

What Have We Been Dreaming Lately?

John Shuck
First Presbyterian Church
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Micah 6:6-8

Back in 1993, Stephen Carter, a judge, wrote a book entitled *The Culture of Disbelief*. His book was about values, religious and otherwise, in the public sphere. What I remember from his book was his three-part definition of integrity. I have remembered it and I have found it valuable in my own life and in contemplating decisions.

He wrote that the *first step* to integrity is to form an opinion. Articulate to oneself what is right and what is wrong. For instance, someone might form this opinion: I believe that no one regardless of race, income, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, or political affiliation should be denied basic civil rights. One could and should expand that statement to state what those basic civil rights are and to determine ways in which certain people are or are not granted these rights.

But that is not enough for integrity. One can believe something and do nothing about it.

A person could believe that everyone is entitled to civil rights but do nothing to help those who are denied those rights to gain them. That is not integrity. An opinion by itself is little more, in fact it is nothing but, words.

The *second step* to integrity is to act upon our opinion. Acting on one's opinion can take many forms. You might give money to a particular cause, join an advocacy group, or vote for a particular candidate who supports your opinion.

But even that is not enough for integrity. One could do those things in secret. Or one could do something and when found out, not give the reason for the actions. That is not integrity because it lacks the third aspect, the public face.

The *third step* to integrity is to publicly state why we acted on our opinion. It is the standing up and being counted aspect of integrity. That doesn't mean giving a speech every time we give money to a cause, but it is not being afraid to give a reason if asked. That third step is critical to advance the rightness of the opinion in the first place. The truth is enacted when public opinion brings it into the open.

Now we may raise objections. "There is danger in doing that," we might say. "It is risky." It sure can be.

But, is our opinion only our opinion when it is convenient for us? I believe in your rights as long as it doesn't cost me anything. It is only right and true when it doesn't involve sacrifice?

Integrity is about not only believing in the truth and saying it to ourselves but also saying it to others. That is what it will take to turn that belief into reality.

Our belief or opinion will involve controversy and risk and sacrifice. If it doesn't it probably doesn't mean much. Anything worth believing will involve sacrifice. We may say, "I believe black people should have the vote and should not have to sit on the back of the bus." That's good, but that is also yesterday's battle. Many took risks back then. Many sacrifices were made.

What have we been dreaming lately?

We might believe that women should be able preach in a Presbyterian pulpit. Good, but a little late. Our ancestors already fought for that one. Many took risks. Many sacrifices were made.

What have we been dreaming lately?

Your friend might say, "I think the war in Vietnam is a bad idea, and I am going to do something about it." Well, that's nice, except that you are 30 years too late.

What have you been dreaming lately?

When Martin Luther King wrote his letter to his fellow clergy while he was sitting in a Birmingham, Alabama jail, he was writing to people who claimed to believe in the same things he did. These clergy published a letter in the paper criticizing King and his movement and his demonstrations. They believed in the same things, they said, but they said he should go slow, not make trouble, not be extreme.

Out of all of those clergy, who are we celebrating this weekend? Who is the one who made the difference? Who is the one who took the risks? Who is the one who got results? The great ones, the ones we remember, the ones deserving of being remembered, are those who demonstrated integrity. They are the ones who believed, who acted on their belief, and who publicly stated why they acted on their belief. They did it when their belief was not popular. They did it when they could lose their jobs, when they could lose their friends, when they could lose their lives. Their greatness, King's greatness, is not that integrity ended with himself, but that his example inspired others to also believe, to act and to take a stand, and to make a difference.

And the reason we honor King this weekend, is because his life and witness can inspire us in January 2006, to live with integrity. And we do that by believing and dreaming for a better world.

What have we been dreaming lately?

I want to speak today about activism as a spiritual path. In the language of creation spirituality, it is the *via transformativa*. It is the way of redemption. It is the way of justice-making. The way of right-relationships. The way of compassion. Micah the prophet spoke of this way when he wrote: “What does Yahweh require? But to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” *Micah* 6:8

Immersing oneself in the transformation of society and of the self toward God is part of the spiritual life. It is a way I have just begun to discover.

Martin Luther King Jr. is the modern day saint of this path. Spirituality and social justice were fused together in his life and in his ministry. Martin Luther King is an important person in my ministry. I don't mean for this sermon to be autobiographical, but I need to share a little about my experience with this. My experience as a pastor in Billings was one of immense spiritual growth for me. I have said that I found my voice there, and Martin Luther King is an important part of that.

I chose while in Billings (although it feels like it was chosen for me); nevertheless, I chose to speak out and to act on behalf of a certain population of people I felt were treated unfairly. I chose this course of action not necessarily to find God, but because I felt it was the right thing to do. As I continued on the path that I had chosen, I found it incredibly rewarding. I found friends and a community and a vitality to my ministry. As a bonus, I feel that I have grown spiritually in a certain way. I remember on one occasion reading the gospel of *Mark*. It was as if the text was on fire. It was relevant. I realized that Jesus as told in *Mark's* story had been going through a similar thing, down to details it seemed. I had never thought of it before, but Jesus was an activist, like Martin Luther King. Or King was an activist like Jesus.

I have no connection with King historically. I feel awkward speaking about him, because I have no “right” to him. I never marched with him, of course. I was seven when he was assassinated. I grew up in the West, and King was rarely on my radar. I never knew the area out of which his activism arose. It wasn't until seminary that I had read anything he had written. He is more of a legendary figure for me whom I discovered through documentaries and biographies and his sermons. But he was there when I needed to reflect on my experience.

King was an important spiritual resource and his experience seemed relevant to my struggles. King helped me realize that spirituality and activism were interwoven. I realized that I could no longer speak about spiritual things without speaking about justice and that I couldn't do justice without connecting it to the spiritual life. I realized that my life and ministry had to be integrated. What I believed had to be connected to what I did and to what I said.

And I realized that the way of social justice is not easy. It is a path that is filled with doubt. It is a way covered with dark shadows. You doubt your motivations. You say to yourself that you are in this for your own ego. You begin to internalize the accusations that others hurl at you, or you put up a wall so you cannot hear criticism that you need to hear. You doubt whether you should be doing anything at all. “Who am I to do this? Who do I think I am, Martin Luther King?” You doubt whether you are having any effect at all. You get your tail kicked for what? Look, you say, “Nothing has changed.” You can become bitter, paranoid, self-righteous, and grandiose. “Why aren’t others doing anything,” you say? “Am I the only one who cares?” Those are some of the shadows of social activism.

Those shadows need to be acknowledged, embraced, and shared.

Despite the shadows and the doubts, you move ahead. You give thanks for small victories. Mother Teresa said, “We are not here to do great things. We are here to do small things with great love.”

I discovered that there is a spiritual discipline that goes with activism. This spiritual discipline includes lightening up. That is in the sense of lightening the load. Letting the weight of the cause be lifted from your shoulders. Play and silliness and laughter are important. Friendship is critical. Also needed is a conscious effort everyday to love, to have compassion for, and to pray for the opposition. They are having their own struggles after all. In fact, we are all victims of the same untruth.

And you need to keep a sense of perspective. Even Moses didn’t make it to the Promised Land. The prophet/poets described great visions, Like Isaiah:

“And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.” Isaiah 11:6

Like Amos, the shepherd, who said “Let justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Amos 5:24

But those poetic visions may not be realized tomorrow or just because we finally heard about them and are now doing something. The beloved community as King called it is coming. We are a small part in it. Yet we are a part.

That beloved community includes civil rights and social justice. But it includes more. It includes ecological justice and peaceful relations among all people and within all creation. Part of the spirituality of activism is to keep before us the dream and the vision for that which we hope.

Martin Luther King is the patron saint of the spiritual path of justice. I am grateful to him and to his dream. I am grateful to him for helping me realize the importance of integrity--to believe and to act and to say.

What have we been dreaming lately?

I like to imagine that there is a big dream. It is a complete dream that is running all of the time—playing over again and again. Each of us has a glimpse of that dream. We get a piece of it. King had a piece; you have a piece; I have a piece. For some that piece has to do with civil rights. For others the environment; for others, caring for animals; for others, peaceful relations between religions, for others, supporting the arts, for others, advocacy for abused children, for others, advocacy for the disabled; for others, feeding the hungry; for others helping survivors of cancer—and on and on and on. We each have a piece, a small part of the larger dream, and a passion for its fulfillment.

This community is a place where your piece of the dream can be nurtured and where your passions can be ignited. It is a place where you will be encouraged to seek to live with integrity.

I also want to say that in this community our dreams are not in competition. It is important for us not to let our piece of the dream become the dream itself, or to overshadow another's piece of the dream. As we share our piece of the dream with others, we may find that we will be able to help one another with their piece of dream while enlarging our vision. We may even feel the need to take on their dream for awhile and let ours grow on its own, trusting that others will pick it up.

What have we been dreaming lately?

The emphasis is on “we.”

What are we, collectively, as in collecting the pieces of our various dreams, dreaming?

I will put that as an invitation: to explore discover, receive and embrace the dreams of others. Perhaps those dreams will connect with our own and our activism may be broadened as well as deepened.

In the meantime,
Bless you, you dreamers!

Keep believing and acting and speaking!

Amen.