

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**Saturday & Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011**  
**TEXTS: Isaiah 25:6-9; Philippians 4:4-9; John 14:8-14**  
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

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So let me tell you something kind of sweet that happened this week. So Thursday morning we got a voice message at the office from a guy named John Windsor. Now, none of us had any idea who John Windsor was, so we were grateful that he took some time on his message to introduce himself. He explained that he and his buddy...a fellow named John Zorn...were calling from Charlottesville; that they were bicycling cross-country to raise money to help battle eating disorders, which had affected one of John Windsor's relatives; that they had started in Oregon, and were trying to make it to Virginia Beach; and that they wanted to stay in Richmond on Thursday night, and could they spend the night at Christ Church. They'd be happy to camp on the grounds.

Now I have no idea how they picked us out, but they did. I'd like to say they picked us out of the telephone book, but nobody uses telephone books anymore... But we got in touch with them and told them that sure, they could stay here. They could camp if they wanted, but the worship space was always open so if they wanted to they could sleep inside.

So I'm driving up Pouncey Tract Road about 5:30 that afternoon, and there are two guys on bicycles with gear hanging all over the place cycling up the road and I say to myself, "I betcha that's the two John's." And sure enough, a couple minutes after I pull into the parking lot in my car that felt much more comfortable after watching them trudge up the road, they came riding in. The first to greet them were Missy Jennings and Peggy Neely, who were doing some planning for the party next weekend. But they stopped what they were doing to explain to them how to avoid setting off any alarms, and letting them know the kitchen was open for them to use, and just extending hospitality.

Now these two fellows looked exactly like you'd expect a couple of people who'd ridden 3000 miles for a purpose would look...their thighs look like hams, and everything's a bit out of kilter. They're satisfied and smiled, but a bit tired and sweaty...

They got settled a bit; asked them if they'd like a chance to take a shower, which considering their response seems to have been a rare blessing during their journey. So we opened up the GCC, and showed them where the showers were. On my way out about forty-five minutes later I walked over to the GCC, and there were some middle school boys and their adult mentors talking with the freshly showered bike riders who by that time had been invited to come over and share with the Middle School Boys Small Group that was meeting that night their witness and the story of their journey. There were lots of smiles and laughing, and new friends were made.

At some point they told someone that about 30% of their "cold calls" to churches end up panning out. They also mentioned they were both Episcopalians, and a grace for us is that we were the first Episcopal Church they'd stayed in.

So they slept here somewhere. I came in a bit later than usual that Friday morning, and by that time they were gone...which makes sense, since they had a hundred miles to ride that day.

Now this is a small thing that went on here this week. And I'm telling you this because I just want to express gratitude for the generosity of this people. Because it's the generous spirit God has given you that made this small act of hospitality possible. The generosity in keeping this space open all the time. The generosity of a space that has showers in it...which has made a huge difference to our CARITAS guests, and now a huge difference to a couple of strangers who needed a shower. The generosity shown by the young men on Wednesday evening to see Christ in these two strangers, and invite them into their group. The generosity of the adult choir meeting that night, that didn't blink an eye that there were people getting ready to sleep in the worship space, but instead prayed for them. And the spirit of generosity God has given us, that you have allowed to flower, and that says "yes" to those who need to hear those words. Those "yes's" make a difference, in ways we don't always see.

There are lessons God has revealed along the way in our eighteen years; some things we've learned as we've grown up. One of them is that gratitude and generosity are paths to the life Jesus intends for us, and opening our hands is a pretty good way to live.

If you are with Christ Church for the first time, I just want to let you know that God is good and loving and merciful and generous and does "yes," and you're in the midst of a people who seek to live that truth; and who know that something good happens when we rejoice and offer ourselves for the sake of God, and one another, and the stranger in our midst. In our lives, we have all received, and know that none of us exist by our own might or power, but by the Spirit of God. We know what God does incredible things through hearts and hands that are lived open; that living willing to take the risk of generosity, and take a chance, and trust in what God is doing...and life becomes more like the rich feast of good food and well-aged wines that brings gladness and joy and makes life the celebration it's intended to be.

So next week, together we're going to practice this spirit of generosity with which God has blessed us. We'll make an offering of ourselves—our treasure, time, and talent—at the 10:00 AM service next Sunday, and then feast on pizza and dessert afterwards. Worship and offering, pizza and sugar...ain't no better way to start a Sabbath.

We do this together to practice generosity and exercise the spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving God has already given us.

And we do it...make this offering...because God is good, and we dare to dream; we're dreamers, and hoppers, and possibility-believers...that's the work of God, and we're in it...because Jesus is a God of Good News, and the empty tomb declares that life always wins.

We dream of a world being restored, transformed, and healed. Of broken hearts mended, and wounded spirits resurrected.

We dream of our city, our community, and neighborhoods...household by household; school by school, business by business; from here to downtown Richmond...being whole and right.

We dream of young people having the firm foundation of trust in God we all know is vital to the rich life intended for us; we dream that what settles in their hearts and ours—no matter our age—is what's true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable, and all that is excellent and worthy of praise; of parents turning to the children and children turning to the parents, no matter how old the parents and children are.

We dream of the peace that passes all understanding to be revealed to our lives, and the lives of others, and in this world where there is still so much anger and fighting and tears.

We dream that everybody will know how much God loves them...absolutely, God does, always, no matter what...changes lives...says "yes"...and has a good purpose in store.

We dream that God's kingdom will come, starting in our own homes and cul-de-sacs, and that the story of Short Pump shall be brought more into line with the story of the Kingdom of heaven.

We dream beyond ourselves, and of rightness in Haiti, and Sudan, and at George Mason Elementary School, and wherever else God takes us.

We dream of a day when CARITAS is not needed; but until that day comes, we do it because someone is fed by it...and I'm not necessarily talking about our guests.

We dream of a time when all the people may claim the word "rejoice" as their own, because the feast is rich, and the shadow of death has been blasted to smithereens by the Light.

We dare to dream that all God's promises are absolutely true, and that they're all too good to shrink back and play small.

We dream that justice, and mercy, and joy, and peace, and love are possible because all those virtues, and more, were made by God.

And we dream that these dreams are not meant to stay just dreams.

We don't always know how to do these things. We sometimes stumble over our own feet. If you're here for the first time, please know we're just a bunch of human beings.

But we try to keep our heart in the right place, and keep looking up, and let perfect love cast out fear. Jesus has flipped on the switch, so we let the light shine, as best we can. We dream and work for what is possible—right where we find ourselves--because sometimes it's tough out there, and for the world's sake we must, and because of God's sake we can.

In the Old Testament, the prophets like Isaiah dreamed God's dreams, and painted a picture of what God intends. So Isaiah told God's Big Story...of all people—not just Israel, but all people—coming to Mount Zion and finding hope there; a feast to which poor and rich are invited and have a place; the end of death.

And Jesus...at the end of the Last Supper...offered his incredible dream for the people who follow him...that greater things than these are our mission and purpose...the way Jesus tells us that what was not achieved when he walked the earth is, nevertheless, still possible through those who trust and follow.

So we ask one another this week to make our offering, for the sake of one another and for the sake of God. To make a promise and commitment to offer a portion of the wealth we've been given to help us help Jesus help everybody to know how much God loves them.

Now a lot of us know how we do this here, but if you don't, let me give a few words of instruction...

You should be receiving a commitment card in the mail this week; maybe you've already received it. We ask you to pray over it, and talk in your household about it, and consider your gratitude list. Remember that here, every promise is confidential. It's between you and God. The only two people who know what we promise are the two people who put the numbers in the computer system.

We ask one another to make an offering of first fruits. It's a spiritual principle that good things happen when making our offering to God first. It's not a complicated principle. Jesus says "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you." Keep God front and center, rather than our own fears and worries, and the other stuff is put in its place.

We ask one another to stretch; to make an offering that gives us the opportunity individually to exercise trust; to flex our trust and gratitude muscles a little bit. The sign that we're stretching is that somehow, our offering leads us to do something different in how we live. What that different thing is looks different for each one of us. But we let it affect our lives.

We testify that God smiles on every offering; and that what matters more than where we are is where we're going. So what we ask of one another when we make this promise is simply that we take the next step in our practice of giving; and we each know what that is for us better than anybody else. If we've supported financially our common life before, or if we kind of just put something in the basket without thinking about it, we take the next step of being deliberate in giving, and make this promise that we call a pledge. Make a choice for being accountable to God. And then, if we already pledge, that we take the next step of giving proportionally based on our income. And then, that if we already are giving proportionally, we take the next step of increasing that proportion to move towards the tithe...which we define here as 10%, off the top, before taxes, given gladly.

But to make it simpler than all that, we really just ask one another to take a chance and stretch as best we can to practice and exercise the trust and generosity that is already so much part of our common life. Because when we open our hands, stretching them out is what we're doing; and because as every dreamer knows, taking a risk and choosing to live large is how dreams come true. After all, it was a dream these two young men had about riding their bikes across country for the sake of a larger purpose. I talked with John Zorn Saturday afternoon...the other John. They arrived in Virginia Beach about 12:30 that day. "Dipped their toes in the ocean," as John said. They didn't, of course, dip their toes in the Atlantic simply because they dreamed it was possible. They also did so because they got on their bikes and rode.

The story God is writing is too big to not be told; the gifts God has given are too powerful to remain hidden; and the dreams God has given us--and has for us--are too world-changing and life-changing to remain just dreams. So next week, we'll give thanks, make an offering of our treasure, talent, and time so what again, we can help God make give a body to these dreams God has placed on our common heart.