

Dreaming God's Dream

Joel 2:28-32

Preached February 15, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

A dream. Have you ever awakened from sleep and remembered a vivid dream? I remember a few years ago dreaming I was extremely wealthy and that I kept my money in a dresser drawer. When I awoke, I went to the draw to see if the money was there. All I found were my underclothes.

The prophet Joel told of a time when God's Spirit would be moving among people regardless of gender, age and status. He said that "old men" would dream dreams. These dreams would be images not conjured up in the mind but would come from beyond because they would be given by the Holy Spirit.

This morning I want to share with you some dreams that I have for our church. These are not images I have had during my sleep but are pictures, thoughts and convictions that have been rolling around in my mind and heart.

As I share these dreams, I honestly wish Joel had not said it would be "old men" who dreamed. I wish he had said "young men" would dream dreams. (I guess I will get off of this soon.) What I will share is not a crystal clear picture of our future as a church – that is vision. I want to share the images that are in my heart and head, sometimes blurred and unclear, but powerful and even frightening to me regarding our church. I believe these dreams have to do with who we are and where we are headed.

The journey. Often when a person has a vivid dream in their sleep, someone will ask, "What in the world did you have for dinner?" "What did you watch on television?" Sometimes what we eat and what we do influences our dreams.

My dreams have come as I have wondered where we are to go as a church, thought about our quest for a core vision through study by our Future's committee and have observed, listened to others and have read some things that have spoken loudly to me. Perhaps the greatest influence is the work done by the Future's committee over the past nine months. We started an adventure to discern the Core Vision or First-Centenary – *At this point in time, what is God calling us to do? What is our niche of ministry in making disciples? What can we do better than other churches?* To get at this vision, we have examined the passions of staff leadership, the strengths and passions of the congregation and the needs within the community. We assert that where these intersect is our core vision.

One part of the committee's work has especially stimulated my dream neurons. We contracted with Jim Kennedy to hold 2 focus groups with community leaders to explore the community's greatest needs. A huge theme from his work was the serious needs which center on poverty. Since coming here as your pastor I have sensed and seen significant concerns and efforts to address needs of the poor.

In our congregation, we do have some who have lived or do live in or near a condition of poverty. They know what it is like to lack basic resources for life. But as a congregation, we seem to have more who have been blessed with prosperity or are on the way to becoming prosperous. As a whole, we tend to be among those who have more abundant resources than the majority in our world and community.

One of the images of my dreams is expressed graphically in our bulletin. On one side you see "poverty" (lack of basic resources – food, adequate shelter, inadequate education, living wage, etc.). On the other end is "prosperity" (an

abundance of resources, skills, leadership, influence, etc.) It is interesting that because of the recent economic downturn, the distance between the ends of this spectrum have narrowed.

Let me make a couple of important statements before I go further. There is no virtue in being either poor or prosperous. There is no reason for feeling guilt solely based on whether one is destitute or wealthy. How one got to that state or what one does in that state may be reason for guilt but the condition is guilt-neutral. Being poor does not mean one lacks faith and being rich does not mean one is greedy and dishonest.

In the graphic, you will notice arrows going from poverty to prosperity and prosperity to poverty. In my dream, we are part of making that flow happen. We are at the center of this.

Most assume that those who are prosperous have resources with which to share with the poor. In church, we often talk about ministry to the poor. We make efforts to feed, cloth, shelter, provide care and educate those who have less opportunity. We fund these efforts and we volunteer to serve.

Biblically, this is a strong theme. God told Abraham that he would be blessed and he would be a blessing to the world. He would be blessed to bless. We as a people have been blessed so that we can bless others. While God wants us to enjoy our lives and what we have been given, God intends for us to use our resources to bless others.

In Luke 12, Jesus tells of a parable of one who left his manager in charge of his house while he was away. The manager took advantage of the man's absence and failed to care for others and personally "lived it up" on the man's resources. At the end of this story Jesus said: *"From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded"* (48).

As a church, we have been given much and much is required of us. We have been blessed to be a blessing.

On the other end of the spectrum is poverty. A few years ago, I attended a Chattanooga District event. During lunch, a church member and I sat across the table from a member of another church. We began a conversation about our heating systems at our homes. I told of having to call for a service person to come to repair ours. The member of my church shared about having to replace her heat pump. Our new friend across the table told us about her home. She had no heat in her bedroom so she would pull back a curtain that separated it from the living room where there was a space heater. This sister did not have the resources to heat her whole home.

In Luke 6, Jesus makes a profound statement. He said, "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*" (20). While poverty is not a virtue, the poor hold a special place in God's heart. The poor have a special connection with God's new society. Those who trust in God know of divine provision and an unfettered relationship with the Creator. They are blessed. Jesus proclaimed that he had a special mission to the poor.

This spiritual blessing is something the poor have to share with the prosperous. Many poor have found what the true treasures of life are. Often they are rich in faith (James 2:5). Remember the poor widow who Jesus commends for giving a couple of pennies in the offering. He said she gave more than all the others because she gave from her poverty. She was a great teacher.

What is learned though is more than what one sees from observation. It is gained in the context of relationship. Jim Wallis comments that the rich need a commendation from the poor to get to heaven. As we become friends with the poor, our lives begin to change together. As we share what we have been given, we are delivered from self-serving actions and consumerism. Serving leads to giving life meaning and purpose.

In this dream, we move from ministering *to* the poor to ministering *with* the poor. We are in this together. We each contribute to the welfare of the other. We begin to look more like the early church where those who had share with those who did not have. The goal is not to make all poor people rich or all rich people

poor or to make all people equal. Rather it is to share ourselves with one another so as to create healthy and meaningful lives in Christ. In the process of doing this, we will have a huge impact on erasing poverty in our community.

As a church, we have a special position of influence in our community. We have influence with the influencers – community leaders, political leaders and business leaders. In dealing with the issue of poverty, some systems must change and social justice must be made available for all people. I believe God wants to use us in this process. Imagine what God could do through us if we are willing to be the conduit through which his Spirit flows to impact influencers and institutions that can make a difference?

While it is obvious if this dream becomes a great reality among us, it will involve devotion of our energies and resources to be in ministry with the poor, it will also include building relationships. One of the glimpses in my mind of what that might look like would be for us to become a healthy multi-ethnic church. Recently I read a book with that title by Mark Deymaz. As I read about how Sunday mornings in churches are the most segregated locations and times in the US, I sensed conviction about our need to look more like our community in terms of our ethnic and racial make up – 36% black, 2.5 % Asian, 2% Hispanic or Latino.

Those thoughts were somewhat challenging to me both emotionally and practically. After reading Deymaz, I prayed for God to show me if this was the direction he wanted First-Centenary to take. The next Sunday after that prayer, we had two new African American families joining us in worship.

You see this requires the breaking down of people barriers. It would involve integrating others into this church fellowship. The tendency of most churches is "Come and join us if you agree to be like us," which is assimilation. But integrating others means a cross pollination where our cultures influence and transform the other, creating something better and stronger.

Another portion of this dream is the multiplication of ourselves as a church. In three to five years when our worship

attendance reaches 1,000, I have the dream of our planting a new church in this area – Highland Park area, Rossville, North Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain. I am not sure of the location and whether it would be a second campus or a new start. But there are many parts of our community that need a strong United Methodist presence. We can plant our DNA in those areas and have a strong witness for Christ.

I must confess that I do not have complete clarity of vision from these dreams. My prayer is that the work with Futures, the church leadership and you will bring our vision into focus. It will take time, work and prayer to see that vision clearly.

About Kingdom building. In reflecting on these dream images, I know it is not about me and making Dwight look good. It is not driven by being "politically correct" or having some political bias or theological bias. It is not something that has come from our denomination but is supported by a wind blowing in our denomination.

What this is about is our mission to make disciples of all people – *the down and out, and the up and in and all in between*. It is about the transformation of our world into a new society, a new reality called the kingdom of God. It is a society where God is supreme, people live in harmony with one another and creation, people find purpose and meaning, people live healthy and productive lives and justice rolls down like a mighty river.

This great reality will not be brought into existence by our efforts. It is a God thing that only God can deliver in its fullness. Yet, we are called to model this new society and to live as if it is here among us.

Source of the dream. Concerning what I have shared this morning, we must ask, "Are these merely the dreams of a dreamer?" Or have these images been planted in this head and heart by the Living God? Together we must pray and seek to discern the answer to this.

If these are merely the dreams of a dreaming preacher, this sermon will soon be forgotten and we will either continue with business as usual or move to a new thing. But if these thoughts have been

planted by God, they will begin to grow in many of your hearts and minds. If these are the seedlings of our core vision, then they will drive us toward God preferred future for our church.

Prayer: *Father, as a church, we want to go where you desire we go. We do not know exactly where that is and we ask you to show us the way. Lord, we know it will be challenging and at times threatening, yet it will be the right way. We believe it will lead to deeper discipleship for each of us and those in our community. Cast your light through us as we follow you and build a new society of peace, grace, mercy and justice in Chattanooga.*
In the name of our Savior and Lord, the One who preached good news to the poor and release to all captives.

Amen.