

Micah 6:1-8; Romans 13.1-7; Matthew 5:1-12

Prayer: Loving God, you are King, and to you we pledge our fidelity, our loyalty, our hearts, our lives. We come to this place to worship you as the Ultimate Reality in the universe. Give us the courage to stand up and be your dreamers within this world. Give us a vision of your Kingdom so that we may live and long for your rule as the revealed Lord of all. In your holy name we come to you. Amen.

How does a Christian exist within a pagan Empire? That's the question that faces Paul and these Roman converts. And, quite honestly, it's the same question we face today.

There are some today who hear Paul tell the Romans to patriotically accept whatever the Empire offers to society. Be subject to it, they say. Such people quickly point out that Paul says, "for rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended."

They use Paul's own words to lecture us, "Just be lawful and you will have nothing to fear from the Empire."

The problem with that sentiment is that it's just not true. Perhaps those words are true if you look like me. White. Male. Older. Protestant. Financially independent. But we know that such words are not true for many others in society.

Through the Landing I've become friends with many African American people. And if I told them to "just be lawful and then they will have nothing to fear," they would scoff at my naivete -- my ignorance about being black in America.

Every one of the black mother's, whom I've asked, have told their young sons to never argue with a police officer, never make any sudden movements, always keep their hands visible. Because these mothers know that being, Black, Male, Younger, perhaps Muslim, and Poorer is a dangerous thing to be in an Empire. All of the African American people I talk to have family and friends who've been shot to death in the city streets of Akron, often by the police. All of the refugees I know tremble at the idea of talking to a police officer.

Paul understands this reality. He understands the danger people live in even when they're law abiding citizens. He's been beaten by the authorities. He's suffered because of his faith. Listen to what he says in 2 Corinthians 11.

I've worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. ²⁶ I've been constantly on the move. I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles (i.e. Roman authorities); in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I've labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I've known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I've been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul has suffered at the hands of the Jewish authorities and the Roman authorities. He understands that those authorities will eventually kill him too, just as they did Jesus.

No, Paul can't mean, just accept the *status quo*. He can't mean to tell oppressed people to just take their imaginary beatings in silence and move on.

I was pondering such thoughts this week when Arbogast's sermon from last Sunday came into my inbox. And I thought, "Ah, that's better than anything I can write." And so, I asked his permission to read it to you.

"Foolishness"
Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan

By the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
February 3 & 4, 2020

Arbogast preaches:

I went to Memphis, Tennessee, last week. I went with friends. We were there for music. But we found much more.

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On Wednesday morning, we walked down Second Street for eight blocks. Then we angled onto St. Martin Street. One block later, we turned onto Huling Avenue. Finally, we made a left onto Mulberry Street. And there it was. Not music. No, not music. No, only the echo of a single gunshot. For there it was. The second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel, the place where Martin Luther King Jr. fell. It took my breath away.

Down on street level, there's a granite memorial. Words of Scripture are carved into it. From Genesis 37: "They said one to another, Behold, here cometh the dreamer . . . Let us slay him . . . and we shall see what will become of his dreams." (Gen 37.19-20) That took my breath away, too.

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. WAS A DREAMER. He dreamed of a future in which his children would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He dreamed of a world in which all people would live in freedom and peace. In other words, he dreamed of the Kingdom of God. We share that dream with him.

You see, the point of our Christian faith, the hope of our faith, is not our own personal salvation through our personal Savior. No, the hope of our Christian faith is that the Kingdom of God will be established here on earth just as it is in heaven. Yes, we hope to have a place in that Kingdom. And by God's grace, we will have a place in that Kingdom. But it's the Kingdom itself we dream of. And that's a dream we share with our dear, departed brother Martin.

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MARTIN'S DREAM WAS OUTLANDISH. Martin's dream was foolish even. Think about the long story of black America. It began with the Middle Passage and death. Then came plantations and beatings, emancipation and the Klan, Jim Crow and lynching.

With that story, what hope could there ever be for a civil rights movement? In the face of firehoses and attack dogs, of bombs and bullets, what hope could there ever be for a non-violent civil rights movement?

For fifteen years, Martin's dream, his foolish dream, was on a collision-course with reality. And on that balcony in Memphis, reality won. Or so it seemed. So it seemed.

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But Martin's dream was a Kingdom dream. It was a Jesus dream. And by the mercy of God, one day that dream will become a reality. That's the hope of our Christian faith. Martin himself put it best. Here's what he wrote:

Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise-up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”¹ There’s something in the universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.” (Bryant in 1873)

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!



EVEN SO, I WAS PRETTY DISCOURAGED when we Uberred away from the Lorraine Motel last Wednesday. I wondered if our Kingdom dream is a self-delusion, a form of foolishness.

But that night I read Psalm 136. That’s the one that says “for his mercy endures forever.” Says it twenty-six times. Well, Psalm 136 makes a claim, a big claim: that from creation to consummation, the mercy of God is constant; that from beginning to end, the mercy of God is constant.

Notice, though, that God’s mercy is constant, not instant. So, yes, as the psalm says, by his mercy God delivered Israel from Egypt. But that was only after 400 years of slavery. Yes, the arc of the moral universe is long. Too long, we would say. Sometimes 400 years too long! But by the hand of God, that arc does bend toward justice. And there will be justice. The Kingdom of God will be established on this earth, just as it is in heaven. Which is what we pray for. Which is what we hope for. Which is what we work for.



WITH OUR BROTHER MARTIN, WE HAVE A DREAM, A KINGDOM DREAM. Jesus sketches it for us in the Beatitudes. In this dream, the poor are blessed. In this dream, the beaten-down are blessed. In this dream, the powerless are blessed. And in this dream, people love justice and mercy and holiness. They labor long and hard. And they give birth to peace.



The Lorraine Motel has been incorporated into the National Civil Rights Museum. Last Wednesday, the exhibits there took my breath away again and again. I was amazed by how many people worked together so hard, for so long, against so much resistance.

The world around them called them fools and dismissed them. The world around them heaped ridicule on them and unleashed violence against them. They were powerless nobodies. Nevertheless, they persisted. And segregation was banished from schools and from buses and from lunch counters. The Civil Rights Act was passed. And the Voting Rights Act was passed. Because people in the movement worked for what they prayed for. And they did it in the power of the Spirit and in the light of the Gospel.



YOU SEE, AT THE HEART OF THE MOVEMENT WAS THE CHURCH. At the heart of the movement was Christian faith. At the heart of the movement was Christ. Richard Wright put it this way: “Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows.”

So what we had in the civil rights movement were people who dreamed of God’s Kingdom. What we had were people who prayed for God’s Kingdom. What we had were people who worked for God’s Kingdom. At great cost, they became fools for Christ. In the face of the powers of this world, they

¹ Theodore Parker preached in 1853: Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

pledged their allegiance to the true King, to the King of kings and the Lord of lords, to Jesus Christ. And the arc of the moral universe did bend a little more toward justice.

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IN THE CHURCH, WE PRAY, “YOUR KINGDOM COME ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN.” So we’re praying for the dream. And what we pray for we work for. What we pray for we work to build in the power of the Spirit and in the light of the Gospel. That’s what it means to follow Jesus. To act for justice. To show mercy. To seek the Kingdom first – even in the face of Empire.

That may make us look like dreamers, like fools even. Because we are out of step with the world, because we are out of step with what passes for reality. “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

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Friends, hold on to the dream. Pray for the dream. Work for the dream. Live the dream. No matter what the world says, no matter what popular opinion says, no matter what the unwritten rules of polite society say, no matter what the unwritten rules of prison culture say, live the dream. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. [Live the Kingdom of God, and Long for the Kingdom of God.]

Live the dream and hold on to these words of Jesus: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” (Matthew 5:11-12)

Glory and thanks be to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit