

I HAVE A DREAM, PART 2

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

There is a community named Dreamland on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. It sounds like a lovely spot, doesn't it? Sadly, that is not the case. Dreamland is a dilapidated trailer park that sits on the side of the road next to a cornfield. There are chicken coops propped up next to clotheslines and open areas with scrub grass that the residents keep hoping will be turned into a playground by the landlords. The sewage system is in need of repair. The people who live in Dreamland, however, are dreamers. They have come from other lands to claim the American dream. They are Latino poultry workers, so life is not a dream; life is about hard, grueling, dangerous work.

With Covid, that work has become even more dangerous. Early on, poultry plants were a major source of infection in Virginia. At one plant nearly 20% of the tests came back positive and the numbers of sick people skyrocketed as workers brought the virus home to their families living in multigenerational homes with little or no place to quarantine and inadequate water supplies to keep hands washed. Latinos make up 10% of the state's population, but 30% of its coronavirus cases. This is Dreamland, Virginia.

Joseph in today's reading might have felt that he too was in his own Dreamland. Joseph, you might remember, was the bratty little brother, who had dreams in which his eleven big brothers all bowed down to him. He was his father's spoiled favorite and hated by his brothers. To kill his dreams, they considered murdering him, but settled on selling him off into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt, where he came to great power and influence in the Egyptian government because of his ability to interpret dreams. The bratty little brother turned out to be the one who would give food to his needy, starving family, when they bowed down before him. A dream come true.

Ah, but whose dream was it? Between the time that Joseph dreamed his adolescent dreams of being honored by his family and the time that dream was realized, he had come to believe that God was in the midst of his life and had given his life meaning and purpose. He rightly recognized that Pharaoh's dreams were from God. The dreams were a warning that allowed Egypt to prepare for a coming famine, so its people would not starve. And, it turned out, so that Joseph's family also would not starve. Joseph came to see that all those dreams—his, Pharaoh's, and the others he interpreted in Egypt, were all part of God's larger dream.

I believe our Dreamer God has large purposes for this time, for this place, for us, too. Now I don't pretend to know the mind of God, but God has given us plenty of clues about divine dreams for God's children, even in this story of a fractured and dysfunctional family. Here are three that I found.

First, there is forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph, hated and sold into slavery, had every reason to seek revenge and the power to do so. Instead, he provided for his

brothers and their families; he received them with love; he embraced and forgave them. He broke the vicious cycle of fear and hate and violence that they had initiated. The Dreamer behind Joseph's dreams, has dreams of God's children living together in harmony and in peace.

Second, there is abundance, food enough for all. Because Joseph grasped the meaning behind the dreams of Pharaoh, for seven years, food was stored up and saved against the day when the seven years of famine would come. Because of his stewardship and the utterly gracious purpose of the Dreamer behind the dreams, Egyptians and Israelites, both, had enough to eat, enough to know security, enough to live in peace. The Dreamer dreams of shalom for all God's children.

Third, God's purposes are worked out in concrete human history through the actions of real people. Although during his time of slavery and imprisonment, Joseph surely didn't see it, he came to see God at work even in that horrific situation. "God sent me before you to preserve life," he assured his brothers.ⁱ Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, imagines Joseph saying to his brothers, "I became aware that a larger purpose was at work, transcending these petty quarrels, looking far into the future, and I became aware that my life was more than the sum of my little fears, my little hates, and my little loves."ⁱⁱ

If God's dream is for God's children to live together in harmony and peace, if God's dream is that there be abundance for all, if God's dream is worked out in human history through the actions of real people, then what might that look like in our time of social upheaval when our sisters and brothers are crying for justice?

Hear these stories.

The first is a story of two individuals, Ernest Skelton, an appliance repair business owner in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and Caroline Brock, a customer. Ernest is Black. Caroline is white. Ernest went to Caroline's home to fix her washer and dryer on a day when the news was filled with the protests following George Floyd's murder. Caroline wondered what would it be like to be a Black man coming into white people's homes on such a day, so she asked Mr. Skelton about his experiences with racism. For whatever reason, maybe it was the way she asked, maybe it was because no one had ever asked before, maybe he just needed to vent—for whatever reason, he told her. He told her about the random stops by local police, about the difficulty in finding jobs even though he has two degrees, about the discrimination and mistrust of his own customers. Caroline was shocked and moved by what he told her. It was the first time she had heard what it is like to be Black in America, her first glimpse into the lived reality of systemic racism. With Ernest's permission, Caroline shared their conversation on Facebook so her friends too might learn. The post went viral.ⁱⁱⁱ And God's dream? Caroline and Ernest have become friends. The cycle of mistrust, even hatred, has been broken by two of God's children.

And this story of two churches. First United Presbyterian Church is a Black congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, located a stone's throw away from First Presbyterian Church, a white congregation. First United was established in 1866 when, following emancipation, former slaves were no longer allowed to sit in the pews of First Presbyterian with their former owners. As freed persons, they were confined to the church basement. For 150 years the two churches remained apart. In 2016, a Black man was killed by a police officer and another civilian was murdered at one of the protests that ensued. The white church came to recognize the raw deep wound of racism that still existed. After study and prayer, they wrote a letter seeking forgiveness from the Black church. The letter apologized for all they had done and failed to do that had perpetuated division between two churches. The letter resulted in a first step toward reconciliation—plans for the two congregations to worship together twice a year. When Covid struck, it was decided that the two pastors would lead worship together, every Sunday, side by side. The healing has begun.^{iv} And God's dream? The reconciliation of a broken family.

And finally, the rest of the story of Dreamland, Virginia. The spreading crisis of Covid caught the attention of a local pastor, Jason Yarashes. He gathered community members and organizations to work for enforceable health and safety regulations in the poultry plants. White people and Latino people of various backgrounds and income levels came together to hold car rallies and letter-writing campaigns and, amazingly, they made a difference. Virginia is now the first state in our country to require businesses—all businesses, even poultry plants—to protect workers from the coronavirus, mandating personal protective equipment, social distance, response plans and training for workers. The dream for Dreamland may not yet be fulfilled—the sewage system still needs work and the playground hasn't been built—but now its residents feel a little safer going to work, even a little more hopeful that other things could change, too.^v God's dream? That all God's children might know well-being.

And did you notice that in each of these, ordinary people made the difference? People like you and me. They asked questions, listened humbly and carefully to those who were suffering, and acted. We may not know the mind of God, but God has made clear the nature of the divine dream. God has told us what to do to make the divine dream come closer to true. We are to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God or as Eugene Peterson puts it, “Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.”^{vi}

In this challenging time, it may seem there is nothing we can do to make a difference, but with God's guidance and help, Joseph fed thousands, Ernest and Caroline built a friendship across racial boundaries, two churches have taken steps toward reconciliation and fellowship, and a pastor with a passion started a movement that helped protect hundreds of workers. By God's grace, may we embrace God's dream and do what we have never dared to dream.

ⁱ Genesis 45:5.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 12.

iii “How a Black Repairman’s Conversation with His White Client Touched the Nation,” NPR, Morning Edition, July 2, 2020.

iv Sherry Blackman, “How a Pandemic Brought Healing to a Centuries-Old Racial Wound,” *Presbyterians Today*, July-August 2020, p. 16-17.

v “Virginia Poultry Workers See Victory in New Covid-19 Protection Rules,” NPR, Weekend Edition, July 19, 2020.

vi Micah 6:8, *The Message*.