

***OUR SHATTERED DREAMS...AND GOD**

First United Methodist Church, Asheboro, NC

Scripture: Gospel of Luke 24:13-31
Gospel of John 20:30-31

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A few days ago, I had the phrase jump off the page of a book and grab me, and it hasn't let me alone since. It was **two words**— "**shattered dreams.**" The term has made me rethink my life and the lives of family members, friends, and church members. From somewhere in our past, each of us has had some dreams that were shattered. If you know someone whom you think never had a shattered dream; then you do not know them as well as you thought you did. The words "shattered dreams" are an index to some event, relationship, or vanished wish in our life story. Some of our shattered dreams had no connection with reality; they were but "air castles" that long ago became gone with the wind. Some, like an oyster with a grain of sand gnawing at it, have become pearls, or times through which we "took lemons and made lemonade." Whatever the outcome, the term "shattered dreams" has become an important reflection on the journey and the meaning of my life. Therefore, I want to share the term with you as a dropped thread in the tapestry of your life just as in mine.

The Diversity of Shattered Dreams

Shattered dreams have appeared to us dressed in so many different kinds of garments, and they approach us through so many different doorways. In every season of our journey, something that we really wanted to happen never happened. **If you know someone whom you think had never had a shattered dream; then you do not know them as well as you thought you did.**

Today I want respond to the quandary of how to deal with our shattered dreams—past and present—in a realistic way. To avoid them is to refuse to face reality; they are with us. Some morphed from being dreams to becoming nightmares. If we buried shattered dreams without appropriate rites they can become ghosts that haunt us years later.

Let me just name some typical shattered dreams:

We all know women and men who fell in love, married, and brought children into the world, with their combined genetic heritages. Health was good, jobs provided sufficient income, a house was bought in which to build a home. All the ingredients of "Camelot" were in place, but the relationship became alienation, disenchantment, agony, argument and divorce. **However, their marriage itself became a shattered dream.**

Some time ago in another church, I sat in the presence of a lovely lady over ninety years old. She is the epitome of composure, dignity, and Christian grace. The major shattered dream in her life had occurred years before I was born, but that night she shared it with me. You see, from the second year of her marriage in her early twenties until her middle forties, she tried and she prayed month and month and year after year that she would have a baby. She cried every month that she again discovered that she was not pregnant. The night she shared that with me I entered her hospital

room and found her cradling her arms as if she were holding a baby. Somewhat embarrassed, she said to me, “Don, I do this sometimes because I never had the blessing of holding my own baby to my breast.” Many years earlier, everyone who knew Blanche had long since forgotten to associate her with never having had a child of her own to nurse and love and nurture. For her, the shattered dream lived on. Some of you have probably had the same shattered dream that Blanche had.

Some happy and emotionally healthy marriages into which children were born became shattered dreams because the dreams of the parents when those children were small turned into disappointment, hurt, and young broken lives. To be devastatingly honest, children we brought into the world and reared can bring us sleepless nights and can shatter the dreams we had for them.

Disease shatters dreams. Perhaps the saddest word we ever hear is the word “terminal” that comes from a doctor as his diagnosis of a disease. My expectation as a child was naturally to grow up having a father, but when he was a forty-eight years old farmer and I was twelve, I overheard the surgeon say, “Sam, I could not get all the cancer; don’t go home and plant a crop; you have less than a year to live.” Eleven months later, my dream of having a father was shattered. Whatever the timing, the onset of disease can be what shatters our dreams.

I think the most difficult of shattered dreams is for parents to experience the death of a child. It is not the natural order of our dying. Parents say, “Oh, if only it could have been one of us instead of our child.”

The Bible is a “true to life” story with many characters. The scripture I read this morning told us about two people walking from Jerusalem seven miles out into the country to a little village called “Emmaus.” As they walked, they were talking about their expectation that Jesus was the one who would liberate Judah from the yoke of Rome. Now it was all over—a shattered dream. The shocking part of the story is that they had already heard that Mary Magdalene found Jesus’ tomb empty and had a vision of angels who said he was alive! (Luke 24:22-25) Indeed these two men said that Mary’s testimony had been corroborated! Yet they were leaving town, so overwhelmed by their shattered dream that they could not process any good news.

Paul wrote about his “thorn in the flesh” that he had prayed repeatedly might be removed so his ministry could be more effective. **It was never removed.** He also wrote to the Romans that he wanted to take his missionary work to Spain which was the western end of the Mediterranean world. **He never went** He wrote about a shipwreck on the island of Malta. He wrote of the betrayal or departure of his friends who had helped him write and post letters from a Roman jail. Then, in year 64 of the common era, both Paul and Peter were executed. What a shattered dream that was to Christianity while in its infancy.

The really big challenge in everyone’s life since the dawning of time is to retake and remake our lives after our dreams are shattered. Today, we affirm that God can help us in this revisited crisis.

God’s Response to Our Shattered Dreams

The overarching question for us as Christians is how to relate our faith to our shattered dreams. Are we sentenced to a life of weeping and grieving? Can we live again after the bottom has dropped

out of our lives. The most powerful verb in our language is the verb “to be” and its infinitive form ---to become.” Verse 12 of the first chapter of the Gospel of John is usually translated, “*To those who receive (Jesus), he gives the power to become children of God.*” **A more accurate translation is for “the power to become” to be translated “the power of becoming.”** Recovery from a shattered dream is not a sudden peace and matured faith, but a gradual new lease on life. Alexander Pope wrote, “Hope spring eternal in the human breast!”

I read recently a biography of Madam Curie. Her life as a renowned chemist was also a life of deep love and partnership with her husband. Mutually working at their laboratory in Paris, they had isolated and named a new element—radium! Then came the tragedy of sudden death when on April 19, 1906, he slipped in the rain and fell under the wheel of a heavily loaded cart. The wheel ran over his head and he died instantly. To all the world, the life of his wife and work partner seemed ended.

It was little consolation that the University of Sorbonne broke with tradition and named Madam Curie as the first woman in French higher education to be promoted to the head of an academic department. Every newspaper was guessing what would happen if and when she returned to the classroom for her first lecture after Dr. Curie’s death. The auditorium was packed, the corridors were filled; the crowd overflowed into the street. What would she say? Would it be a eulogy to describe the genius of her departed husband? Would it be words of appreciation to the university for elevating her to his academic chair?

When Madame Curie entered the room, the crowd stood in prolonged applause until they saw the expression on her face as she began to speak. Then there was an immediate stunned silence. She said, “When one considers the progress that has been made in physics in the past ten years, one is surprised at the advance in our knowledge of electricity and matter.” Some of Dr. Pierre Curie’s former students recognized that line as the last sentence of his last lecture. **She took up where he left off!** She had the courage to continue the work that they had shared. She continued their mutual analysis that would create the book which would be on the shelves of every library in the world with the one-word title, *Radioactivity*. She wrote to their daughter, “Sometimes my courage almost fails me, but my work with radium is not finished.” She had the courage and the stamina and the faith to keep on keeping on. She faced up to her shattered dreams and stared them down.

Our Christian endowment of the risen Christ is not to evade, not to avoid, not to deny, but to be able to take up the unfinished agenda of our lives. It is the courage of “becoming” in the face of a shattered dream.

One of my favorite heroes is Dag Hammarskjold, the greatest Secretary General that the United Nations has ever had. He fought through some depression in 1952 following a barrage of criticism. I read this line often from his diary: **“I cannot control what comes to me, but I can have some measure of control over how I respond.”** Then, on New Year’s Eve, he wrote this line that is basic to my philosophy of life: **“For what has been I give thanks; to what is to be, I say ‘yes.’”** The next day the small plane in which he was a passenger crashed and he was killed.

The world of the 20th century remembered the impossible task before the parents of Helen Keller when they had to rear a child who was suddenly blind, deaf, and mute. What happened was that

they discovered Anne Sullivan, and she taught Helen Keller to communicate in unprecedented ways and means. Through the miraculous work of Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller inspired generations of people with shattered dreams.

Experiencing the Risen Christ as We Face Shattered Dreams

The Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, is considered by some critics to have been the most insightful author of all modern literature. When writing about the hardships and shattered dreams of all people, he discovered that he learned life's lessons most accurately when he observed simple peasants in his native land. One of his most famous stories tells about an old cobbler who had lost his wife and all three of his children. He wanted to die. Then, in reading his Bible about Jesus' appearing to people after the resurrection, he wished so much that Jesus would appear to him and that he could witness to the villages that he had seen the risen Christ. One night he dreamed that Jesus came to the little shop. The next morning, he simply put on his apron and began to repair shoes, but also somewhat hopeful that his dream would come true.

As the short cold day went on, the story tells us about three people whom the cobbler saw from his small window. First, he saw the old man who shoveled snow from the sidewalk. He had no gloves and kept stopping shoveling so he could rub his hands. He looked so very cold. The cobbler invited him in and noticed that the soles of his shoes had holes in them. He quickly patched the shoes and gave the man some gloves.

The second was a young woman with a baby. The snow was falling but the woman had no coat and only a thin covering over the baby. He invited her to come in for some tea. Her husband went to war, and she never heard from him again, but she was pregnant. When the baby came, she lost her job. She was destitute, hungry, and hopeless. He found one of his deceased wife's coats and gave it to her and she warmed at his fire.

Next, he saw the village apple woman, and a mischievous boy run by and steal one of her apples. She caught the little thief by his hair and was thrashing him. The cobbler went outside, bought an apple, gave it to the little boy, and made the boy apologize for his petty crime. As the old woman resumed her route to sell more apples, the boy said, "Lady, let me carry the basket for you. The old cobbler smiled as they went down the street helping each other.

Then he realized that the day had ended and his dream of seeing the risen Christ was shattered. By and by he went to bed and in the story, he heard three voices. Each of the people he had helped had their own identity, but they also looked like the old cobbler imagined Jesus would look.

The title of the Tolstoy story is "Where Love Is, God Is." The cobbler realized that he had indeed seen the risen Christ in the people who needed him to help them and he did! Where his love was, there was the risen Christ.

Therefore....!

The challenge before us as Christians is whether we can really plow the new reality of Jesus' resurrection into our own faith journey. Jesus **prayed** to His Father,

“I am not asking you to take them out of the world. I am coming to you and I am speaking these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”
(John 17:15, 13)

John Wesley said it this way: “God whispers to our heart.” We can have a “God moment,” a time of being permeated, inspired, and given new courage through the presence of the Holy Spirit.”

John Greenleaf Whittier, the great Quaker, has us singing a hymn with these words:

“O sabbath rest of Galilee! O calm of hills above
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee the silence of eternity, interpreted by love.
Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.

In 1978, Scott Peck wrote a book that millions found helpful in dealing with our shattered dreams. It was entitled, *The Road Less Traveled*. As you opened the book the first line on the first page was, “**Life is difficult.**” So it is, but God can bring us the inner peace and the faithful courage to rise up and hear the “sounds of silence” in God’s whispers.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Reprinted in April, 2024 from the original manuscript. Donald W. Haynes was senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Asheboro, North Carolina from June 1973 through June 1977