

“Unfulfilled Dreams”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Dr. King knew about all of the death threats, he knew about the challenges and so on this particular Sunday morning, he climbed the steps into the pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He stood there before the congregation of people that he knew and loved. They were the congregation of his father’s church. They watched him from the time he was a small child, like the little ones who were here this for the children’s moment. They watched Dr. King grow, they watched him get his education and become the symbol of the civil rights movement at that time.

As he got into the pulpit he would share with them in a way that he wouldn’t necessarily share with other groups or other churches. He was talking to his extended family. This sermon, if you listen to it in its entirety, is a little disjointed - sounds more melancholy. It seems almost as if Dr. King has trouble putting together words and phrases and thoughts together. He struggled. He’s struggling I think because, in some ways, as he’s giving this sermon, he’s trying to prepare his loved ones for the reality that what he’s starting he will not be able to end, for he will die soon.

He titled his sermon “Unfulfilled Dreams” and he begins it by talking about this Scripture passage from I Kings 8. Dr. King said, “This is of cosmic significance. Because this is the place [like I talked about last week] where God and Heaven become so close to earth that something transformative is about to take place. Heaven and earth combine and come together as one. And, in this place is the building and the discussion of the building of the Temple.”

And he said to the people at Ebenezer Baptist Church, “In so many places, the people of faith start something, but it takes someone else to end it. Prime example: The Scripture passage I read,” Dr. King said, “It was Solomon’s voice. He was talking about his father, David. David wanted to build the temple. God laid the foundation for David to start what was necessary. But David would not see that Temple built – only his son, Solomon.” And he said, “Each one of you will have your moment where you will have to start something, but many of you will never see it fulfilled. It’s yours to start, and then you hand it over to God and let God’s spirit work and move, and watch your children, and your children’s children, and maybe someone else entirely to fulfill it, because it’s not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about the ministry of God through Jesus Christ, making a difference over time.”

You can imagine Dr. King saying that, knowing that he was probably going to die shortly. He was preparing them.

(Excerpts played of Dr. King’s speech.)

One of the great agonies of life is constantly trying to finish that what is unfinishable. That’s what he [Dr. King] was trying to get to the congregation.

I have a little test for you. I was reading a book written by a teacher who was talking about the educational system these days. Frankly, it was a little depressing. He is a high

school teacher and he says he starts every class year with the same question: What's half of eight? Four. Ok, that's the first answer. It's a good answer. It's an accurate answer, but, it's not the only answer. Think a little bit more. What's half of eight? Yea, you could say two plus two, but let's get away from math for a minute. What's half of eight? E, I, and half of G. Now we're going somewhere. What's half of eight? Two zeros. Just cut it [the numeral 8] in half. Now we're thinking a little differently, out of the box. What's half of eight? Two threes, by slicing [the numeral] 8 down the middle. If you only stop at "four" you missed a whole other way of thinking about what half of eight is.

When it comes to religion, when it comes to faith, a lot of times when asked the question, "What's half of eight?" we say, "four." And, good, we've got the answer, and we leave. We memorize the doctrine, we recognize the dogma. We come up with the easiest first answer. And then we think we've got it.

But, Dr. King was never satisfied with the first answer. He gave us a whole other way of looking at the world. That's everything from "What's half of eight?" to "What is love?" to "How does God relate to the world?" All of these things. But he was never satisfied with the first answer. He always makes us dig and reflect differently. Only someone who would play that game would be able to take on civil rights, challenges us on what love means, who is my neighbor, and all of those other fundamental changes that would require us to make a difference in this world.

How many pastors from Baptist churches would stand up and use examples? Yet this is what he did in that sermon of shattered dreams, in order to talk about the fulfillment of civil rights?

How many Baptist preachers would use Gandhi as an example of what a Christian ought to do? He made us look at what was beyond the norm to something greater. He used Gandhi, over and over again, as his model of what non-violent love would look like. He would preach to his congregation, week after week, on what Gandhi did about non-violence. Dr. King said, "If you are the minority, violence is always lost for you, because the majority is stronger and better able to win." He said, "What you have to do is shame the powerful."

He gave Gandhi as an example of how he [Gandhi] walked across the entire country of India and then broke the law in a dumb way, by making salt - half of eight, but not four - a whole strange, creative, interesting way of breaking the law, to show how stupid the law was. And that stupid law showed how all the other rules were: the diminishment of the Indian people, the diminishment of minorities groups, the inequality of different religious groups - whether they be Muslim or Hindu - stupidity. He took half of eight and made it two zeros and two 3s and E, I and half of H. All of a sudden they could not look at it as "four" any more.

He and Gandhi embraced, and Christianity changed forever. Dr. King went on in his sermon and talked about Woodrow Wilson. And, he said that the League of Nations was started in 1919 and formulated in 1920. Woodrow Wilson died in February 1924. He [Wilson] wouldn't see it at its prime - at its greatness. He also wouldn't see it when it folded and became unworthy, and when it did not stop World War II.

It doesn't matter if everything we do is a success, it matters that we're trying for a worthy cause.

Dr. King goes on to talk about the Apostle Paul. He [Paul] had some many triumphs and so many sufferings all in one human life. And, he [Dr. King] said, he [Paul] wanted to get to Spain before he died, and proclaim that Gospel in Spain. But, where did Paul end up? He ended up in a prison cell in Rome.

(Scott shows a copy of Rembrandt's painting of Apostle Paul.)

All you have to do is look into the eyes and the gaping mouth of the Apostle and know what Rembrandt was trying to do.

Your life can even feel like a failure sometimes, and God can turn it into a success.

I believe Dr. King was trying to talk to himself that morning, standing before his family at Ebenezer Baptist Church. He was admitting to them that he was hurting, and that he was lost and scared. He was worried that the Temple that he was trying to be the symbol for would not work. He was reminding himself in front of all of them that it doesn't matter what Martin – Michael – does, it matters how *God* takes what Martin does.

Your failures *after* your lifetime can become successes. You don't know what God's going to do, over the long haul, with your life. Building a temple of peace is challenging, and it hurts.

Dr. King continues by saying, “the reason that it hurts is that there are civil wars going inside each one of our souls. Each one of us fights. We want to do good and somehow, because of our sin, every time we try to do good it seems to come out wrong.”

“But,” he said. “Don't worry. What you try to do and it doesn't work, God can take that imperfect 'you' and turn it into something better. But,” Dr. King said, “I know how you feel. Just like the Apostle Paul, the good that I could [do], I do not; and the evil that I would not, *that* I do. Look at how God took Paul, who did more misguided things – who was not a perfect person. He was a stubborn, ornery guy. And, God made him the real transformative person in the continuing rope of the early church.”

King continues, “God does not judge us by the separate incidents in our lives, or the separate mistakes that we make, but by the total bent of our lives. Don't let that one mistake. Those few simple moments detract from what God has in store for you.

“We are frail and we will fall, but we must never be stopped.”

(Excerpts of Dr. King's speech are played.)

The responsibility that we have as adults as we teach our young people is that we are called to work toward continuing our faith; then we are on the right road.

How do we know that we are on the right road, the road that God has called us to be? Sometimes you think you are, or do you worry that you are on the right road. Or, like Dr.

King said are you on I-80 when you should be on I-78? They sing songs about that – “At the Crossroads.” As a Christian, and as Dr. King lifts up in his sermon, the characteristics of the right road are: Are you praying for direction? Because, *you* will never know, but *God* will always know. Is there potential for improving people’s lives on that road? Because, if it’s all about you, you are on the wrong road. Does this road bring out the best in you or is it tearing you down? Is this road worthy of your sacrifice?

Dr. King says each one of you is going to be sacrificing – you are never going to get through your life unscathed. You are going to stand and fall for something. Is what you are doing worthy of the sacrifice?

Dr. King knew sacrifice. He believed - and we all believe - he was right – that what he was sacrificing for was worthy of him. The same could be said for Gandhi. It’s true. And for Jesus, the Christ. He gave his life. And we can all agree it was worthy.

Are you going to take the easy road, or the road less traveled? Dr. King said, faith is taking the first step, even when you can’t see the whole staircase, and trust that God is the one who will guide you, to a sacrificial, *worthy* place. Trust in God. We can only see a little bit down the road, but God can see around every curve.

As I was saying to the children, we need to get on our knees and pray, and trust that our love is deep enough – loving – to be worthy of the sacrifice we will inevitably make. And, it will be more profound if we do it together: Black, White, Asian, Native American. All of us. Together. Arm-in-arm. Every day.

Amen.