

# Turning Dreams into Deeds

Hebrews 11:1-16

sermon digest

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Koinonia Farm founder Clarence Jordan was a minister, missionary and Greek scholar before he became a farmer. His *Cotton Patch Version* translation of the New Testament into Georgia dialect is sometimes humorous, often provocative, but always faithful to the Greek text. One of Jordan's more provocative phrases was the statement of faith in Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the turning of dreams into deeds." Martin Luther King Jr. had turned thirteen in 1942 when Jordan had a dream of a community where people could be known by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. He gathered support from friends, left a ministry in Louisville that paid a salary, and started Koinonia Farm—a place where people of all races and stations in life could come together to live out the radical call to forsake all and follow Christ. A casual reading of church history shows that most such experiments do not work in the real world. The utopian ideal of the perfect society seems always to contain the seed of self-destruction rooted in naivete about human nature. Jordan was not naive, but neither was he blind to the radical teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. He fixed his eye on the vision of the beloved community of Christ in the New Testament and set out for Georgia to turn the dream into deeds.

Jordan's friend from seminary days Henlee Barnette later wrote his story choosing the title *Turning Dreams into Deeds*. In short order the Koinonia dream became a nightmare. The Koinonia family was turned out of the local Baptist church. They faced economic boycott designed to starve them out. They became a target of the KKK. Their houses were riddled with bullets from drive-by shootings, a roadside stand was bombed, and they lost insurance on the farm. Jordan would be the first to tell you that turning dreams into deeds is not magic. In fact, his dream did not turn out exactly as he planned. In 1966, he was about give up the dream when a disturbed banker Millard Fuller came to the farm seeking counsel from Jordan about the way of peace. In the subsequent process of giving away his fortune, Fuller dreamed a new dream bigger than Koinonia Farm. Knowing the banking industry as he did, he envisioned a way to provide adequate housing for the poor. Faith in action turned the dream into deeds that we know today as Habitat for Humanity.

**Biography defines faith.** The greatest statement of faith in the entire Bible begins with a dictionary definition, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," or in Clarence Jordan's words, "the turning of dreams into deeds." But the definition is only a part of the story. I suspect that Fred Craddock (*The New Interpreter's Bible, XII, p 131*) is right, that the opening line in Hebrews is a refrain that should be repeated with the life story of every champion of faith from the Old Testament. Follow the rising crescendo of personal stories, and you begin to see the larger picture. Faith is not an abstraction that can be adequately defined in words alone. Faith is a verb, never a dead, impersonal idea. Christian faith is defined through biography. You cannot distinguish faith from people of faith. You cannot understand the word without following the deeds flowing from the thought. "Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds."

Although the word *faith* lies at the center of biblical religion, it is one of the least understood words in Christian history. Somewhere in the process of forming the church, someone got the idea that faith, *pisteo* in the Greek, was about words, creeds, abstract ideas, theological orthodoxy. Thus, faith in Christ was narrowed down to accepting propositions like the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene decision about the relationship of the Father to the Son. As significant as the historical documents became in the Christian story, orthodoxy, right words, was never an adequate substitute for orthopraxy, right deeds; and some of the worst atrocities in human history were committed by Christian against Christian over the mincing of words.

My memory is still vivid. I was nine years old when I made a public profession of my faith and was baptized at the First Baptist Church in Galena Park, Texas. I sincerely wanted to respond to the God I envisioned in my prayers and heard described by mentors and family in the church. I paid close attention to the other kids who "joined the church." The pastor greeted them at the front during the hymn and asked several questions. It became clear to me that to become a Christian you needed to nod "yes" to the questions. So I did. I had very little understanding of most of what I was asked. If affirming the virgin birth of Jesus was essential to my salvation, I was willing, but at the age of nine I had no idea of what it meant to be a virgin.

Over the years, I have had warm memories of my early childish ideas about God. My theology grew with maturity and education, but I have never rejected my childhood awakening to the calling of God in my life. What was important then and now was not my assent to theological questions, even to those that I may consider essential to the Christian faith today. What was important was biography, living out the meaning of my trust in God over a lifetime.

Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," "turning dreams into deeds." Consider the biblical biographies. Abel made a sacrifice pleasing to God that speaks louder after death than it did in life. Enoch was so close to God that he disappeared into the mist of history. The legend says he passed directly into the eternal presence of God. Noah responded to the calling of God to build an ark; he had a vision of saving his family along with the world to come. Then there was Abraham.

Abraham had an utopian vision of a place, the city of God, designed and constructed by the Creator. He followed the promise of God into a foreign land without a road map or any guarantee that the venture would lead to the City. All he had was promise and hope toward the future, a covenant provision for a family growing out of his faithfulness to God. Maybe the funny dialect of Jordan is not so far removed from the spirit of Holy Scripture. The promise of a son to a centurion was a joke. Sarah laughed as would most of us at the thought of becoming parents at seventy or eighty. But from Father Abraham and Mother Sarah, people who dared turn dreams into deeds, came a nation of children and a world of hope.

**Faith is eternal.** Should old men and women dream? More important, should they dare to act on their dreams like Abraham and Sarah? If the word from Joel recited at Pentecost is right, the coming of the Spirit of God is signaled by dreams and visions, "your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." The Abrahams and Sarahs of faith are essential to the whole

family of God and critical to the purpose of God in time.

The words sound sad, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises." The message of faith is not about being rescued from mortality; no one ever is, including Jesus. But people who live by faith, turning dreams into deeds, always leave a legacy for the people who walk behind them. If all that we want from faith is the extension of life into heavenly bliss for me and mine, I think that we miss the whole point. Faith is eternal. Even though we die, our dreams do not die with us. Even though we die, we die with a glimpse of the promise and a gleam of hope for the next generation. Even though we die, the promise of God never dies, and our faith is the stuff that makes the transition from one generation to another.

I attended two Baptist seminaries and found a unique culture common to the feeding and growth of ministers. I was surprised in the move from Fort Worth to Louisville to find the same stories (possibly myths) about student life circulating on both campuses. Seminary students often took night jobs to survive, and their presence in class was not always enthusiastic. In fact, napping in class was not uncommon. We normally began each class with prayer, usually led by one of the students selected by the professor at the beginning of the hour. My favorite story, told at both seminaries as the gospel, was about the student who passed out in class. A somewhat fiendish friend wrote out in large letters on a piece of paper, "The prof just called on you to pray," slipped the note under the sleeping student's face and shook him awake. The student opened his eyes, read the note, jumped to his feet and began to invoke God's blessings on the lessons of the day. He became conscious of something wrong as he heard a few snickers from classmates, quickly closed his prayer, sat down in his embarrassment, and the professor welcomed him to the conscious congregation of classmates.

From my own learned experience, I can testify. Dreaming dreams, no matter how sweet, does not substitute for conscious effort. We are called out of our sleepy-headed dream world to the life of faith, where people are about the work of turning dreams into deeds.