

# **“Is It Time for a Little Revolution?”**

**Mark 6:1-13**

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In his book *To Dream Again* former Southeastern Seminary professor Bob Dale notes that Thomas Jefferson once said he hoped America would have a revolution every twenty years. He wasn't talking about overthrowing the government completely, open warfare, all that was a part of forming this nation, Dale says. He was identifying the need to redefine the American dream in each new generation.

Dale connects this idea to church life. This is the focus of his book. It's about doing the kind of dreaming or visioning we have been doing over the past year and half. And it is needed in every church. The gospel doesn't change but how we experience it and connect it with the world around us requires a bit of reimagining in each new generation.

Something similar can be said of Thomas Jefferson's, or as we were taught to say in Virginia, Mr. Jefferson's hope for this nation. The basic principles upon which America was founded have not changed nor should they, but how they are lived out in each new generation requires a bit redefining and reimagining, indeed sometimes even revolutionary thinking. But this has been the case since the very beginning.

Consider this claim of the Declaration of Independence made 239 years ago yesterday. “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.” “All men are created equal” is the claim and in 1776 this meant all *men*. Women were not equal under the law, they couldn't even vote until the 19th Amendment was adopted in 1920.

But the claim didn't apply to *all* men because men and women of African descent were held as slaves until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, they were bound by Jim Crow laws until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and in many ways we are still living with the long-term impact of the institution of slavery. Racism is a gift that keeps on giving!

Furthermore, how did the claim that “all men are created equal” apply to Native Americans in 1776? Were their rights to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness respected in the new experiment that became the United States of America? Or were they not treated like occupants of the Holy Land who were in the way when a wandering people leaving bondage in Egypt entered *their* land of milk and honey?

The claim of equality was genuine. The people who made this claim just didn't understand all that it implied. Like us, they were people of their time, but they were in touch with ideas or principles, dare we say even a Holy Wisdom, that were bigger than them and us. As a result, Jefferson's hope for a revolution every twenty years is profound. We must constantly reexamine the dream. Doing so is not act of treason, but one of patriotism; it is not a criticism but a high compliment.

Consider two petitions of the beloved patriotic hymn we have just sung. “America! America! God mend thine every flaw...” and “America! America! May God thy gold refine...” Both petitions assume that we have been richly blessed in this nation, but both petitions also assume that we are still flawed, unrefined, we still have work to do to live into the dream, the claim that all are created equal.

This seems like an appropriate way to think about Independence Day this year. The last several weeks have been jolting in our national life with not only the massacre in the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston but the burning of many Black churches, not all by arson, but some; not to mention what Bill Leonard has called the two thunderbolt decisions handed down by the Supreme Court in one week.

No matter how we feel about these issues, we are living in a time of much change, a time when American ideals are being reexamined and redefined. Questions are being asked about what the founders' claim that all men are created equal really means. Many are wondering whether it is time for a little revolution in the Jeffersonian sense.

The prior question in this context, however, is as to whether the church has a role in any of this. Some dive in head-first without asking any questions. Christian ideals should shape American ideals. If there is a revolution going on, of course, we need to be involved! Others

suggest restraint based on the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. Church and state must be separate in this nation. We have no business addressing public issues. And many, understandably, prefer that the church stick to personal faith concerns because the issues around us can be so divisive. We encounter the chaos everywhere else. Can't the church just be a place of refuge?

Well, diving in head-first has its advantages but there are risks involved, not to mention the very real 1st Amendment issues early Baptists like Roger Williams, Isaac Backus and John Leland fought for, not just on the basis of philosophical principles like Jefferson and Madison, but out of religious conviction. Genuine faith cannot be coerced, they maintained; it must be freely chosen; thus, the state must not in any way bless or establish any approach to faith. And the church should never seek establishment, if knows what is good for it. As the late African-American Baptist preacher Gardner Taylor put it, church and state need to be separate so that each can have some swinging room.

But we have that swinging room, which is to say that the 1st Amendment does not in any way imply that people of faith cannot speak to public issues. It guarantees the free exercise of religion in addition to prohibiting establishment. Care is called for, but loyalty to religious liberty does not preclude involvement in the public square. All of those early Baptists who fought for the separation of church and state weighed in publically on issues that mattered to them as we are free to do.

Theologically speaking, though, what part of the world does not belong to God and thus concern God's people? The argument that we should avoid all public issues because of their divisiveness sounds appealing, but again and again Jesus expresses concern for the world and sends us into it with a mission of love. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," he says in Matthew 28:19. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," he says in Acts 2:8. Again and again he tells us not to pull back and protect ourselves but to go into the world just like him.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus sends his disciples into the world to preach repentance, cast out evil and heal the sick. He sends them even though he knows they will face rejection, as he has faced rejection in his hometown. So much for the idea that faithful ministry

always produces harmonious results! Knowing that some will not welcome his disciples, Jesus tells them to wipe the dust off their feet and move on. It sounds harsh, but Jesus' focus is on getting the work done. Even he cannot perform miracles where people do not welcome him.

So, Jesus sends his disciples into the world with a mission, even knowing they will face resistance. The message for us is that we cannot simply remove ourselves from the world with all its struggles no matter how tempting it may be to do so. While we need times of refuge from the all the chaos around us, the purpose of this time is to empower us to live out our faith in a world that desperately needs our witness.

I have shared with some of you before these words of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Quaker thinker Thomas Kelly (*A Testament of Devotion*, p. 47).

Paradoxically, this total instruction proceeds in two opposing directions at once. We are torn loose from earthly attachments and ambitions – *contemptus mundi*. And we are quickened to a divine but painful concern for the world – *amor mundi*. He plucks the world out of our hearts, loosening the chains of attachment. And He hurls the world into our hearts where we and He together carry it in infinitely tender love.

Indeed. That is our calling.

So, how do we do this? How do we carry the world in our hearts with God? What is our mission and how does it relate to the revolution that is taking place? The disciples are sent to preach repentance, cast out evil and heal the sick. All three callings seem to apply to the struggles of our day, especially those that involve the matter of race.

Repentance is about change, not just a change of heart, but a change in how we live. And perhaps it begins with the church's willingness to name issues like race. A visitor last Sunday recalled growing up in a Baptist church in Alabama. She said that when a bomb exploded outside the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, killing 4 young girls and injuring many others, nothing was mentioned about this tragedy in her church. She is no

longer Baptist but was thankful to hear the Charleston shootings mentioned and addressed here last week, in a Baptist church. The first thing we need to repent from is our silence when others are hurting.

But there is more than silence, there are words and deeds that devalue our brothers and sisters. I have told some of you about an interracial couple at the church I served in Richmond who were friends as well as congregants, but who quit coming to church the last year we were there. We learned from them a year after we moved to Winston-Salem that the reason they quit coming was that church members went to Gardner's workplace and told him that he and his wife had no business doing things with Dana and me socially. Perhaps we had to be in church together across racial lines, but close friendships were just not appropriate, much less a mixed marriage. This was in 1998, not 1968.

There are some attitudes and behaviors from which we just need to repent. There is no place in Christian community for valuing people differently based upon the color of their skin. And to be clear, this is not just a black-white issue. Some of the current attitudes in public discourse toward Latinos and anyone who might be of Middle Eastern descent who is presumed to be Muslim and thus presumed to be a terrorist, as if all white, southern males should now be considered racists, are not worthy of anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus.

Casting out evil may seem dated. Jesus actually refers to unclean spirits and demons. Do we even believe in these today? But whether we believe in little creatures wandering about wreaking havoc, most of us do believe in evil, something more than the result of destructive human actions. What happened in the Holocaust, in Soviet Siberia, in the genocide of Rwanda – was evil. Racism, in the way it gets inside not only people but systems and structures, falls into this category.

It's difficult for those of us who have never been on the receiving end of this kind of prejudice to understand fully what it feels like. It is impossible really. But read the blog of CBF leader Ronald Fairley this week which you can find on the CBF website and it will give you some insight into the level of pain caused by systemic racism.

Fairley is African-American as are his sons and they attend a black church. He feels like the likelihood of attending a funeral for one of his

sons or being killed himself has increased and he is deeply troubled. He notes not only the Charleston shootings, but other shootings of black men, and he says he has openly cried for his sons several times this year.

He says he is not angry but when he experiences the kind of peace only God can provide about these matters, he may become angry. Perhaps he should have been all along because we have to do something to break the cycle of complacency. He asks how Christians can be the catalyst for transformation and reconciliation that we are called to be.

There are other ways to document the reality that racism is evil. We can document the impact with numbers and statistics. But personal stories like Ronald Fairley's are the most powerful documentation of all. We are called not only to proclaim repentance but to cast out evil.

And then, we are called to be about the work of healing. There is no simple answer here and we have made progress, but there is still work to do. Acknowledging our need is a good first step. Some claim there is no longer any racism in this country and I would concede that not every problem people identify as race-related is. But to suggest there is no racial bias is naive. You can't treat a physical illness until a person admits he/she is sick. So it goes with a social illness like racism.

Once we name the need, we must take action. I made a few suggestions last week about the kinds of things we might do together in an organized way. But there are also things we can do on our own, like just simple acts of kindness, treating everyone with respect, and choosing to speak up even when it is difficult to do so.

Consider this example from a church conference in my previous setting in the late 60's. People were up-in-arms because the staff had led the church to be involved in racial reconciliation. What pushed people over the edge was that the youth group did something terribly unsettling with an African-American church youth group. They went swimming together... It wasn't planned, it just happened after a joint meeting, and it seems like a small thing now, but in those days, it was scandalous!

During the heated exchange, some called for the staff to be fired for imposing their social agenda on the church. What changed the conversation was that a wonderful man I knew much later stood up and said he shared the views about "colored" people others had expressed,

and he didn't know how they felt, but deep down he didn't think his attitudes were pleasing to his Lord. He said believed the pastor and other leaders were just trying to help them do what God wanted them to do, and he thought they should try to do it.

It changed not just that meeting but the history of that church. It took courage, but often it does. Healing requires action, often courageous action.

Then, we are wise to anticipate resistance. We would like to believe that, if we are doing the right thing, we will create nothing but good feelings. But it didn't work this way for Jesus or his disciples. In fact, if they are the model, if we are not meeting resistance, we might ought to wonder whether we have attempted anything worth doing.

I think of 28 young white United Methodist ministers who served churches in Mississippi during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960's. They signed a statement affirming their commitment to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior who teaches that all people are brothers and sisters; champions justice, mercy and peace; defends the underprivileged and oppressed; and calls for repentance when we fall short of his standard. They were rejected in their churches. One was refused food in a restaurant, many received death threats, all had to leave their settings, wiping the dust off their feet. So it often goes with faithfulness.

But this is not the end of the story. A few years ago 13 of those Methodist ministers returned to Mississippi where they shared stories of rejection and fulfillment. Things have changed in Mississippi, though there is still work to do, and they were a part of that change.

How so and why? Well, while Jesus anticipates that the disciples will face resistance, he also sends them forth with authority. This doesn't mean they heal every disease and cast out all evil, overpowering all forms of resistance. It just means that their calling will ultimately be fulfilled, no matter what obstacles they face, because it is God's calling.

That is why the story about those Methodist ministers does not end with resistance and rejection and that is a good word for us to hold onto as we seek to honor God's calling today. We are sent forth to do work that will meet resistance, but we are given authority for this work, a kind of authority that cannot ultimately be overcome.