

“Do You Have a Dream?”
A Sermon by Paulo Gustavo França
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
22 August 2004
Text: Luke 13:10-17

“And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”
(Luke 13:16 – NRSV)

Prayer

May only the Word of God be preached
And may only the Word of God be heard here this morning.
Amen!

I know it is a tradition at Fairmount Church during the summer for pastors to preach on specific topics that are suggested by the congregation. Since you, the congregation, get to pick the topic of the week, this series of sermons is also known as **“YOU ASKED FOR IT.”** I really think this is a creative and exciting way for pastors and church members to engage each other in theological, philosophical and sociopolitical dialogue. Now, having said all that, I feel compelled to tell you that my sermon this morning does not deal with any one of the topics suggested for the summer. Actually when I was considering what title to choose for today’s sermon, I thought I could introduce it this way: **“YOU HAVE NOT ASKED FOR IT, BUT YOU WILL HAVE IT ANYWAY: DO YOU HAVE A DREAM?”** However, such a title would not be consonant with the democratic nature of the Presbyterian Church, would it? So I chose to leave you with an open question: **“DO YOU HAVE A DREAM?”** – Which, by the way, I hope will not sound so vague or open by the end of the worship service.

Today’s sermon arises from my increasingly perplexing awareness that many of us might be allowing the complexities and challenges of today’s world to weigh on us to such an extent that we are willing to relinquish many of our rights and freedoms to feel safer as individuals. Needless to say, this can be a very dangerous path for us to tread.

After reading the article published in the local newspaper last Sunday, which revealed the lack of political engagement shared by many voters in the state of Ohio, I was very disturbed. Perhaps my sense of uneasiness with the news has to do with my own life experience. I lived the first 18 years of my life under a military dictatorship and most Brazilians are very aware of what can happen to a society when it is stripped of its freedom of speech, assembly,

association, privacy and of its right to oppose government policies freely and publicly. We know what happens when a powerful central government takes control of people's lives and choices. That is exactly the reason why last Sunday's article causes so much distress to those of us who believe and care for true democratic values. As you know, the democratic system will only be as strong and healthy as the trust the people have in its validity; for one of the most vital principles of any democratic society is that the people, and not the government, are the ultimate authority. When voters' confidence in the democratic system begins to erode or fail, the whole system is undermined. Without the vigilant and engaged participation in the political process, Americans run the risk of giving up their rights to have a voice in the next elections. And if voters are not engaged in the presidential elections, then what kind of democracy are we living in?

This past week, I spent some time reading about the expectations that Americans have concerning the upcoming presidential elections. Even though every one agrees that this year's race to the White House is one of the most contentious and decisive presidential elections this country has seen in a generation, a large number of voters remain unenthusiastic about it or show, at best, a tepid interest in the elections. There seems to be an overall dissatisfaction with the presidential campaigns and many voters say that neither one of the candidates' political platforms have succeeded in grabbing their attention. Others have expressed concern about the touch-screen voting machines, which will leave no paper trail. They fear that votes may not be counted accurately or, even worse, that an electoral foul play could be written into the system's software in order to favor one presidential candidate over the other. Therefore, they remain deeply suspicious of the political system as a whole. Apparently some voters are more concerned about national security than any other topic on the political agenda. All they really want is a strong president in the White House who will not hesitate to go to war to fight terrorism and other recalcitrant nation-states if need be. To carry on this fight against an elusive enemy, these voters are willing to forgo many of their civil rights and liberties to give the government free rein to keep this country safe.

As far-fetched as some of these opinion polls may sound to you, they do point to a very troubling reality and that is: **many Americans feel disenfranchised by the political system and many voters are mistakenly assuming that their vote may not make a difference anymore.** If you add to that sentiment of alienation from the political realm the vivid memories of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which appear to be portents of greater evils that might still be perpetrated against this nation, it is not difficult to understand why so many Americans are willing to stand by and let the democratic principles that have been the pillars of this nation be superseded by practices that undercut the very essence of any true democracy. This sense of disenfranchisement, alienation and fear was clearly expressed in a bumper sticker that I saw on a pick-up truck the other day that read somewhat like this: **"Where are we all going? And what**

am I doing in this hand-basket anyway?” The disconcerting and overwhelming feeling that says to some of us that we may not be heading toward a very promising bright future is keeping people immobilized and disengaged from the democratic process. People are so worried about their own lives and needs that they cannot see what is at stake in this election. We are not looking at the bigger global picture!

There is an old adage that says (that), **“Fear makes man [humanity] believe the worst.”** It is absolutely incontestable that many Americans, who are discontent with the political decisions that have curtailed many of their civil rights and liberties, are willing to accept them for fear of dangers that they believe come primarily from outside the United States. What their fear does not allow them to take into account is the danger that may come from within if citizens voluntarily and uncritically give up their rights to grant unchecked powers to the government. And one of our most important rights is the freedom to choose who will make our laws and govern our country. Without having free and democratic elections, our other freedoms have very limited value. So why are so many Americans reluctant to be involved in civic life? Why has this political apathy gripped as much as “a fifth of the American population?”¹ I cannot answer that question for you, but there is one thing that I know: **WE ALL NEED TO RECLAIM OUR HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE.** And in order to do that, we must be engaged in the political arena as responsible citizens and as people of faith.

One way that we might reclaim our hope is by looking back into our past and find in the strength of the great men and women who built this nation our vision for a better future. People like Martin Luther King Jr. who believed that it was possible to dream about an integrated America, where people would not be discriminated because of their skin color or ethnic origin. I think it is quite amazing that in the 1960's, an African-American Protestant pastor would emerge from the ghetto of exclusion to change the social fabric of the United States with his dream. And King's non-violent dream was **“to hew out of the mountain of despair [and segregation] a stone of hope”**² for the entire nation. He refused to be isolated in the abyss of self-pity and despair where life was guided by feelings of resentment, revolt and hopelessness. King was convinced that forgiveness could change every enemy into a friend, that hope was hidden in despair and that redemption was possible despite the great sins of humankind. So this young pastor dared to have a dream that was not about the liberation of African-Americans only. His vision for the future of the United States extrapolated the plight of African-Americans to include all Americans and, indeed, the whole world. He believed in the words of the Declaration of Independence that so wisely states: **“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with Certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”** So King went out into the streets and spoke of his dream of

¹ The Plain Dealer, Aug. 15 2004 – “Who doesn't vote in Ohio? Data Revealing” by Julia Carr Smyth

² Martin Luther King Jr.'s Address in Washington DC, On Aug. 28, 1963.

equality, peace and justice in the public squares, in the marketplace and in churches across the United States. His discourse delivered in Washington DC in 1963 “**I HAVE A DREAM**” marks a milestone in the history of this country and its reach has gone far beyond the borders of the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 turned the United States into a real democracy and there is no doubt that Martin Luther King’s dream must continue to inspire all of us who believe in the equality of all human beings and in the unalienable rights of humanity.

So my question to you this morning is: **DO YOU HAVE A DREAM?** Do you have a dream for the United States and a dream for the world that is not limited by your immediate needs and interests? Do you have a dream that will encourage you to take what you believe to be true about God and humanity into the world?

I confess that I read about the 1960’s with a touch of nostalgia. Even though I was born in 1968 and never experienced the energy of that decade, I read about it and wish that we, people of the 21st century, had that same courage and mettle. It seems that in that decade people could dream dreams that transcended their immediate needs and interests. Their involvement in civic life was not conditioned by economic factors or driven by fear alone. That whole generation wanted to build a better world for all humanity. Some of my friends say that there was something in the water in the 60’s that made people dream these dreams of freedom and justice for all. Across the world there were men and women marching down the streets to protest the abuse of human rights, to make demonstrations against wars, to demand that nations learned to live in peace and to ask for more humane government policies. From Europe, to Latin America and in the United States, students and intellectuals, housewives and religious people were joining hands to dream about a new world. Have we lost that visionary spirit? I hope not.

I certainly hope that the Church, in particular, may still have in its memory the dream of a new creation completely transformed by God’s message of love and forgiveness. Interestingly when we look at the gospel reading for this morning, we encounter Jesus at a synagogue on the Sabbath Day. Much like you and I, he went to his faith community on the Lord’s Day to worship and to be nourished spiritually. However Jesus was not the kind of man who would allow the circumstances of life to keep him from being fully engaged in his community at large. Whenever he saw the opportunity to be God’s instrument in somebody else’s life he seized that opportunity without any hesitation. On this Sabbath Day, Jesus reaches out to a crippled woman who had been bound by her disease for 18 years. By healing that woman on the Sabbath Jesus knew that he was going against the religious law. As a faithful and practicing Jew, he was fully aware that the commandment to keep the Sabbath was at the very heart of the Jewish Law and he could certainly appreciate the concern of the ruler of the synagogue for the sanctity of that day. So Jesus questioned not the validity of the Law, but how it was being applied. He wanted to show the religious people of his time that the

understanding of the Law is as important as it is application. For Jesus, the Law was not just an instrument to remind humanity of our shortcomings and to restrain us from doing what is evil. Jesus saw in that moment when that crippled woman dared to approach him on the Sabbath Day the opportunity to teach all of us that the Law also exists to teach us to be better human beings, to include the excluded, to love the unlovable, to make the world a better place for every human being. And the greatest Law of all laws is the law of love, which has to have a bearing on everything we do and say as a community of faith.

Presbyterians have understood this important pedagogical aspect of the law and Reformed Christians have consistently affirmed that the law illumines and motivates Christians in well-doing. This conviction that the law can indeed teach us to become better human beings, that it can indeed help us to see beyond our limitations and own sinfulness, has encouraged Presbyterians to look for an unqualified link between our faith and our daily actions beyond the walls of the church. Our historic engagement in the social-political realm stems in part from this theological conviction that God uses our lives to establish civic justice for the good of God's entire creation. In this light, participation in the political process is not simply a matter of choice, but it is our calling.

Over the centuries, the Church has fulfilled a mission of singular importance for humanity and I believe that the Church still has a determinative role in the struggle for world peace and human rights in this new century. I do not want to deny that, at times, the Church has had a contradictory and ambiguous participation in the sociopolitical arena, unfortunately that is part and parcel of the Church's humanness. On the other hand, there is no doubt that historically the Church has managed to become a safe and sacred space where men and women have been able to meet together to have dreams about a world without violence, a world without famine, a world without segregation, a world without borders united by mutual respect and solidarity. In the 1960's, during the height of the repressive military dictatorship in Brazil, the Roman Catholic Church was instrumental to keep the dream of a free and democratic society alive in the hearts of Brazilians. When the political parties, the press and other civil associations could no longer act, the Church went against the oppressive law of the military régime and seized that historic opportunity to become an instrument for peace and social transformation in Brazil. Many priests paid a high price for their belief in freedom and many are still missing this day. But they accepted their calling willingly and with bravery.

Our calling today is to follow on the footsteps of Jesus. We cannot let the dream of freedom, justice and peace succumb to the calamities of war, death and injustice. The salvation proclaimed by Jesus is not some kind of other-worldly reality that we shall experience in the afterlife. Christianity believes in an all-embracing saving grace that is at work here and now as we engage in the sociopolitical process to tell the world that our understanding of a loving and caring God does make a difference in our community. If we want to live in a safe

and free world, we must look at the present that we are constructing now. If the present is pervaded by laws that undercut our democratic values and by fear and war, it is unlikely that the future will be peaceful and prosperous.

I hope we, at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, will dare to dream dreams that transcend our immediate self-interests. I hope that we will continue to be a church with open doors that offers people a sacred and safe social space where they are free to speak, disagree, talk about what is happening in the political realm and a church that encourage its members and friends to take back into the world the hope proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The hope that humanity may be set free from the diseases that cripple us and that destroy human relationships so we may stand straight up to see far beyond our comfort zones. Then we may be able to find in the strength of people like Martin Luther King the inspiration needed to motivate us to be wise participants in the political process, knowing that, as King said, **“CIVILIZATION AND VIOLENCE ARE ANTITHETICAL CONCEPTS. SOONER OR LATER ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD WILL HAVE TO DISCOVER A WAY TO LIVE TOGETHER IN PEACE, AND THEREBY TRANSFORM THE ELEGY [OF WAR] INTO A CREATIVE PSALM OF BROTHER- AND SISTERHOOD.”**³ May it be so.

AMEN!

The Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

³ Excerpt from Martin Luther King’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize.