

I Have a Dream

Shepherd's Grace Church

January 20, 2013

The prophet Amos has heard God's concern for the practices of worship in Israel. God is not desiring that the Hebrews abolish public worship. There is nothing wrong with the order of service for worship. Musicians and song leaders are not at issue. Instead, God's concern is for the heart of worship. The people worship with their lips, but their hearts are far from God's concerns for the world. They come at festival times and times of obligation and they fast and pray, however when they leave they leave behind the meaning of their offerings. They are willing to write checks and show up but they are not willing to get their hands dirty. They are not willing to reach out to those truly in need. When the place of worship is a whirlwind of activity but the poor of the neighborhood are neglected, the worship is a mockery. All of the busy-ness of religion has made religion of busy-ness. The people are so keen on being seen in the work of the church that they forget the one to whom all praise and honor belongs. Said differently, they spend so much time thinking about how they do church that they forget why they do church. God's plea is not for commotion, but for communion. God's desire is not for feasts and festivals, but for justice and righteousness. Will you pray with me? (Read Amos 5: 21-24)

Amos 5: 21-24

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream

(Prayer)

Fifty years ago, a great American whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow issued a profound challenge. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of former Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But today, half a century later the legacy of racial inequality in our great nation lives on, the Negro, now called the African American, still is not free. The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. The Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. Those of us who long for life to be fuller and richer for us and for our children are exiled with him. We are diminished as a people as we diminish others and marginalize them. We are diminished as

we fail to live into the fullness of the promise of our forefathers. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, Hispanic and Asian alike would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the all people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. Now is the time to look carefully at the rights we claim as Americans. Now is the time to recognize that all people have God given rights and freedoms, but now is the time to recognize that the rights of one person end where the rights of another begin. In our great nation, all people are afforded the right to keep and bear arms. That right is guaranteed to us by the constitution which protects our freedoms and governs our actions. That same constitution also guarantees to all Americans a government dedicated to protecting the safety of all Americans. In the wake of the recent massacre in Newtown, and in the wake of the recent massacre in Aurora, it is obvious that the rights of some have clearly infringed upon the rights of others. Now is the time to engage in dialogue that will allow for all to be protected, all to be defended!

Our conversation must not break down into name calling or label making. Liberals and conservatives, republicans and democrats can all agree that there should never be another case where a mother sends her child off to school in the morning not knowing for certain that they will come home on the bus that evening! Now is the time! Now is the time to commit to ourselves and to our children that we will protect not only their rights to defend themselves, but also our responsibility to protect them so that their future, our future in them can be as bright as God intends it to be! Surely a nation as creative as ours can find a way to protect not only our liberties, but also the lives of those whom we love so deeply! Now is the time!

Now is the time as we stand on the threshold of new health care measures that will allow for adequate care for our elderly to recognize that our work on their behalf has only just begun. Now is the time to know that elderly abuse is on the rise in our nursing homes and in the homes of their children. Now is the time to act on behalf of our parents to insure their safety and provide for their security! Now is not the time to turn our backs on them, but to turn toward them and embrace them even as they have always embraced us! Now is the time to recognize that these, our brothers and sisters in faith are and always will be people of great worth. They have healed us when we were sick and cared for us in our dark nights of desperation and they still have much to offer as we share our journey of faith together. These are the giants of our faith and not the geriatric. Now is the time for us to invite and include them in worship and in the future of our community and our congregation. Now is the time to provide transportation

for each and every one of them so they can come and worship with us in the place of their choice.

Now is the time to reach out to the youth of our community. Now is the time to recognize their new ideas and energy! Now is the time to invite them into full participation in the world they will be responsible for in such a short time from now. Now is the time to recognize their strength and their intelligence and their worth. Now is the time to embrace their new ways of worship and their new sense of responsibility for all of God's creation. The youth of our community are healing and they are reeling from the events of the past year in Arkansas City. Now is the time to walk beside them and to recognize the fullness of our commitment to them. Now is the time to commit to their Christian education and to move out to the margins with them and give them voice! Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of injustice and intolerance to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This frigid winter of the marginalized person's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is a soft sunlit spring of new beginning. And those who hope that we as Christians just needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the community returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in Arkansas City until the all human beings are granted their citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our community until the bright day of justice emerges.

We will not be content until we return to worship with passion and purpose. We will not be content until every person in our community has heard the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. We will not be content until we recognize that each one of us is a Child of God and an heir to a Kingdom more replete with richness and love than we can possibly imagine. This nation is on the verge of turning its back on Christianity. It is said that we are not relevant, that we have no sense of purpose, that we are in fact hypocrites! We will not rest, we will not retreat, we will not renounce the one who is our savior and King! In His name and by His power our world will be restored! It would be easy for us to be resentful and wronged. It would be easy for us to put on false righteousness.

But there is something that I must say to you, my brothers and sisters who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Christian community must not lead us to a distrust of any people, for many of our brothers and sisters, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. We must all come to realize that our freedom is only gained and our future is only secured as we walk together!

We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead.

We cannot turn back.

There are those who are asking the followers of Jesus Christ, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as one person is the victim of the unspeakable horrors physical or mental or sexual abuse. We can never be satisfied as long as the bodies of our brothers and sisters, bruised and battered, are not seen or heard by others our society. *We cannot be satisfied as long as the voices of our children crying from their own homes are not heard. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by those who should have loved them most.* We cannot be satisfied as long as crimes against a stranger carry greater penalties in our nation than crimes against our own children. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."¹

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some have come here feeling sick or suffering from some debilitating or disabling injury. You have persevered to come because you believe! Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Geuda Springs, Go back to Newkirk, go back to Winfield or to your homes in Arkansas City, go back to the conditions of your own lives and to the quiet desperation of your own circumstances knowing that your life, your circumstance, your situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

I have a dream!

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the steep banks of the Arkansas River, the sons of those in hunger and the sons of those in wealth will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the city of Arkansas City will be transformed into a seat of passion for those who are homeless and unable to care for themselves.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by their gender but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream today that one day my daughters in Texas and my sons in Kansas will be able to do equal work for equal wage, that they will be recognized for their abilities and gifts and not for who their parents are!

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."²

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I live my life with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to live a life of abundance together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,

From every mountainside, let freedom [ring](#)!

And if our community of Arkansas City is to be great, this must become true.

And so let freedom ring from the great plains of Kansas.

Let freedom ring from the red dirt of Oklahoma.

Let freedom ring from the tops of the flint hills.

Let freedom ring from the depths of the mighty Arkansas.

Let freedom ring from the deep green tree lines of Sedan.

But not only that:

Let freedom ring from our great capitol in Topeka.

Let freedom ring from the halls of justice in Wichita.

Let freedom ring from every curve and bend in the Walnut.

From every rock and craig, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last!

*Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*³