they are God’s dreams!
Shall we decry them and scorn them?
That men shall love one another,
That white shall call black man brother,
That greed shall pass from the market place,
That lust shall yield to love for the race [the human race],
That man shall meet with God face to face —
Dreams are they all,
 But shall we despise them —
 God’s dreams!

Dreams are they – to become man’s dreams!
Can we say nay as they claim us?
That men shall cease from their hating,
That war shall soon be abating,
That the glory of kings and lords shall pale,
That the pride of dominion and power shall fail,
That the love of humanity shall prevail —
Dreams are they all,
 But shall we despise them —
 God’s dreams!

Amen.

Notes:

1. For the importance of the declaration, “Romans always win!” see Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*.
2. Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: an Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant “Establishment,”* p. 140.
3. “O Holy City, Seen of John,” Walter Russell Bowie, 1909 alt., No. 374 in the hymnal, *Glory to God*.
4. Thomas Curtis Clark in *The Hymnal for Youth*, p. 371.