

Fools and Dreamers

Isaiah 42.1-9

January 17, 2010

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

- Langston Hughes

The Reading

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

In my library I have a collection of letters to God written by children that has provided me with a wealth of inspiration and wisdom over the years. One letter in particular – a snippet of a letter really - was written by a young girl named Jan, who gets right to the point:

Dear God:

Who draws the lines around the countries?

Your friend,

Jan

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Who draws the lines around the countries? What a profound question. Every time I reflect on it I am amazed at its openness, directness, and honesty; and I am humbled by its insight. This young girl, with wisdom beyond her years, has intuited something truly significant about the world in which we live; she has begun to recognize that any divisions between peoples, any barriers that keep them apart, any distinctions that mark privilege, status, or superiority are like so many lines drawn by feeble human hands on an otherwise seamless landscape.

If we listen closely this morning, perhaps we can discern God's reply to Jan; a reply uttered with the same openness, the same directness, but with a touch of confusion thrown in: What lines? When viewed through God's eyes, it would seem, the distinctions we make between people are just that ...*our* distinctions. They are invisible from beyond our limited horizon; and worthy only to be erased by those with the vision to see and the courage to act.

But therein lies a problem. As we celebrate peace and justice on the occasion of Martin Luther King, Jr. day, it occurs to me that it is our sacred trust, our sacred calling to do just that; to erase the lines that divide colors, races, cultures, and religions, lines drawn by prejudice and ignorance that mar the landscape of our community. I really believe this is our sacred duty – and our privilege – but to be honest I must tell you; it scares me to death. I'm not sure I'm up to it. I'm not sure I can meet such high standards; I'm not sure I can pick up the gauntlet that God has thrown down; I'm not sure I can reach out to all equally, and recognize the dignity of all. This *all*, you see, is big. It includes those who are different from me ...who may not like or trust me, and who may not appreciate my efforts on their behalf.

I'm not sure I am up to this task. I lack the vision, I lack God's dream for unity among all peoples. Like so many others, I don't dream big enough. God's dream is grand. God's dream is big; it's bigger than all of us together. And if we are to succeed, if we are to erase the lines of prejudice and discrimination that separate us, we must be guided by this vision, God's vision of unity. This vision alone will penetrate to the darkened recesses of our hearts to illuminate and eradicate the prejudice and fears that linger there and haunt our spirits. This vision alone will empower us to break with the conventions of our past and reach out graciously to others. And

this vision alone will afford us the courage of our convictions, the courage to stand, alone if needs be, for the dignity and equality of all.

Many men and women have glimpsed God's vision; men and women who so out-stripped their time and place that they were viewed by their contemporaries not as visionaries, but as fools and dreamers. Miguel De Cervantes and his fictional friend Don Quixote - the man of La Mancha – represent, perhaps, the archetype of such visionaries. In the musical setting of this classic novel, Don Miguel finds himself imprisoned, awaiting trial before the inquisition on a charge of heresy. In the darkened stench of a communal prison, Don Miguel is accosted by a fellow prisoner who scoffs at his fanciful flights of idealism and hope. But you see, Cervantes, there is a difference between reality and illusion...and a man has to come to terms with life as it is. Life as it is, Cervantes responds pensively, I've lived for over forty years and I have seen life as it is; pain, misery, cruelty beyond belief... When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies. Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams; this may be madness. To seek treasure where there is only trash... too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be.

Don Quixote, the Man of La Mancha, has been judged by many as a fool, a dreamer, jousting with windmills, as the popular saying goes. I would add that if he is a fool, he is a holy fool; a fool with the vision to see life as it should be, to see serving wenches as nobility, and willing to defy convention and expectation to dream the impossible dream.

We need not confine ourselves to fiction to identify the visionaries on whose shoulders we stand. Consider Mohandas Gandhi – Mahatma, the great souled one - whose passion for justice was ignited when, on a business trip to South Africa, he witnessed the plight of his fellow Indians. He perceived perhaps the most daunting challenge of unity: nonviolence. Gandhi saw clearly that violence in any form represents the destructive underbelly of creation and leads not to unity and wholeness, but to chaos and continued destruction. He recognized as well that the seeds of prejudice, divisions, and discrimination lie deep within our own hearts. If you love peace, he once said, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed; but hate these things inside yourself, not in another. Is it foolish to identify the seeds of prejudice in the dark recesses of

our own hearts? If so, it is a prophetic foolishness that can and should inspire our dreams and our lives.

It must be said that not all visionaries are larger than life like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, that's not at all how they began. They weren't visionary because they were heroic figures; rather, they became heroes because they dared to dream and dream big. Consider, for example, the story of Miep Gies, the secretary to Otto Frank who recently died at one hundred years of age. She was the last surviving *helper* of the family of Anne Frank; one of a small cadre of courageous people who risked their lives daily to provide food and other supplies to the family while hiding from the Nazis. To her dying day, Ms. Gies refused to be called a hero. She was, in her estimation, an ordinary housewife and secretary who simply did her duty. She didn't want kids to grow up thinking heroes had to be larger than life, lest they fail to perform their duty. Make no mistake, Miep Gies was a hero; Miep Gies was larger than life. But it wasn't her heroic stature that motivated her actions; it was her actions that made her a hero.

We want our visionary heroes to be larger than life but, in fact, heroes are not born; they appear when ordinary people simply do their duty. You never know when one tentative act of love, when one shy expression of compassion will lead to something life-changing; something world-changing. You never know what will happen when you bring the materials to assemble a baby care kit for the victims of the recent earthquake in Haiti. You never know what will happen when you serve an evening meal at Interfaith Hospitality Network. You never know what will result from any of the seemingly insignificant acts we share with each other throughout a lifetime; you never know when one will be world-changing, signaling the creation of a hero.

Miguel De Cervantes and his Don Quixote, Mahatma Gandhi, Miep Gies; fools and dreamers all some would say; but I will not, unless permitted to speak ironically of holy fools who dared simply to do their duty and live into God's dream of unity and equality; who dared to envision a world different and better than the one in which they lived, and courageously set out to make that vision real in their lives. Their stories illustrate for us that between who we

are and who we can be stands a question of vision - the ability to see our community in the light of equality and unity – and the courage simply to do our duty.

Have we the courage to follow in their steps? Have we the courage to give up the security of yesterday in order to become a community that celebrates and cherishes its marvelous diversity? Have we the courage to look deeply into our own hearts to illuminate and eradicate the seeds of fear and prejudice that linger there? Have we the courage to stand in support of justice and equality, even if that means being called fools in our community? May we be granted such courage; may we be granted such vision; and may we, like the visionaries who have gone before us, dare to envision a community different and better than the one in which we live, and courageously set out to bring this dream to fruition.