

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, January 17, 2010 based on John 3:1-10.

How Can This Be?

Play 1 minute and 23 seconds of the documentary "I Have a Dream"-

Well good morning everyone! It seems that it has been awhile since we spoke. Last Sunday I was not here as I took a week of continuing education, and the Sunday before that I gave my message on the "Word of God that keeps on Giving." But that was also the Sunday that we moved over to the Community House for worship because of a boiler issue over here. So we did not have much time for chit chat that day.

I am glad to be here today and continuing my ministry as your transitional Senior Pastor. Soon you will be hearing from the Senior Pastor Search Committee that is doing wonderful work getting ready to search for the next Senior Pastor. Meanwhile, those of us on the staff and the Boards, Committees, and organizations are doing ministry in Jesus' name to live out your core values of faith and service.

I wanted to show that clip of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech from August, 1963 since tomorrow is the day we celebrate Dr. King's birth.

Do you realize that it has been almost 50 years since he gave that speech? It was a speech delivered during a March on Washington for jobs and freedom in 1963 that also commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham Lincoln in 1863. That was almost 140 years now.

In his speech Dr. King said: *And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.*

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

Those were some dreams! Some of those dreams have come to pass. Others are still waiting. What do we do with those dreams today?

Part of the problem, as I see it, goes back to the Emancipation Proclamation itself. Abraham Lincoln by executive decree freed slaves held in Confederate States beginning January 1, 1863. This began the process that led to the 13th amendment to the constitution that officially abolished and continues to prohibit slavery and involuntary servitude in the

United States of America, except as punishment for a crime. The problem is that for those freed, all they received was their freedom and later some civil rights with the 14th amendment, but nothing else.

Those who were freed did not share in the spoils of war from the civil war. Those who were freed did not receive any kind of stipend for a few years to get on their feet when the war was over. Those who were freed got freedom with no tools to make a life for themselves.

My ancestors, when they came to America after the Civil War, were poor peasants from Germany. But at least they had a little bit of money to buy property or eventually buy property in southern Illinois and make a life for themselves. Equality is hard when there is so much separation between people. Well how can this be?

Nicodemus wondered how this could be. You heard Nicodemus ask that question in scripture today. Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night because he sensed God at work in Jesus but he was afraid to come to Jesus openly. Jesus told him that in order to understand God, he had to be born from above, but Jesus used a word that meant both "from above" and "again" as in a physical rebirth. Nicodemus thought he meant again.

But Jesus tried to teach Nicodemus that it is the Spirit that connects us to God and each other not flesh and blood and that it is the Spirit that binds us together. Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?" because it had always been blood line that connected Jews to God and each other. Jesus turned his world upside down by changing how we are connected.

It was an African American pastor who taught me the meaning of this connection. The pastor's name was Dr. Reuben Sheares. That name, Sheares, may sound familiar to some of you. Dr. Sheares was a denominational leader in the United Church of Christ for many years before he became a pastor in Park Manor here in Chicago in the 1980s and 90's. Unfortunately, Dr. Sheares died at the age of 58. Many of you have met his widow, Ora Sheares, who attend worship at FCC occasionally.

Dr. Sheares was a delightful man who used his mind and his passion for Christ to help the world be a better place. He was first educated at Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama. Talladega was a college first organized in 1867 as a place for former slaves and their children to receive an education. That college is still in existence today.

Dr. Sheares taught that it is the Holy Spirit that makes us first generation Christians. If it weren't for the Holy Spirit, we would just be someone who knew someone, who knew someone, who knew someone, who knew someone, who knew Jesus. Because of the Holy Spirit, faith in God through Christ makes us first generation Christians that connects us to God and each other. Jesus expanded Nicodemus' understanding about who he is connected to and how that connection works.

I think the events of Jesus and Nicodemus also helps us with our understanding of our connection as Americans and human beings. Like Nicodemus, many of us are increasingly thinking about our connection as Americans by family line and blood line. We see it as a physical connection.

But it is not a physical connection that binds us together. It is our connection to an ideal that binds us together. It is the ideal of freedom, equality, and justice for all that binds us together. It is in that spirit that we live and work together that makes us a caring and decent nation. It is a broad spirit of inclusion that makes us who we are. To have a broad spirit of inclusion takes compassion on our part.

Most people would agree that Jesus was compassionate. He had concern for other people and sympathetic concern for someone in pain. But Jesus also had a fierceness for justice. He had a single minded determination to bring about a just future. Compassion is about both tenderness and fierceness. As American, I think we need both – tenderness towards others but also fierceness for a just future. We can not keep the spirit of equality and fairness alive unless we, as American and human beings can have this kind of compassion.

In a sermon entitled, "The Drum Major Instinct" delivered near the end of his life in 1968, Dr. King said: *"Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. Say that I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.*

And then he went on to say in that sermon: *"If you want to be important – wonderful. If you want to be recognized – wonderful. If you want to be great – wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's the new definition of greatness.*

And this morning, the thing I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness it means that everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love and you can be that servant.

It is our connection to God through the Spirit of Christ that makes us first generation Christians. It is our connection to each other to the ideals of equality and fairness for all that makes us first generation Americans. I have a dream, that one day we will have enough courage and wisdom to understand that the compassion of God gives us the tenderness to see others as our equals and the fierceness to insist on fairness for all. Amen.