The Impossible Dream
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First they ignore you,
thен they ridicule you,
thен they fight you,
and then you win.
—Mahatma Gandhi

Ancient Witness: 1 Peter 3:13-16 (The Message)

If with heart and soul you’re doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you’re still better off. Don’t give the opposition a second thought. Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They’ll end up realizing that they’re the ones who need a bath.

The word that I’m looking for here is “quixotic.” It means to be “foolishly impractical, especially in pursuit of ideals.” The word comes from Don Quixote, the hero in the novel by Cervantes that was later adapted for the musical, Man of la Mancha.

The story was originally a comic satire against the chivalric romances that were in vogue at the time, such as the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Don Quixote, a ridiculous elderly gentleman addicted to reading these romances, goes out of his mind, and decides to become a knight, to go out into the world and live his own romance of chivalry.

He loses contact with reality, so that the local prostitute becomes his fair maiden; his donkey, his steed; and the windmills, dragons to slay. In the Broadway musical, this hero sings:

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go

To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star

This is my quest to follow that star
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far
To fight for the right without question or pause
To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause
Here’s the thing: As foolish a character as Don Quixote is, as impractical and ridiculous as he is, his song seems to strike a chord in people. *The Impossible Dream* has been sung by everyone from Andy Williams to Elvis Presley. And people don’t take it as satire; they don’t hear it as poking fun at a daydreaming old man.

Sure, sometimes we can get so swept away by our ideals that we lose contact with reality and slip into a fantasy world. But that’s not usually the problem. Most of the time we lose touch with our ideals; we succumb to the voices that tell us that it’s no use, that we might as well give up, that we should have small dreams and pedestrian goals. People know how the world can squeeze the ideals out of us, and that is why they like Don Quixote’s song so much. Maybe Cervantes didn’t intend it this way, but people take it as a spiritual affirmation.

You know, people of faith have often been dismissed as “foolishly impractical.” The apostle Paul, wrote to the church in Corinth:

> We’ve become a spectacle to the world and angels... We are weak, you are strong. We are despised, you are honored. We are like the refuse of the world, the scum and dregs of society. We are hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, homeless; we are abused, insulted, and persecuted. But I want you to imitate me. I want you to become fools for Christ. (1 Cor. 4:9ff.)

This reminds me of a great quote from John Mason Brown: “The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose.” The cynics of this world will look at people of faith and followers of Jesus and say, “What are they thinking? Can’t they see that these are wasted efforts?”

Again, Paul wrote, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). Ineffective heroes. The word for “stumbling block” means “scandalous, ridiculous, absurd.” And the word for “foolish” is the root for “moronic, idiotic, stupid.” To much of the world, people of faith look quixotic—like they are squandering themselves.

Throughout the generations, people of faith have been seen as “foolishly impractical,” not very smart, even absurd. One of these, Francis of Assisi, lived in solidarity with those who suffer, who are crucified by the world and who are at the margins of society. In a book about him the authors write:

> The gospel message of the cross is a scandal and stumbling block because it does not bring us the message of success or the triumphant power of goodness, but of God’s presence hidden in what is defeat, loss, abandonment and death (St. Francis and the Foolishness of God, p. 129).

People of faith are often portrayed as big-hearted losers. Like folks who somehow got loose from the psych unit, they need to be protected from themselves. They suffer and squander themselves for nothing, for some impossible dreams and ideals.

This is so embarrassing that the church has conveniently ignored and forgotten this part of the tradition. The church, in its desire to be respectable, has tried to mirror the wise, the practical and the successful. What’s an impressive church? The one with lots of members. The one with big buildings and big programs.

But this theme of losing and suffering and being “foolishly impractical” keeps cropping up. In our passage from the First Letter of Peter, here it is again. If you are a follower of Jesus, expect to be persecuted, abused and reviled. What kind of church growth message is that? According to Peter, the
most important goal is to be “zealous for what is right,” to do what is right, even if it means that we suffer. He writes, “even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.” You can’t get any more “foolishly impractical” than that.

And so you have people through the ages like Daniel Berrigan, the poet/priest who poured human blood on nuclear warheads, burned draft cards and was put in prison.

Someone has said, “We are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful.” When we look back on our lives, the primary question we ask ourselves is not, “Was I successful?” The important question is, “Was I faithful? Was I zealous for what is right?” As the song goes,

   And I know if I’ll only be true
   To this glorious quest
   That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
   When I’m laid to my rest.

People of faith are those who are, as Don Quixote sings, “willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.” One of the strange and puzzling phrases in the Apostles’ Creed is the part that says that Jesus was “crucified, dead and buried, he descended into hell.” Descended into hell? Where does that come from? Immediately following our passage today, it reads that Christ, “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison” (3:18-19). Early generations interpreted this that Jesus, between the crucifixion and resurrection, went to hell so that those lost souls might have a second chance.

Jesus taught about a God who never gives up on us, who never gives up on others. And in Jesus, we have the model of the one who will go to the ends of the earth, who is willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause. A former professor of mine in seminary once wrote:

   This is the destiny to which we all have been called. This is the mission for which we are preparing here: to go to Hell, to find and walk the paths that lead to the places and conditions where evil is the strongest and the human need is greatest, and to set people free to serve the living God who loves them. “Go to Hell,” says God, “and I will go with you.”

Some of the cynics of this world will laugh, poke fun, shake their heads and say that we are just “tilting at windmills.” But faith is not about guaranteed success or absolute certainty. Faith is being able to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty, “no matter how hopeless, no matter how far.”

William Sloane Coffin wrote:

   I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings.

   ...faith must be lived before it is understood, and the more it is lived, the more things become possible.

And so we resist injustice. And we fight the unbeatable foe. We fight the huge oil and gas conglomerates to establish 100% renewable energy for the survival of future generations. We fight the military-industrial complex that plunders our national budget when we have so many urgent and pressing needs. We fight the gun lobby to reduce the insane gun violence as it has been achieved in
other countries. We fight global economic wealth and power that has been able to manipulate, captivate and undermine true democracy, exploiting ignorance, apathy and fear.

Some of the cynics of this world will say that this kind of fighting is just silly and suicidal. “People who act this way just have a martyr-complex. People like this have lost contact with reality,” they say. I say that people act this way because they have made contact with Reality! A much bigger and deeper Reality.

About five years ago, came the historic decision of the Supreme Court to make marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples the law of the land. I had been an advocate and activist for my sisters and brothers in the LGBTQ community for my 30-year career.

Many of us have paid dearly and have made significant sacrifices. We were told to lower our sights, to tone it down, and to settle for the crumbs that fell from the table. Many of us encountered ridicule and resistance from opponents and frightened allies, alike. Many of us could never imagine that the day would come, and yet we continued to agitate, organize and struggle against power and insurmountable odds, year after year. And my friends, this should give us hope in the struggle for justice in so many other areas, as well. We are all, right now, working for victories that we cannot even imagine! Victories that can only been seen by those foolishly impractical dreamers.

The world will tell you to modify your dreams, to adapt, to accept the unchangeable nature of how things are, to give up on your impossible dreams.

But if there is one message of faith it is this: Never give up on this dream! Never become “adjusted” in this way.

This reminds me of something that Martin Luther King would say, first in 1955:

> There are some things in our social system that I’m proud to be maladjusted to, and I call upon you to be maladjusted to. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of lynch mobs; I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and discrimination; I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of the economic system which take necessity from the masses to give luxury to the classes; I never intend to adjust myself to the insanity of militarism, the self-defeating method of physical violence...

And then he has this wonderful line,

> The salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.

This big, impossible dream of loving-kindness and compassion, of social justice of planetary wholeness—this dream of the prophets, of Jesus—this is the dream of God!

And so, as people of faith, we are called to keep dreaming the impossible dream in spite of the criticism, in spite of the ridicule, in spite of the hardships, in spite of being labeled maladjusted.

And you know what? Sometimes these impossible dreams come true!