

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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## **Living For The Dream**

Matthew 25:21

The Illinois Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial commission has endorsed a dramatic presentation which deals with the early history of this church. This event is scheduled for February 15 of next year and will be the final offering of a week of Lincoln birthday celebrations in Springfield. Robert Davis will portray Jamieson Jenkins, an African-American free man who was a friend and neighbor of Abraham Lincoln and a conductor on the Underground Railroad in Springfield. Jamieson and his wife Elizabeth became members of this church in 1848. Elizabeth was received by letter of transfer from the Colored Methodist Church of Springfield. Two months later, Jamieson became a member by profession of faith. Our church records describe the Session meetings in which they were received. These meetings were moderated by Albert Hale, who served as pastor for 27 years.<sup>1</sup>

The admission of the Jenkins' into the membership of this church at a time when African-Americans were considered property rather than citizens of this country was a daring move. From its founding in 1835, this congregation said that slavery was evil. But what Albert Hale and the Session did in 1848 went much farther. They said that race did not matter. They were making a down payment on the dream that the day would eventually come when our nation could say the same thing. They knew that they would never live to see that dream realized. But they believed in a world where God's grace is more powerful than all the forces which divide human beings from one another. They were determined to do everything in their power to multiply the grace which God had so generously bestowed on them.

In the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew we find a parable which challenges the church to multiply the gifts that God provides. There Jesus tells of a wealthy property owner who is preparing to leave on a long journey. He entrusts his property to three servants in the form of talents. Each talent represented the amount that a worker would receive from 15 years of hard labor. This was a huge sum of money. Two of the servants immediately put their investments to work and they were hugely successful. But the third servant was afraid of what might happen if the markets turned sour causing his investment to decline in value. Driven by fear he was determined to preserve the talent against any possible disaster. He chose not to invest the talent. He buried it in the ground.

In these times of volatile markets and economic uncertainty many of us can appreciate the fear of the servant who buried his talent. And at the same time we cannot help but wonder what would have happened to the other two servants if their high risk investments had gone bad. But this is not a story about investment strategy. These three servants have received money they did not earn. They are beneficiaries of an act of unbelievable generosity and trust. Their master has shown great daring in placing these resources in their hands.

The test for the servants is how they respond to this daring gift. Will they live in fear of losing it or will they be equally daring in the way they share it with others? The grace that God showers on us is a dynamic reality. It is multiplied many times when we take the risk of offering it to others. When

we do that we are making our own down payment on the dream of a world which is free from the destructive patterns of the past.

This is the central issue in the fourth chapter of Judges. There we read that the Hebrews have moved into the Promised Land but the land is not empty. There were people living there called Canaanites. They had their own religion which emphasized public enactment of temple prostitution and human sacrifice. The worship of sex and violence drew big crowds then as it does today. The Hebrews had carved out a place for themselves in this alien culture, but they were not yet secure in that society. The land of Canaan was a place of conflicting values and competing religions. It was not clear which way the future would go.

This was a time when the leadership of the Hebrews was very fluid as well. Moses and Joshua were long dead. The great kings of Israel were far into the future. During this period of time the best that the Hebrews could do was a series of military commanders and leaders who were called judges. In the fourth chapter of Judges we are introduced to a military commander whose name, interestingly enough, was Barak. This Barak was not the commander in chief. He was only a commander and he was a cautious man. He did not like to take risks with his forces. He was slow to respond when the people were in danger.

The passage tells us that it was a judge named Deborah who understood what was at stake. She convinced Barak to change course. She challenged him to remember the dream of the generations that came before them. The generation that left Egypt had put everything on the line to begin their journey to the Promised Land. This dream stayed alive as the next generation wandered in the wilderness always hoping for a better day. Now that dream of a different world is their inheritance. But it is a dream that will lose its power if they give in to fear and live only to hold on to what they have. They are called to take risks for a future that can be fundamentally different. They owe it to their ancestors to continue living for the dream.

The conservative commentator Kathleen Parker has described her debt to an African-American woman named Dorothy. Dorothy became her caregiver when, as a very young child Kathleen's mother died. She spent a lot of time with Dorothy's family and friends before she knew that there was such a thing as race. In a recent article on the cultural significance of the election of Barack Obama she described her discovery of race:

Dorothy and I were walking hand-in-hand down Main Street when we passed the Ritz Theater. I asked if we could go to the movies and she said no. Why? Because she would have to sit in the balcony and I would have to sit downstairs alone. I was only 4, but old enough to recognize foolishness and injustice. How could that be? What reason? Nothing made sense as she tried to explain that the color of her skin was fraught with meaning. The illogic of her assertions, painfully if matter-of-factly rendered, was stunning even to a knee-high girl.

The shame of our racial history is a burden not easily lifted, but Obama's election has eased the weight considerably.

During the next four years, we will differ with our new president on policies and appointments, but we can all agree on the momentousness of this transaction. There's something different in the air.

The day after the election, a black woman and I were marveling about events and trying to put our finger on what had changed. That thing. The little speck of difference that kept us imperceptibly apart had been dissolved in a lovely instant of national consensus that race no longer matters.

I wish my Dot had lived to see it.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, we can say the same about the dreamers who came together in this church in 1848 daring to believe that this day would surely come.

#### Endnotes

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1. Second Presbyterian Church Session Minutes, 15 April and 5 November 1848.
2. Kathleen Parker, *State Journal-Register*, November 10, 2008.