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Pentecost Again: Two Mistakes Avoided

(Acts 2:14-18 NRSV) ...Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

For the longest time, my parents kept the autobiography I wrote when I was in the sixth grade. I think they were just as startled – and highly amused – by my answer as was my teacher when in response to the question *"What is your dream for what you want to do when you grow up."* I wrote, *"I want to drive a Greyhound bus so I can see the country."* Now, nothing wrong with driving a Greyhound bus; it's important and honorable work but I don't think we had ever even mentioned Greyhound at home and I don't recall having ever ridden one. I suppose, though, that my parents could at least take some comfort in the fact that my answer had changed from the time when I was three years old and it was reported that I once told an adult who asked me *"What do you want to be when you grow up?"* that I wanted to be a fire truck. Not a fire *fighter*, a fire **truck**. Now while I may now have achieved the girth of a fire truck, I at least apparently came to realize that being a "fire truck" itself was not a good career dream.

In American English idiom, there are a many phrases that refer to dreams. And when you begin to catalog them, you realize that as a culture we seem to have very mixed feelings about this whole notion of "dreams." On the one hand, there are the disparaging and derogatory kinds of phrases like: "In your dreams" or "Dream on" or "That'll happen only in your dreams." But on the other side of the ledger, who hasn't been stirred to the depths when listening to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"

speech, with its stirring cadences that invoke the best of America? Or, more prosaically, I suspect that many of you can recall the Mamas and the Papas' song, "California Dreamin,'" which beautifully expresses that haunting longing for someplace in life that is warm and fulfilling on those occasions when life was too much and too often instead like a "winter's day." (How many of you are humming it in your head right now). Or consider professor Benjamin Mays' profound words when he says this: "*...the tragedy in life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with [your] dreams unfulfilled. [But] It is a calamity not to dream.*"¹

"*It is a calamity not to dream.*" How true that looks in retrospect for that day of Pentecost almost 2000 years ago, a day we celebrated last Sunday. The disciples in that story avoided the temptation to dream too small, and they avoided the oh-so-human inclination to say – disparagingly – "in your dreams" and to dismiss the stirrings and movement of the Spirit. But they could have, you know; they could have missed everything that the Spirit was trying to give birth to. There were some in the crowd that day who **did** miss it. It's one of the more humorous lines in Luke's writing when he shows that some in that crowd thought those gathered to hear Peter's preaching and be animated by the Holy Spirit were just drunk; Peter responds – did you catch this? – "they're not drunk; it's only 9 a.m."

Let me, then, talk a bit more about the two specific mistakes that the disciples avoided on the Day of Pentecost: the mistake of ruling certain people out, and the mistake of not thereby blessing the future because their dreams were too tiny. Both mistakes that were avoided can be found at the end of Peter's sermon: Notice what he says: "*God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and*

¹Mays' quotation can be found numerous places online. E.g., cited by Larry D. Thompson at <http://www.usdoj.gov/dag/speech/2003/011803fourteenblackmenglynncyga.htm> Mays was the former President of Morehouse College in Atlanta; he was one of Martin Luther King's teachers.

your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." And with these words, which are, as we noted last week, actually a quotation of the prophet Joel, Peter reaches back in order to point forward, he claims these words as the founding words to guide the church in its life and birth and mission and he thereby says "no" to something that the culture would impose on the church, if it could. What do I mean? Well, in first century Judea, occupied by the Roman army, a colony of far-off imperial Rome, it was only Roman citizens who had any "standing" to be counted in a court of law or in most sort of official transactions. And, even then, for the most part it was male, property-owning citizens who had such "standing." Women didn't count. Children didn't count. The poor didn't count. Slaves certainly didn't count. Rural folks didn't count as much as urban folks. Folks who could speak Greek counted more than the lowly Palestinian peasants who spoke only Aramaic.

Have you ever had the experience of feeling like you don't count? For me, one of the still painful memories from Middle School has to do with P.E. class as it was conducted back in that Jurassic era, when the coaches would pick two captains and then these two boys would then start picking folks for their side for whatever game was going to be played. The jocks and the physically coordinated were always picked first. But the nerds among us weren't. Middle School memories last a lifetime, don't they?, and I can still recall that increasingly awful feeling of standing in the shrinking circle of the un-picked, feeling more and more like I didn't count, wasn't wanted, didn't matter. It's the feeling and the reality that, rightly or wrongly, seems to be driving so much of this election season and is unfortunately manifesting itself on every side as hatefulness.

But that first Pentecost showed a different story, a different reality, a different hope for how the world could be. For in the newly-born church, **everyone** counted,

no one stood in the circle of the un-picked. Peter's words are a testimony to the fact that God can and will use **everyone**. Peter's words are a testimony to the fact that God has always sought to employ the talents of each and every one and will continue to do so in the Church down to this day. Peter's words are a reminder of the reality that the ability to "prophesy" is a gift from God that is not limited by race or age or ethnicity or gender or orientation or status or any thing that the world so often values in making decisions about who "counts." And so that's the first mistake avoided: the mistake of thinking and acting as if some people count more than others in the eyes of God, for that would have turned the church into a club. The story of Pentecost is the story of the fact that from God's point of view, everyone counts, everyone is called on to contribute to the common life and the common good. For everyone – male and female, young and old, Parthian and Roman, Jew and Samaritan, everyone – has standing in the Spirit, everyone counts. Nobody goes un-picked.

The second mistake the disciples avoided on the day of Pentecost is this: to not dream big enough and thereby not bless the future – even when it is a future that you may not yourself see. A few years ago I shared the story of Leland and Jane Stanford with you, but it is the perfect story to tell again today. You may, of course, recognize the name of Leland Stanford. He was the governor of California 160 years ago and he is credited with keeping California in the Union during the Civil War, and he was one of the founders of the Central Pacific Railroad (which helped to lay the first transcontinental railroad tracks; most of you have probably seen the famous picture of the site in Utah where the westbound and eastbound crews met up, two steam locomotives nose-to-nose, with those pictured having just driven the golden spike). He was extremely wealthy, and during the latter half of the 19th century had a great deal of influence over what happened on the west coast and all the way to Hawaii. But he didn't start out that way. No, he started out as a small shopkeeper in a dirty little gold

mining camp working 24 hours a day during the height of the California Gold Rush. But his small store was successful, and then he built on that success to achieve a host of other things.

But in the 1890s, tragedy struck. He and his wife Jane's only child, a son, died at the age of only 16 years old. Full of grief but wanting in their grief to suitably honor and remember their son, they decided to give a gift for a fitting memorial. Mrs. Stanford had been a long-time and strong supporter of the Disciples of Christ and Mr. Stanford, who was always generous to every church they visited as they went around the state, had a habit of putting two \$20 gold pieces in the offering of any church they visited (that would be the equivalent today of eight hundred dollars). So these two, who had so much wealth and yet had had taken from them that which was most important in their lives, went to the pastor of the church in Sacramento where they were members. And they told the pastor that they want to give a gift to the congregation in honor and memory of their son. The pastor thanked them, and thought long and hard, and responded to them this way: "*Well, the parlor here at the church needs new carpeting.*" The Stanfords thanked him, but said "*We had something a little more fitting and a little larger in mind.*"² And they then went and gave \$10,000,000 (and, remember, this is in 1890s dollars) to found Stanford University.

That poor pastor. Talk about a mistake NOT avoided! Talk about dreaming far, far too small! Talk about a failure of imagination and a failure to help folks honor the past by blessing the future! The pastor's failure here was indeed his inability to dream a big enough dream, to imaginatively and even audaciously listen well to what the Spirit was trying to do. His failure was in not realizing that the Stanfords, even though they

²While this story is not yet published anywhere, it has circulated for years among Disciples of Christ members and its details have been confirmed in private correspondence (May 29, 2006) with Rod Parrott, former Dean of Disciples Seminary Foundation, Claremont, California, who in turn confirmed it with Lester McAllister, former Professor of Church History at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana. The Stanfords apparently were gracious enough to also pay for that new carpeting in the church parlor as well!

would not themselves live to see the full fruits of the future, nonetheless wanted to be a blessing to that future.

But Peter avoided this sort of terrible mistake on the day of Pentecost. Peter heard the mighty rush of the Spirit and had the audacity to dream very, very big. It was a big dream that saw the church and the gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ not just to Jerusalem, but literally to all the world. It was a big dream that could end up taking in not just those “Jews from every land” but those in every place who would learn the “goodness of the Lord.” It was a big dream that would soon take the church into Europe and Africa and India, into England and Ireland, and all the way to the foot of Pikes Peak in 1874. And here is the point: Peter and the disciples on that day of Pentecost would never themselves live to see even a tiny fraction of all the places where the gospel would take hold, where lives would be changed, where the church would be planted. On the day of Pentecost they renounced any self-centered selfishness that would claim that they were more important than the future God had in store for the Church. No, by their response on that day they said that they would bless that future growth even though we will never see so much of it.

My friends, what dream in your life are you in danger of dreaming in too small a way? Is there something that you sense the Spirit calling you to do, to become, to change that may even be a little scary? Is there something that has been gnawing at you? Is there something that you believe the Spirit is calling us to do here at the corner of Platte and Cascade, still in the shadow of Pikes Peak xxx years after our founding? Something that can continue to give life to our mission statement that says we will have a particular heart for at-risk children and youth? Well, then the counsel of the Pentecost story is for us to make sure that we as individuals and as a church we are indeed dreaming big enough. Because it might be a calamity otherwise. And God doesn't want that either for you or for the abundant future where God is calling us to.