

## *Martin Luther King Sermon, 2007*

*Micah 6:6-8; Amos 5; Luke 10:25-37*

Rush Otey

Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

and then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

—Langston Hughes, 1951

It is appropriate and timely on this particular weekend for us to consider again the dream, birthed and rooted and grounded in Scripture, of people living together in peace, without animosity or discrimination or fear, a dream in which swords shall be transformed into plowshares and spears into garden tools.

First, we may be thankful and hopeful for the dream itself, that it still haunts us in many ways but always beckons us to be better human beings than we have been, better citizens of the world than we have been, better Christians than we have been. It is a blessing for me to be pastor of a congregation which keeps the dream alive, which welcomes all people regardless of ethnicity or age or nationality or gender orientation or economic class. On the front of our bulletin is an invitation which you have brought to life in so many wonderful ways—“to whosoever will come, this church opens wide her doors and offers her welcome in the name of Jesus Christ her Lord.” No church has to be. The church is the creation of God, part of God’s gift to the world for the healing and the repair and the future of the world. Sometimes we may say, “the children and youth are the future of the church;” but the church is always dependent upon the fidelity of each current adult generation and the responsiveness of leaders and members to the transcendent call of God to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and with one another.

There have been many times in American history when the dream was in danger of being forgotten or even extinguished. The Civil War of the mid 1800’s was perhaps the crucial period, and it was at great cost that the dream prevailed. But even after the civil war, how violently people held to their prejudices and misshapen ideologies of power! I hope some of the congregation, and some of the younger people in particular, will take the opportunity this week to watch “Eyes on the Prize,” a documentary of the civil rights movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s—violent times and frightening times, but maybe in the long run, redemptive times, too.

Many of us have read Tim Tyson’s *Blood Done Sign My Name*, the author’s

account of growing up as a Methodist pastor's son in Oxford, North Carolina in the 1950's and 60's. The pivotal event in the narrative was the murder of an innocent black youth by a white man who was friendly to the Ku Klux Klan and who subsequently was acquitted by an all white jury. I want to share with you two occasions regarding Tim Tyson and his book which just received the Graumeyer Prize in religion. In 2005 I was part of a small group of ministers who had breakfast with Tim Tyson here in Charlotte. What came through to me even more than in the book, was his memory of how terrifying it had been for him as a youth to be confronted with the irrational hostility of the white people of his hometown. Forty years later that memory was still vivid for him, and I am sure it is even more vivid for black persons who were victims of that hostility more often than not. The other thing was that Tim Tyson's father, Vernon, an otherwise unheralded Methodist pastor, displayed remarkable courage and gentleness and strength throughout his ministry. In fact, in the fall of 2005 when *Blood Done Sign My Name* was the book discussed by all students and faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, it was interesting that after the lecture, there was a much longer line of students to talk with Vernon Tyson, Tim's father, than with Tim himself. There is something utterly powerful and full of awe and grace, even at a great cost, when Christian faith is authentic and clear and stands for justice and for love.

In Charlotte, whatever strides have been made since the days of apartheid have been led by fairly ordinary and humble Christians and Jews and humanists and others who simply would not let go of the dream—Judge James McMillan, Julia Maulden, Harvey Gantt, Jack and Dolly Tate, Randy and Arline Taylor, Charles and Beryl Kraemer, Doug and Claudia Oldenburg, Carlyle and Elizabeth Marney, Joe and Joan Martin, Mike and Caroline Myers, George Thompson, Gene Owens, Tom and Jean Stockton, T. J. Reddy, Thomas Moore, Adeline and Jay Ostwalt, Mel and Eulada Watt, L. A. Ellis, Ernie Patterson, Charles Ratliff, Ruby Huston, Loy Witherspoon, Bonnie Cone, Michael Begley and others. We may not know their names, but we benefit daily and immensely from their sacrifices.

Even here at Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, I expect that our vitality of mission and service and social witness, alongside others in more than twenty community ministries, goes back to ministers such as Bob Ramey and Neil McMillan and Susan DeWyngaert, and Caroline Craig, and Elders and Deacons too numerous to name, who continue to surround us in the great cloud of witnesses, most of whom were unassuming yet full of love, and at heart, full of dreams. It is a miracle that the dream lives, and apart from the power of the Lord, it would not live. The dream is as old as Moses and the Exodus, as challenging as Amos and Micah and Isaiah, as difficult to behold as the crucifixion of Jesus, and as astonishing as the empty tomb.

This past autumn I have been part of a project sponsored by the interfaith group Mecklenburg Ministries called "The Souls of White Folks." (For more information contact the Rev. Maria Hanlin at [www.meckmin.org](http://www.meckmin.org)) The project gathers small groups of religious leaders (Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Unitarian) to consider the dream and also to reflect upon the corporate social issues of white privilege which still beset us here and across the nation. I was reminded of the all but forgotten work by Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). If any of us were asked about our hearts and our hopes, few would be avowedly racist in our responses. On the surface all people of good faith desire to live as people who accept

others based upon their character and not upon their skin color. However, social evil is an affirmation of the old theological notion of original sin—we are born into structures which are unjust and unfair, and but by grace we cannot escape them. Niebuhr observed decades ago that we participate in structures and systems which do things that no individual would devise or support. There is a strong and resilient web of cultural bias that continues to blind, bind and beset us.

For example, Thomas Hanchett, the Charlotte historian with the Levine Museum, has written a very interesting book about segregation in Charlotte (*Sorting Out the New South City*). Hanchett discovered that one reason the neighborhoods in Charlotte are racially segregated is because of practices begun in the 1940's and 1950's, supported by federal agencies and banks, which allowed for generous real estate loans to caucasians in predominantly caucasian areas, and no or highly restrictive loans in primarily black neighborhoods. If you were born black in Charlotte, such practices assured that your chances would not be high that you could ever live in Myers Park or South Charlotte, simply because there were huge legal and cultural and unspoken barriers to your ever becoming a property owner anywhere in the city. Some doors just did not open to black persons, and these same doors opened readily for white persons. In fact, as our church officers were recently working to lift a deed restriction regarding our use of the property we have just acquired on the corner of Selwyn Avenue and Hassell Place, I learned that one of the original deed restrictions was that the property could never be sold to persons who were not caucasian. (That was from the 1940's, next door to the sanctuary!)

Another illustration of the immoral society occurred during the urban renewal efforts in the same period following World War II. Maybe you read something about this in the *Charlotte Observer*? Have you ever wondered why the trajectory of Independence Boulevard/Highway 74 South is like it is—an arc, veering slightly upward from the city and then angling eastward and then south? Hanchett observed that it was to avoid high density traffic in the affluent caucasian Dilworth and Myers Park neighborhoods. The straightest and shortest distance between uptown Charlotte and Monroe would have been down Providence Road or Park Road or Selwyn Avenue, but instead, Independence Boulevard was expanded—the road bisected the predominantly black neighborhood known as Brooklyn, and a major piece of Charlotte's black history was decimated. This was in the 1940's, when black citizens had neither vote nor voice.

The “Souls of White Folks” project included a couple of assignments which I want to share with you. One was for us to try to remember the first time in our lives when we realized we were white. This proved to be more difficult and more painful than we expected. Many people were in tears as they remembered incidents from their childhood where their innocence was assaulted by a racist ideology into which they/we were born. The stories went something like this:

My family was privileged to have as a helper to my mother an African American woman, Elizabeth. She would come to our home several days a week, assisting with housecleaning and cooking and child care and whatever else needed to be done. We children loved her dearly, for she was a guide and a constant companion and shepherd to us. When my brother was born, Elizabeth had been present more than usual in order to aid in my mother's recovery from a difficult pregnancy. I remember one evening, after Elizabeth had taken me to play in the nearby park. We were getting ready to have

dinner. I exclaimed to my parents, “Elizabeth and I had a great time swinging and riding the merry go round and sliding down the sliding board—I want to sit by her at dinner so we can tell you all about it!” After a silence, one of my parents said, “Elizabeth can’t sit beside you. She will eat in the kitchen as always.” “But why not?” “When you get older, you will understand that this is the way things are, this is the way things have to be.” Well, I am now a lot older, and I still don’t understand.

Another painful personal memory was recalled:

When I was eleven years old, I was a member of the school safety patrol. There was a summer camp for safety patrol members held down in South Georgia during the stifling and gnat-infested heat of July. When we boarded the un-air conditioned school bus to go to the camp, we were handed a box lunch for the journey. The lunch for some reason included a pressed-meat sandwich. We didn’t like pressed meat under any circumstances, but on this day, after a few hours in the paper sacks on the floor of the bus, the mayonnaise had begun to turn green. We were smart enough to eat only the potato chips and cookies! But, human beings being what we are, one of the boys thought of another use for the pressed, rancid meat sandwiches. All along the highway through Middle and South Georgia, there were black persons walking. They quite likely were simply on their way to fetch water from the well behind the white people’s houses, since their own sharecropper dwellings had no water sources. Several of the bus riders collected the sandwiches. And the sandwiches became missiles, hurled at the black sharecroppers along the side of the road, along with the commonplace racial epithets. I remember that two Georgia State Troopers were on the bus, advisors for the summer camp. They said nothing, did nothing, to stop this. (And neither did I, who had just completed confirmation class and knew better.) And so, some years later, it was no surprise to me that much of what passed for law enforcement, from the FBI to local authorities in the Southland (and most ministers and Christians I knew), often “saw nothing” when civil rights workers were beaten or murdered. I began to know in my heart then that whenever race is the subject, for me there must be repentance both from what I have done and what I have left undone. And later on, when I was sixteen and playing in an integrated rhythm and blues band, I received some of what I deserved when the KKK threatened and chased us simply for getting together and playing music!

When was the first time you realized you are white? Chances are it was a time when the immoral society confronted your deepest morality. The other assignment was to meet with a person who is African American and discuss his or her experiences and encounters with white privilege. This was difficult in that many participants, even in 2006, did not have an African American friend or acquaintance with whom this kind invitation could be extended, with whom this kind of deep and possibly excruciating conversation could occur freely and openly. Whether or not we caucasians can or want to admit it, unspoken prejudices still abound and hurt our neighbors each day. Our “souls of white folks” group heard this clearly from our individual conversations and also in a group meeting with a number of African American clergy who let us know that the smell of rancid meat sandwiches is not yet gone.

What happens to a dream deferred?

We are thankful that by the power and mercy of the Lord, the dream is not dead. There may be wondrous and awe-filled and dread-filled experiences ahead of us as we continue on our way to the Promised Land.

One arena which deserves our concentrated attention in these days is the need for large amounts of affordable housing in our city. According to Fred Kelly in the *Charlotte Observer*,

Mecklenburg County Commissioners on Tuesday heard details of a study that suggests leaders (should) subsidize affordable housing for the homeless instead of putting them in shelters. Last month, a coalition of social service agencies endorsed the plan designed to end chronic homelessness in 10 years.

A 2005 report showed Charlotte needs more than 11,000 affordable housing units for families earning less than \$16,000 a year. The report said it would take nearly \$800 million to build enough units over the next 10 years just to cut the shortage in half. (Fred Kelly, "Family Inspires Help for Homeless," *Charlotte Observer* 1/10/07).

Now that's a lot of money, but it is attainable. Just think—thirty years ago there was no Habitat for Humanity in Charlotte or anywhere else to speak of. But in Charlotte, if we stacked the Habitat homes on top of one another, the Habitat Homes would form a tower which would dwarf any skyscraper on the cityscape! The dream lived then, and it is still alive—though too often and always sadly deferred.

What a difference it would make if the bankers, realtors, attorneys, political and religious and civic leaders, neighborhoods, ordinary citizens of Charlotte would put our heads and hearts together in addressing this urgent matter!

What happens to a dream deferred? I am so thankful to God that you are part of the answer instead of part of the problems, that we move on together longing to be recipients and bearers of the Good News, remembering as we travel the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus said, "Who proved to be neighbor to the wounded man?" And the lawyer, a bright person for sure, answered, "The one who showed mercy. The one who had compassion. The one who stopped and stooped to care."

What happens to a dream deferred? I have a dream—yes, I have a dream this morning with Jesus. And so do you!