

## **When Dreams Become Nightmares**

Ecclesiastes 5:10

Matthew 16:24-26

1 Timothy 6:10b

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It was a picture-perfect New England Church. White pillars. A steeple. Red carpet and pipe organ in fine repair. The church was right in the center of this small, Massachusetts community. For most pastors to serve a church like that would be a dream come true.

For many Americans a dream come true is a new home. A home that looks like this perhaps: three bedrooms, a spacious kitchen with marble counter tops, in a new sub-division on the outskirts of town, brand new appliances, family room, a yard and two car garage.

We all have dreams, hopes, and a vision of the future. Sometimes our dreams make us restless. Alexis de Tocqueville, a political philosopher came to America from France in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and wrote about what he saw. "Americans are extremely eager in the pursuit of immediate material pleasures and are always discontented with the position that they occupy..... They think about nothing but ways of changing their lot and bettering it. For people in this frame of mind every new way of getting wealth more quickly, every machine which lessens work, every means of diminishing the cost of production, every invention which makes pleasures easier or greater, seems the most magnificent accomplishment of the human mind..... One usually finds that the love of money is either the chief or a secondary motive at the bottom of everything the Americans do....." Was De Tocqueville right? Are we always striving for more? Do we fail to be content with what we have?

That the new house I told you about, it was owned by members of I once served in Kenosha. The woman was always well dressed: makeup, nice clothes, beautiful hair style. Her husband didn't come to church often; maybe he was busy, perhaps working on the weekend at his high-powered job. My first year at that church this couple was building their dream home. The next year I visited. It was gorgeous. But by the third year, they were in the process of getting a divorce.

It happen: a couple spends lots of time and money building a dream home. They move in, start paying for it -- and soon are separating. Divorce can be very painful. And divorce is sometimes -- sometimes -- exactly what needs to happen because two people who are married can become incompatible -- or realize they were incompatible from the start. For this couple, their dream of being married living in a gorgeous new house became a nightmare. Financial expert and author Dave Ramsey says "the number one cause of divorce is financial issues." I've wondered:

did that couple over-extend themselves in what they could afford by way of a house? That couple had dreams. Good dreams. Dreams of loving each other for a lifetime. What got in the way of their commitment? Their intimacy? Did one think more highly than the other of having nice things?? Was it differing values about money that drove them apart? Or did they find they had no time for each other? That they were so busy designing, building, decorating their new house that they forgot about spending time with each other?

Let's go back to That little church now: the dream church with white pillars, steeple, the red carpet and organ in good repair. The first year after seminary in Boson, I joined a team that consulting with churches that wanted to grow. This was one of those churches. It looked prosperous and well-cared for on the outside. They had once been a thriving church: full of life – with people in the pews, children filling the Sunday school rooms. But those days were over. The church had money, that was not the problem. They had an endowment. An endowment is a pot of money usually a lot of money, given to the church over time by church members upon their death. With an endowment, the pot of money is left to grow. Usually (not always) it's only the interest – the earnings on the money invested – that is available for use by the church. The principal (the main pot of money) is left to continue to grow.

They were now spending the principal on their endowment. That's what they were living off of because their church members were so few. Their dream of being a perfect little church had gone bad. That church had dreams. Good dreams. What happened? The church had money but they had lost touch with the people in the community. Especially the new people moving into the area. The church's ministry wasn't reaching people any more. Did their dream go bad only because of demographic changes, thing they had no control over? Or had they stopped caring and become complacent? Did they feel they had no need to reach out to people in the community? We have money in the bank. We don't need them. Was this in fact their attitude?

Good dreams can become bad dreams. That married couple had a dream house but a relationship gone bad. I trust and believe that each of them went on to dream new dreams, to begin new relationships and find new paths to hope. That church with a beautiful building but little life inside. I believe both would say "amen" to Jesus in Matthew 16:26: "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" Listen to that verse again, this time in the New International Version: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" Jesus teaches that we can be rich in things but still be lacking in our souls. In John 10:10 Jesus says he came to close that gap:" I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." There is more to fullness of life – to joy -- than dream houses and dream church buildings. The life Jesus came to bring us is more than mere existence. It is fullness of life. It is joy.

Today we begin our fall stewardship program: Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity. Our program is inspired by Adam Hamilton, pastor of the church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. He is our guide but the journey is our own. Just like that couple and that church. Each has to do the work of finding the joy God intends for us. No one could do it for us. And no one can do it for you. Along the way I hope we can help each other. Our goal in these next four weeks is nothing less than joy. For these four weeks, let's restlessly pursue that goal of joy – until we find it.

So, here's what our team did to help that Massachusetts church begin to live their dream again. We began our work by simply listening. Listening to them talk about the good old days. They told us about the bean suppers. They remembered how in the 1950's and 1960's when the church needed money (before the endowment) they'd put on bean suppers for the community. And everyone came. And the church members worked so hard on those suppers, and it was everyone working together. And it was fun. They don't need to do bean suppers any more because they have money in the bank. But when they stopped doing the bean suppers, the life that had been in the church began to fade away. So a team helping a church like that find its way back to living its dream must follow the trail that leads to life. As a team we began to wonder if this was the key to infusing joy into their church once more. It wasn't the bean suppers per se, not church suppers per se because they have become a lot less common as restaurants and fast food in particular have become more prevalent. The suppers were occasions for people meeting each other, people helping each other, people reaching out to each other, people connecting with each other. Though they may have lacked money back then, the church did not lack life – It had its soul back then. To help a church like that means asking "where are the places that church can today find and share that kind of life?" Once they could answer that question, those leaders would be on the way to living their dream once again.

Today is a good day to being your journey finding more joy in simplicity and generosity. What are your dreams at this moment of your life? Do you dream for a little more? A little more money? If you had a joy which was a little bit better? How does money, how does material success fit into your life's dream? To be honest, some of us are troubled about having enough. Some of us are anxious about being able to pay the bills. If that's you, that is perfectly all right. And I invite you to come next week at 9:15 a.m. for our faith and finances class with Bill Greenhalgh so you can learn how to manage finances and have enough to pay bills. We as a church wants help if we can, help you seek greater financial wellbeing.

For some of us our finances are in good shape. Yet we still dream. Maybe it's not money but joy that is lacking in your life. If that's the case, then I say to you: What was true of that Massachusetts church in the 1950's and 1960's is true of us right now. They didn't know it but back then they had enough – not enough money perhaps but enough life. They had enough to live abundantly. To live a life of joy the kind of life Jesus came to bring. In this very room there's enough love, peace, power

to shake away any gloom. My hope and prayer is that if you stay with us these next four weeks, you will claim joy for yourself, joy in greater simplicity and generosity. That is a dream that I know can come true.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This sermon is based on ideas from *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* by Adam Hamilton Abingdon Press 2012.