

*The Size of Our Dreams* (Mk. 6.30-44)  
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On Friday evening my favorite television program aired its final episode. That program, *Bill Moyers Journal*, had become one upon which I relied for perhaps the most thoughtful journalism anywhere. While I did not catch the show every Friday evening, thanks to the miracle of technology and the doctor's orders to the treadmill, I did listen to its podcast each week. And one of the more delightful portions of my week has been turning on the television or pressing the button on my iPod to hear the gentle drawl of Bill Moyers' voice introducing his topic. Over the course of the last year, *Bill Moyers Journal* has included hour-long discussions of such things as the need for financial reform, the state of the ongoing war in Afghanistan, the role of money in our court system, the case for same-sex marriage, and the debate over health care legislation. The program is always enlightening, devoting ample time to simply sitting with experts, whose voices have often been unheeded, and getting at the complexity of the issues we face and the possibilities of addressing them with intelligence and compassion. Bill Moyers almost always appeals to my best sense of what it means to be a citizen, and the sharpness of his mind and the calmness of his demeanor in debate often make me proud of this country. What's more, he makes me proud of something else. Did I mention he's my favorite Baptist?

Now the point of this sermon is not to praise Bill Moyers and note how much I will miss him, though I could think of worse sermons. The point is actually to carry away one of the last gifts Bill Moyers' program gave to me. This gift,

which others might call a curse, was a sort of awareness that has gnawed at me since I listened to the April 2<sup>nd</sup> broadcast that considered economic inequality in America.<sup>1</sup> For some reason, that particular program stirred something in me. Afterwards, through both my own efforts and a curious series of coincidences, I found myself reading several books and articles about the ever increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots in our society and what that gap might mean for our social and spiritual health. While Bill Moyers didn't quite frame the questions religiously, there was an implicit invitation to consider them in such a way. Because the questions Moyers asked were asked on a program devoted to Martin Luther King's dream on the 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Dr. King's death. Dr. King's dream, of course, was not simply one of equal civil rights for every American citizen; it was a broader dream of social and economic justice for all people. Bill Moyers was simply asking what Dr. King might have thought of the direction our country has taken over the past four decades. The data on this is not encouraging at all, but before we get to it I'd like to shift for a moment to this morning's reading from our sacred stories.

According to the Book of Mark, there was once a time when Rabbi Jesus and his followers were traveling and they stopped in what they supposed was a deserted place in order to rest. People had heard of Jesus however, and soon enough they found him and gathered near in hopes that he would teach them. The rabbi obliged the crowd and spoke to them until it began to grow late and their stomachs began to grumble. Then his students came to him with a worry:

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<sup>1</sup> *Bill Moyers Journal*, "American Inequality," April 2, 2010.

“This is a deserted place and it is already late. Send [the people] off so they can go into the surrounding farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

But [Jesus] answered, saying to them,

You give them something to eat.

They said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of loaves and give them that to eat?”

And he said to them,

How many loaves do you have?

Go and see.

When they found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.”<sup>2</sup>

Now five loaves and two fish weren't nearly enough to feed the rabbi and his students, let alone the great crowd that had gathered with them to consider Jesus' teachings. Yet if we were to pause here in the middle of the parable, at its point of greatest tension, then we might find some creative dissonance. For we have the Jesus movement teaching a new kind of society, a beloved community, a kingdom based not on the political order of the day but on a completely different set of values. And in the middle of this rather dreamy story we are presented with something of a tangible problem: there is not enough food to go around. The meager portion procured by Jesus and his followers pales in comparison with the need. Yet here they all are, having no doubt held out grand dreams and visions of the sort that the rabbi was known for before realizing that they were hungry and in a pinch. There was a gap, we might say, between the resources and the need. Which brings us back, for a moment, to one of our present dilemmas as those who have listened to the rabbi.

What Bill Moyers and others have been recently highlighting is the gap between the resources and the need in our own country. To be more specific,

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<sup>2</sup> Willis Barnstone, *The Restored New Testament* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 165.

what has been stressed is not only the gap but the growth in the gap. For since the days of Dr. King, the disparity between the haves and the have-nots has only become more pronounced. With every passing year, the rich are becoming richer, the poor are becoming poorer, and the chasm between the two is widening. For example, in a recent article, Professor Tony Judt observes the following:

In 2005, 21.2 percent of US national income accrued to just 1 percent of earners. Contrast to 1968, when the CEO of General Motors took home, in pay and benefits, about sixty-six times the amount paid to a typical GM worker. Today the CEO of Wal-Mart earns nine hundred times the wages of his average employee. Indeed, the wealth of the Wal-Mart founder's family in 2005 was estimated at about the same (\$90 billion) as that of the bottom 40 percent of the US population: 120 million people.<sup>3</sup>

Judt mentions the disparity not in order to criticize Wal-Mart in particular, but rather to raise awareness about the direction our country has been going. Since 1968, which happened to be Dr. King's last year, the incomes of the nation's wealthiest people have grown exponentially while, at the same time, millions more people have joined the working poor without access to the basics of a real living wage, an equal education, or quality health care. Judt's argument is that there is something fundamentally wrong with a system that allows this to happen or, perhaps more importantly, with people who abide it in silence. We have settled for a small dream of individual prosperity, the professor warns, and given up on yearning for something greater. This works out well enough if you're a CEO, but not so well if you're a bus driver. But shouldn't everyone have access to what they need, no matter who they are? That's the question being put forth by

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Judt, "Ill Fares the Land," *The New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2009, 18.

a number of social researchers, who are stumbling upon some astonishing findings. They are uncovering a much bigger dream than that of individual wealth and accretion. We'll come to that in a moment, but, before we do, I believe we left Jesus and his friends in a sort of distributive dilemma.

Once the rabbi and his students discovered that they did not have enough food to go around, the story takes something of a miraculous turn:

[Jesus] told them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.

They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, and looking up into the sky he blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his students to set before the people, and the two fish he divided among them all. Everyone ate and they were filled. And they picked up twelve full baskets of crumbs and fish. Those who had eaten were five thousand [people].<sup>4</sup>

Without any further explanation, then, we are told that Jesus and his followers were able to take what they had and share it in a way that sustained them all. The miracle, wonder, or sign here seems to be not in the magical multiplication of loaves and fishes but in the affirmation that when the resources were pooled enough was found for everyone. It's a very curious story because none of Jesus' verbal teachings are recorded. What the story records is an event that is a kind of teaching of its own. And what was that event if not the equitable distribution of what they had? Perhaps the real miracle wasn't that the loaves and fishes never ran out. Perhaps the real miracle was the willingness to look at things differently, to take a leap of faith, to dream big dreams, and to share with every sister and brother in a grand embrace of the whole. The story stands as a vision of beloved

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<sup>4</sup> Barnstone, *The Revised New Testament*, 165-66.

community, and it differs markedly from the kind of community our society has set up. Far from being a society based on hoarding and privilege, Jesus was setting up a communitarian movement wherein all people were included in ways they hadn't been before, violence as a way of living was set aside, and food and money were shared freely with each according to need. Indeed, the early Christian communities picked up on this and tried some rather daring experiments in common living that would likely be unrecognizable to modern American Christians. These early Christians were informed not by our small dream of individual acquisition, but by the rabbi's much larger dream of beloved community. The way of following Jesus was understood to be the way of treating everyone equally. This is a very beautiful religious idea, yet to follow it in this country has almost always led to accusations of romantic delusion on a good day or communist sympathy on a bad one. Even so, some of us consider this idea of community an article of faith as followers of the rabbi. Others just look at it as good public policy.

I mentioned that researches have reached some startling conclusions about social inequality. In their recent book, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett document that the greater the inequality in a society, the greater its social ills. Conversely, the more equal a society tends to be, the healthier and happier its citizens. The book consists of several hundred pages of meticulously gathered information that tracks things like mental illness, life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, children's educational performance, homicide rates, and imprisonment figures. Wilkinson

and Pickett were surprised to find a direct correspondence between inequality and social ills. Inequality, as their research defines it, consists of the gap between the haves and the have-nots. What matters most to the health of a country, they find, is not whether that country is rich or poor in comparison with other countries, but how vast the divide between the rich and poor citizens within the country.<sup>5</sup> The least healthy countries are the ones with the greatest disparity between citizens. Do I need to tell you that the United States, while being arguably the wealthiest country of all, is not the healthiest or the happiest by a long shot? In nearly every ranking, we do much worse than other developed countries, raising the question of what our growing inequality is really doing to us.

It's enough to bring us back for a moment to the teachings of our faith. They are teachings that run directly counter to so many of the values of our society, though they now seem compatible with recent social science. For the kingdom that Jesus was teaching was not a kingdom where the rich would get richer and the poor would get poorer. The movement that Jesus began was not a movement for the privileged and the educated to hold on to their advantage at the expense of everyone else. And the community that Jesus was dreaming was not a community based on material resources and conventional success. No, our rabbi was dreamer of bigger dreams than those. He was dreaming a divine dream that saw the light in all people and sought to honor it, nourish it, and share it. And it raises the questions for us, as Americans who gather in the name of the rabbi: How do we

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 11.

understand the sharing of our resources? What shall we do if we are to dream dreams of a greater equality? Where are we called to go if we are to follow the one who blessed the bread and fish, broke them into bits, and passed them to each and every sister and brother?

We may not yet have all the answers to these questions, but to fail to ask them is to settle for the small dreams our society has sold us. The dream of our faith is a much larger dream, a dream shared by people as different as Bill Moyers, Martin Luther King, and Jesus. Each of these people heard the whisper and followed it, wondering what it would mean to build a beloved community where everyone's basic needs were met. Perhaps today we could draw on this dream again and find some new courage of our own. And perhaps we could follow the dream's questions wherever they lead us. In the name of the one who invited them to sit on the green grass and share what they had.

May it be so.