

## Realizing God's Dream

Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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### *Acts 11:1-18*

Our scripture lesson for this morning comes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which as more than one person has put it, might better be known as the Acts of the Holy Spirit. In the passage I am about to read, Peter is facing criticism from his fellow Jewish Christians in Jerusalem for eating with Gentiles, non-Jews. Up to that point, what one ate (dietary laws) and with whom one ate was one of the key ways of defining what it meant to be a follower of the God of Israel. It was a way of telling who was in and who was out.

When Peter is challenged about eating with Gentiles, he tells his critics a story about a vision he had and what happened after he had the vision. Notice several things as you hear Peter's story. *Number One*, the vision occurs when he is in the city of Joppa praying. If you remember your Old Testament history, Joppa is the place where the prophet Jonah went to get on a ship, in an effort to escape God's call to go to Nineveh and preach to the hated Assyrians. Jonah went to Joppa to avoid leading Gentiles to repentance. *Number Two*, just as Peter denied Jesus three times, and told Jesus three times on the beach that he loved him, now Peter has to hear from the Lord three times that he should now eat the meat of animals that, according to the book of Leviticus, were considered unclean. *Number Three*, notice that right after his vision, some non-Jews show up at the door and lead him to the house of a man who we know from the previous chapter is Cornelius, a Roman centurion - a non-Jew. *Read Acts here.*

If I were to ask you, "What is God's dream for humanity and for creation as a whole?" How would you answer? Thanks to Peter's vision, I suspect your answer might be somewhat similar to mine. You might point to the prophetic vision of the lion lying down with the lamb in peace (and the lamb not winding up getting eaten!), swords being beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, and speak of a time of universal peace.

You might look to Jesus' words in the Gospel of John, "*For God so loved **the world** that he sent his only begotten son that **whosoever** believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"

You might turn to Paul's words in the letter to the Romans which state that God desires to have mercy on **all** people and that **all** creation has been waiting for its redemption. Even those of us who have some discomfort with apocalyptic literature might flip over to John's vision on the isle of Patmos, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a reality where there will be no more crying, no more pain or tears.

You might talk about the Hebrew concept of shalom, the deep peace and wholeness where people are connected in steadfast love and mercy is lived out and understanding is fostered. Where people do the right thing by each other, and have equality of opportunity no matter what their color of their skin, the class of their birth, or the ethnicity of their background. I think you would do that, because of Peter's vision and, more importantly, what happened after Peter's vision. You see Peter went from having an idea that God meant to break down barriers between people to acting on making that idea a reality in the way he embraced Cornelius, the centurion. He went from having a dream to working toward the fulfillment of the dream.

While you were thinking about how you would describe God's dream, you might also, like me, have bemoaned how far we seem to be from God's dream. In a world of so much rancor and division, a world where people go hungry every day and others seem to be obsessed with holding on to what they have, we are far from God's dream. In a world where equality of opportunity is still not a reality. A world where wars go on apace and oil slicks menace our Gulf Coast. Where children in some cities live on trash heaps and get sold into slavery and in other cities get gunned down in gang violence or never really seem to have a chance at an education. We are far from God's dream. We are indeed far from realizing God's dream, but that does not mean we should give up on it. This is why initiatives like our Dreamer program are so important.

Now the Dreamer program is not the only way to go about addressing the distance between God's dream and the discouraging circumstances of the world. There are all kinds of ways to do that - all sorts of opportunities to participate in that work through projects and organizations Immanuel sponsors and in projects, organizations and activities that people are involved in outside of Immanuel. There are all kinds of ways to address the gap between God's dream and the harsh realities of the world. But the Dreamer program is one very important way - a way that Immanuel has been committed to since 1990. When I think of the program, so many stories come to mind. Stories I've heard told and stories of which I have been a part.

Two weeks ago, the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my first day as your Senior Pastor came and went without too much fanfare. (I didn't even realize it until Paul Erickson called and invited me to lunch. Paul was the chair of the Pastor Nominating Committee that brought me here.) Reflecting on that anniversary, I was drawn back to thinking about what it was about this congregation - what first grabbed my eye when I read about Immanuel on paper--that first attracted me here before I ever met a single Immanuelite. Do you know what grabbed me first and foremost? It was reading on the Church Information Form about this congregation's involvement in what they called the Dreamer program and then studying the Washingtonian article about a congregation that was determined if it was going to build something for itself, it was going to make sure it did something big for other people. And then I heard stories about people like Marcus, Kermit and Edward and a number of other Dreamers in the first class. Were it not for the Dreamer program, I might not have been drawn here in the first place.

And since I've been here, I've watched people give generously of their time, money, energy and emotion in the second iteration of this program. I remember cleaning up a park with some of our youth and some kids from the Dreamer program and hearing tales of camp in New Hampshire, Camp Merrowvista. I think of Lee Rainie driving two kids to a school out in Kentucky. He drove twelve hours there and twelve hours back. And then he had to turn around the next week to drive out and get them and bring them back because they had been expelled.

I remember going on field trips and being at Apple Fests and learning how to hip-hop dance with the Dreamers (that's part of my story, though I'm not going to demonstrate it here!) I think of the joint Habitat trip and the relationships that were cemented there between some of our youth and adults and the young people from Anacostia. I think of the "Minutes for Mission" I've heard over the past five years. I think, too, about Jonathon being admitted to Tufts (and hearing people say, "I don't think I could get into Tufts!") and Josh Clark being at VCU.

I think not just of the academic and other successes, but also of the times of disappointment, and the way the core people involved in that program have been present in the midst of those disappointments. Names like Jemaine and Illya come to mind.

And speaking of disappointment, Ashley Toon. Ashley, herself was not a disappointment. She was one of the stars of this particular phase of our program. But when she was diagnosed with cancer, and

then six months later died, that was a disappointment. All through the time of her illness and death, I watched people from this congregation reach out to her and her mother, making sure that Ashley had a prayer shawl, be consistent about visiting and checking in with her and her mother.... And then, I watched as a large group of Immanuelites were there at her funeral.

If you had the privilege of being at Ashley's funeral, you know that, even as much as the death of a young person is not a part of God's dream (and I will never believe that it is), God's dream was made manifest in that event. There was such a large contingent from Immanuel, all seated together. I didn't realize it, but there were also some senior high youth, who had come to know Ashley through going on a Habitat trip with her, seated in the balcony, too. All of the Immanuel people were gathered together (except for those few senior highs) in a group. And a large group of our Dreamers sat with us. They were glad to be associated with this community of faith, glad to sit in a group with us.

What was most remarkable was listening to the preacher, the Bishop, going on in his sermon about African-American history, about how black people in this country have been mistreated and had such a hard road. And then he looked over at us and said, basically this, "Here are some white people who are getting it right." God's dream being realized....

I chose the title of this sermon advisedly: "*Realizing God's Dream*". The word *realize*, someone pointed out to me, has a couple of different connotations. On the one hand, to realize something is to recognize it. "Oh, yes, I realize that this is important. I get it. I recognize it." But there is a second connotation to realizing something. To realize something is to work to make it a reality.

Last weekend more than forty of us were down at Massanetta Springs for our intergenerational retreat. It was a wonderful weekend. We focused on the fruit of the Spirit. I think everyone who went had a marvelous time and came back feeling very energized.

Flynn Bucy, in the session right before we had our closing worship, talked to us about the importance of intention. He put it this way, "It is one thing to think that parents should love their children. It is 'a whole 'nother thing' (That's a Texas way of putting it). It's a whole 'nother thing to actually love your children." Then Flynn went on to encourage us to have an intention about living out the fruit of the Spirit.

Let me put it this way. It is one thing to believe reaching out across boundaries that keep us separate and breaking down barriers is important. It is one thing to be proud of the fact that this congregation is involved in that. It is one thing to think it is a good idea to make a difference in the lives of young people in Anacostia. It is a whole 'nother thing to take either a small or a big part of your financial, emotional, spiritual, and your physical resources toward realizing that dream.

We are about to go to the table. It too is a place where dreams are realized, where boundaries are broken down, and where we are given energy for the task of working towards God's dream.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt