

“WHEN DREAMS COLLIDE”

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You might know that Andrew Young was a Congressman, a civil rights leader, a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a delegate to the United Nations, and a mayor of Atlanta. Did you also know he's a Congregational pastor? His daughter Andrea joined the United Church of Christ world mission board in the 1980s, back when I was a member. Andrea must have inhaled some contagious mission spores while serving on that UCC board. For she found she'd suddenly come down with a serious case of Christianity. No more genteel religiosity, sending abstract others to help the poor, while herself remaining at a distance. No, it was dig deep, follow Jesus into the trenches and serve the least herself.

Andrew Young had always prayed Andrea would be a faithful servant, a woman of God, an advocate for justice, and a faithful disciple. But one day Andrea announced to her dad that she would go to troubled parts of Africa to create clean water projects. She was moving to a village without the basics of life, never mind the comforts; a village where disease was a threat; a village vulnerable to the raids of nearby lawless tribes. Like any dad, Andrew Young was alarmed. What are you doing? Are you nuts? What's wrong with a husband, a picket fence, and grandchildren? Young was honest about how self-ishly protective he felt as she only became the woman he raised her to be. Young said as much when he addressed our United Church Board for World Ministries. You see, when it is someone else's child, it's for the glory of God. But when it *my* child, it is crazy!

I share the story because it's about the collision of different dreams in the hearts of the faithful. And that is what today's story from the heart of Mark is all about. Jesus had just announced his way was no conquering triumphalism. It was about confronting powers and principalities who'd chased him from Jerusalem, and who'd kill him for coming back.

While on the road to Jerusalem, James and John asked a favor of Jesus, one big favor. They wanted to flank Jesus as God granted him accolades when he came into his glory. Jesus was flabbergasted and flummoxed by the appeal. He likely felt like Casey Stengel said of the 61 Mets: "Doesn't anybody here know how to play this game?" But he stayed patient and on point, saying it was only the Father's place to honor whomever he would.

Can you see the similarity to what Andrew Young confessed? While ever living in the grip of the gospel, he was vulnerable to other dreams. The dreams Hollywood, Disneyland, and Broadway all force feed us from the day we take our first breath. James and John were aware at some level that it was a bad question, even as they asked it. "Jesus, how can you help us get what we want?" Wow, that doesn't sound right. They'd just spent years with Jesus focusing on God's wants; they immediately regretted asking this.

Guess what? We all live with competing dreams churning within us. America is a dream factory like no place on earth. Dreams are manufactured here on assembly lines like the Mustang convertibles rolling out of the Rouge Plant in Dearborn where our grade school took field trips. We are vulnerable to so many different dreams at once. So much about

faithfulness is letting God's dream get the upper hand among those competing dreams. And when I say God's dream, I'm talking about what Jesus named the kingdom of God.

The dreams of the Christian way—which suddenly gripped Andrea Young—are not the way of the world. And the friction between God's dreams and the world's burn hotter in Fairfield County than anywhere else I have ever lived. Last week I spoke to Chapin Garner, the new senior pastor of the Congregational Church of New Canaan. We've been friends for 20 years. Having grown up here, he's forewarned and protected against the hyper-competitive, status-driven, no holds barred, achievement mentality. But moving from small town, coastal Massachusetts into the New Canaan schools has been eye-opening for his children. Of course, we have no such pressures like that in Darien.

The world values assertiveness, opportunism, competition, winning, power and prestige. That is one package and bundle of dreams. Jesus expects each one of us to find our own creative way to humbly serve the broken. Jesus brought that dream from above. And that Christian narrative is the one Chapin Garner has surrounded his children with. Just like his kids arriving here, we all must sort that out and decide our core convictions.

Another pastor friend of mine remembers his own son at age 12, struggling in school. They took him to a psychologist who put him through a battery of tests to discover why he was having such a hard time. Then Will and Harriet were called in to hear the results.

"Your son is a wonderful kid," said the psychologist. "Unfortunately, he has an exaggerated sense of empathy for others. He gets distracted from his school work by anyone else in the room who is having difficulty. Your son is kind, sympathetic, and concerned."

"Well, what is wrong with that?" asked the mom. "All those are worthy Christian values." "Congratulations," said the psychologist. "You have done a good job raising a Christian. Unfortunately, none of those traits leads to success in competitive schools." Sometimes our dreams collide, and it's up to us which gets the last word as we choose what is most important, as we must decide where to invest ourselves, as we find our way forward. It's confusing. It's not easy. But like James and John with Jesus, we all must finally choose.

I tell you, the saving grace of our gospel lesson is Jesus' patience with James and John. Truly, they didn't call Jesus "rabbi" for nothing. Here we clearly see him as their teacher. He's so very gentle with them. He patiently and repeatedly takes time to show them that his way will often take us in directions other than where we'd always imagined we would end up going. As Jesus teaches them, he gently keeps pointing back toward his cross.

Like the shepherd with unwitting sheep, he guides them to what God wants. He lets them know that if we all get what we want, it is often at another's expense. The world's dreams create winners and losers. But as God gets what he wants, all can actually win.

And the way God gets what God wants--a world brought back to him--is not by coercion, power, glory and violence, but by the serving and suffering love Jesus willingly models.

Yes, James and John, the Sons of Zebedee, misread Jesus. But then again, so do we. We reduce Jesus to some technique to wave away everything we regard as unpleasant. We picture him as the key to advancing our cause, our self-improvement, prospering us. We imagine Jesus as the answer to all of our problems, our shin splints, our bad credit.

But Jesus doesn't represent himself as any of that as he steadily moves to Jerusalem. In that walk, there's no absence of pain, no absence of conflict, no absence of rejection. He shows us the way, the truth, the life through all of that where God eagerly awaits us.

As the two dreams collide in their hearts on the road to Jerusalem and as self-interested James and John refuse to forsake Jesus' difficult path, so might you and I stay faithful. We might not get everything we want, everything sparkly and shimmering, everything that our dreams say we must have. But we'll get a new and bigger heart, like our God's. The sweep of God's redemption will fill our lives and indeed all the earth. This gospel, this church and this following of Jesus you hear me relentlessly lift up, is all about that. Trusting that as our Creator and Redeemer has his way, you, I and all are remembered.

We've had more and more baptisms of little ones since I've been your pastor. I always sit down with the parents to go over the logistics, read through the liturgy, and interpret its meaning. I tell them God claims their child as his own in the dream Jesus brought us. And if their child feels led to go to Africa and do clean water projects, they must let her. Now you know where that comes from, and what it means in the sparring of our dreams.

God calls us to walk paths we'd never would choose for ourselves or our loved ones, as God asks something from us no one else can give, following Jesus, carrying his cross. Amen.