

I DREAM A CHURCH

I remember when going to church was a big deal. You started thinking about it on Saturday night. Well you didn't think about church, really. You thought about what you would wear. You made sure that you had a handbag to match your shoes. You didn't think about all the other things you had to do on Sunday morning because there wasn't that much else to do on Sunday morning. Most people I knew went to church. But then, like now, more women went than men. Somehow men got away with not going. They drove you there, and dropped you off, and picked you up, and the grace you received rubbed off on them on the way home. So it was ok.

The men that did go to church wore ties. Most women wore hats. Some Protestants carried Bibles. I carried a Bible. You knew that you weren't supposed to show off, but there was something about carrying a Bible that made you feel somehow holy. You got a Bible sticker for bringing your Bible. You got another for just being there, and others for knowing Bible verses. These stickers were pasted on THE chart in the front of the Sunday School classroom. (Up until a certain age, I believed that God kept tabs with stickers.)

As far as I know, my Catholic friends didn't get stickers. They did not carry Bibles. But they did have rosary beads which I secretly envied until my next-door neighbor, Katie Marchiafava, lovingly gave me my own rosary beads. I was grateful, and they were really beautiful. But I wasn't sure what to do with them because nine out of ten rosary bead prayers are Hail Mary's, and my mother told me that we didn't worship Mary. So, I would skip all the Hail Mary's and go directly to the Lord's Prayer. You could really pray the rosary quickly that way. Anyway, my Catholic friends had to

go to mass, but they had more times to choose from than we did. For us, Sunday School was at nine-thirty. Church was at eleven. That's how it was. Everyone knew it. It was part of the rhythm of life. After church, you ate. You started thinking about Sunday dinner somewhere around 11:15AM, so, when you actually did take the first bite it was especially delicious.

Sundays seemed so long. The downtown stores weren't open, and there was no soccer practice. You had time to go to church, and eat, and visit cousin Ruth, and still have time left over to be bored. For me, this lifestyle almost lasted until high school when church became about youth group. There were some really cute boys in my youth group. But then I graduated, and I went away to college. President Kennedy was assassinated, and the world changed. Forever. And, although I dragged myself to church during my freshman year of college, by my sophomore year the term church key had taken on a whole new meaning.

I began with that reminiscence to get you to think about what church meant and means to you. What were your Sunday rituals? I would love to know. What are your church memories? Are they of a stained glassed Jesus perpetually kneeling in the garden? Of voices raised in "on a hill far away stood an old rugged cross"? Of seeing your first baptism or tasting your first communion? Of flirting in youth group? Of helping build houses for Habitat or of Appalachian work camp? Of experiencing the power of heartfelt prayer? Of candlelit Christmas Eves or sun-filled Easter mornings? Were you blessed with at least one inspirational teacher or pastor who somehow seemed to put into words your deepest longings? Were you surrounded by the love of church as extended family? Do you have warm memories of growing up in church? Or are your memories not so idyllic and idealized?

If they are not good memories, you are not alone. All you have to do is pick up the paper or turn on the TV or radio to hear stories of women and men for whom church was anything but loving and ideal--people whose core belief systems were shattered by betrayal and abuse, not just at the hands of one, but also by the arrogant complicity of many. And before you think I am picking on my Catholic friends, let me assure you that the horrors committed within church walls, and under the shadow of the cross, cut across all denominational boundaries.

Let's begin not with horrors but with the lesser crimes. Take mediocrity, for example. All over America, as we speak, millions of people have come to church seeking transformation and transcendence. All over America, as we speak, millions of people are bored, and I don't blame them. They are going through the motions of what they call church, but nothing is happening. They stand. They sit. They mumble prayers and hum the hymns. They, and those who lead them, are simply not bringing their best to the worship of Almighty God. They are perpetually preoccupied and distracted. They are planning dinner menus and rehearsing tomorrow's sales pitch while someone is reading something from Corinthians. All of us have the most exciting news in history, yet somehow we make it as stale as yesterday's frozen bagels. Worship should demand the best we have to give, whether we are leaders or participants.

Next, there is the co-opting of the Gospel to legitimize all kinds of agendas that have very little to do with what Jesus was about. A lot of good and faithful people sit in the pews and believe that Jesus of Nazareth came primarily for twenty-first century, American Protestants. Church should not be where we rubber stamp agendas; it should be where we challenge and question them, where we hold them up to our faith. Even worse, there are the

heinous, hateful, verbal atrocities committed by groups like the Southern Baptists who, every time they meet, make headlines with their sweeping condemnations. Every time I read these dangerous and treacherous words I am filled with fury. For the church is suppose to look like and sound like and act like God in Christ, and that is not how God looks and sounds and acts to me!

Beyond the corporate pain there is story upon story of individual pain. God knows how many people have silently agonized as they sat in so-called sanctuaries. There is the pain endured by the divorced woman or by the gay man who sit in pews and hear ministers and priests—ministers and priests who have not ever raised a voice against racism, or the arms race, or hunger—assure them that they are on their way to fiery and eternal damnation. There is the stupidity of those who, because, of course it is “God’s will,” under the guise of “Christian counseling,” send battered people back into death defying relationships. There is the slick and silver-tongued televangelist who knows exactly what to say to separate the lonely widow in Des Moines from her grocery money. There is the sum total of damage done by all the battles that have ever been waged over the color of carpets, where to put the flowers and what hymns to sing.

And yet it is too easy to be among the critics. The fact is: We are called to be Christians in community. That is a profound theological truth, one that we will study in depth this fall. Never lose faith and never forget! There are as many remarkable stories of what church can and should be and is as there are atrocious tales. There are beautiful worship services, and thoughtful sermons. There are good counselors, and honest prayers. There are people fed, and prisoners visited, lives redeemed and neighborhoods transformed. There are inspirational stories of great and heroic and

sacrificial works. Churches can be very, very good and loving and Christian places. They can be living, active presence of Christ. And it is to this possibility that we now turn.

Between the innocence and parochialism of my childhood and the make-your-head-spin revelations of today, somewhere between the worst and the best of which we are capable, there is truth. And it is to seek that truth in hope that we gather here this morning. We gather, as persons of faith have gathered for centuries, to explore these questions. Who are we, God? And who are you? How do we know you, and how do you know us? What does it mean to love you with all our hearts and minds and souls? What would the world look like if we loved our neighbors as ourselves? Why did we come to this place this day? And why, I ask myself, when some of my friends are thinking about golf courses in South Carolina, do I dream a church? Why, when I should be winding down a career, am I revving up? Acknowledging all that is wrong with what we call church, and all that can be good will you dream a little dream with me? Will you dream with me as I dream a church.

Let's dream, first, of a church that is relevant. People seek a place that speaks to them about the world in which they really live. What does this Jesus have to say, they ask, about the war zone that is my work place, about how bone tired I am, about how frightening it is to get old? What does this Jesus have to say about Afghanistan and North Korea, Israel and Palestine, Mexican drug lords and Wall Street schemers? What does this Jesus say about the pervasive verbal assaults of Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, and Keith Oberman? I dream a church that does not avoid these questions but that does provide a place to discuss them. I dream a church that teaches us how to

work for peace and forgiveness and, in the face of a culture that celebrates meanness, kindness. I dream a church for this day.

I dream a church that offers a voice for the voiceless not just a support of the powerful. Here is some really big news: Jesus Christ is counter-cultural. The Gospel is counter-cultural. The early church did not get any presidential citations. There has never, ever, been a greater need for the other voice, for the prophetic voice, for the voice that says: there is more to life. There is more to love. There is more to life than keeping score by counting how many square feet you own, how many messages are backed up on your answering machine, and how many decibels of surround sound your personal entertainment center can blast into your home theatre. There is more to life than these things, and there is more to love than Brad and Angelina, than contrived proposals to Bachelors. We have a whole generation of kids who get all of their input on the meaning of life from Facebook, Wikipedia and *US* magazine. We have children and adults who never hear the other side of the story, who never hear that we do not have remake ourselves in the image of Cosmo or GQ because we are already beautifully made in the image of God. And for them, as for ourselves, we must dream a church.

For them, and for each of us, I dream a church that loves. Not the warm and fuzzy kind of love. Not just the feeling. We can't all love each other that way. Rather we dream of a community where love is expressed by support and acceptance and affirmation of authentic self—the true self to which God calls us. There is a deep and profound yearning for this kind of place to be and to grow.

Hear the words of the brilliant New Testament scholar N. T. Wright as he describes what Saint Paul meant. “Paul does not mean that all Christians

should feel warm fuzzy feelings for each other. That romantic and existentialist reading of *agape* does not begin to capture what is really going on. The critical thing is that the church, those who worship God in Christ Jesus, should function as a family in which every member is accepted as an equal member, no matter what their social, cultural or moral background. The very existence of such a community demonstrates to the principalities and powers, the hidden but powerful forces of prejudice and suspicion that their time is up, that the living God has indeed won the victory over them, that there is now launched upon the world a different way of being human, a way in which the traditional distinctions between human beings are done away with. That is why we find in Ephesians the climactic statement: the purpose of the gospel is that ‘through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places’ (Ephesians 3:10) The very existence of a community of love, love where before there was mutual suspicion and distrust, is the crucial piece of evidence that tells Paul that God’s spirit has been at work.”¹

And so, because I dream a church that loves, I must also dream a church that is inclusive. I dream a church that not only tolerates but affirms, not only affirms but embraces. I dream a church that is not just inclusive in the obvious ways of race, economics, sexual orientation, gender, and age, but also in the more subtle ways of politics, education and all kinds of insidious, cultural biases. In this kind of church, where I am accepted and valued, circles of trust would form. This is the only kind of circle in which each soul can do the eternally important work of growing into God.

This kind of inclusion and acceptance and trust would then free members to grow and to create. And so I dream a church that is creative. I

¹ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 146.

dream a church that pulses with creativity, a church where members are free to imagine and design and contribute—a church where the positive energy of all members flows, where all gifts are nurtured. I dream a church that is filled with music, that resonates with music, that honors God with every note. I dream a church that uses music and art and color and dance and drama to expand horizons and to shrink ignorance.

And to do all of this, I dream a church that loves learning, that encourages inquiry, that thrives on study and dialogue and passionate interaction with the text. If you have never had that moment when the Scripture comes alive for you, when the words just jump off the page—when they come to life like Ezekiel’s bones, come to life like Jesus is unrolling the scroll right in front of you--you are missing one of life’s truly powerful moments.

And the reason for all of this—this creative and inclusive and empowered and learning community—is to live out the Gospel of Jesus. And that means I dream a church that works tirelessly for justice. Preaches justice, Teaches justice. Advocates for justice. Takes on the Goliath system for justice. Rolls of their collective sleeves with new zeal to work for shelter for the homeless. Health care for the uninsured. Food for the hungry. Friendship for the lonely. Fair wages for the working poor. And peace. Peace. Justice!

Church for me is no longer about shoes that match handbags or being able to find a Bible verse faster than someone else. The church of my childhood may have offered comfort, but it did not challenge the racism, or classicism, or any of the other isms that pervert our minds and poison our hearts. Upon reflection, in fact, that church was frequently more about the dominant culture than crucifixion. And if I am going to get serious about

dreaming a church, I must return to the centrality of the life, and scandalous brutal death, and resurrection experience of Jesus.

I dream a church that is "...what God is up to in the world; recreating a people whose corporate life tells the world what the death and resurrection of the Messiah is all about. This people, this 'Church,' lives the story, embodies the story, tells the story."² It is a relevant, counter-cultural, radical, creative, inclusive, empowering place, and it has been a dream since Jesus first said: "Where two or three are gathered." I dream a church where people would rather be than anywhere else because there they find themselves in the presence of Almighty God.

²

Ibid.