

**What's Good? A sermon based on "Man of La Mancha"**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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**August 4, 2019**

*Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 5:38-48*

In front of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC is a statue of Don Quixote. It's a breathtaking one, he's in his armor, there on his horse, lance in hand, bursting out of what appears to be a solid chunk of rock. What a good and inspirational work of art to have in our nation's capital.

And what a wonderful musical to use in our "Gospel Goes to Broadway" summer worship series. One doesn't have to be a theologian or biblical scholar to see the parallels between Quixote and Christ. Both believed the world could be and should be a better place, that was their quest. Both believed we should be working to make it better. Both were courageous! And both were regarded, by many of their contemporaries, to be fools.

In the show's 1965 Broadway debut, when Quixote finished the song that Harrison just sang for us, the audience stood and cheered with tears in their eyes. What do you suppose made them respond like that? What moved them so deeply?

I believe that they were touched by appeal of a great dream, an ideal, even if it was called "impossible". At least for a moment, that sophisticated Broadway audience was caught up in Don Quixote's quest, immersing themselves in risky, romantic idealism and loving it!

That's noteworthy, because it seems like that kind of idealism is out of style now. We pride ourselves in being realists, evaluating everything in terms of efficiency, cost effectiveness and practicality. Most of us have little time for dreams or visions.

Maybe that's why we have so much trouble with the Sermon on the Mount.

Common sense tells us that to go two miles when you're only required to go one is ridiculous. To turn the other cheek when someone is hitting us is foolish. To pray for those who are persecuting us is dumb. To love our enemies makes no sense.

And even if we can make ourselves tow that difficult line from time to time, who among us can do what Jesus is asking us to do 100% of the time? We don't deny that they are beautiful thoughts but in today's culture, among

people like us? No Way! We are more practical than that. It's true, isn't it? Idealism is out of style.

So I wonder... what if that is precisely what's killing us? Perhaps we have become so calculating and practical that we have set aside our dreams and ideals. We seldom ask for and demand the best of others. What's even worse, we seldom expect the best from ourselves.

And yet, Jesus reminds us that we cannot live the best life if we are always expecting the worst. What we need is a dream, a vision of what can be. We need a dream that captures our imagination and inspires us to reach again and again for that which is yet to be, by God's grace.

One thing that excites me about the gospel is that it challenges us to reach for the unreachable. We will never outgrow our ideals, because no matter how much we grow and accomplish, Christ will still be out there ahead of us, calling us to grow some more and to accomplish some more. And that excites me. I don't want to follow a Jesus who asks me to do anything less.

Both Quixote and Christ would quick to remind us today that whatever your situation is, there is hope.

Miguel de Cervantes, the writer of the 17th century book the Broadway show was based on, wants us to know that is the case by setting this story in the most desperate of situations: The Spanish Inquisition. The story, which is a play within a play, begins in a dungeon where prisoners languished, waiting for their probable execution. It can't get any more depressing or hopeless than that!

It is in this setting that Quixote says "*for neither good nor evil can last forever*". He believes that since evil has lasted a long time, good must now be close at hand. So did Jesus.

Another thing that I find common in both Quixote and Christ is that they were really good at telling people how great they really are. How special they are, how loved they are, how valued they are, how good they are. Each, in his own way, loved people into the best version of themselves.

Individually, we may not be able to fully live up to the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Perfection may not be realized in our lifetime but that is no reason not to try. The person who reaches for the highest ideals, even if the result is failure, still changes their life for the better by the trying.

Think about Simon Peter for a minute – that rough, crude, impetuous fisherman. Before meeting Jesus he was just another nobody – in other people’s minds and even his own. But then Jesus came along, tapped him on the shoulder, and said *“follow me and I’ll teach you how to fish for people.”*

Later, once he had grown into his vision and understanding, he professed his faith in Jesus, who then said *“You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church.”*

Up until that point, Simon had not acted in a particularly solid manner. But then, Jesus gave him a new vision of himself. Simon began to believe the vision and it changed his life forever. Although he never became perfect, the more he saw himself as Peter the Rock, the more he became Peter the Rock. Solid. Dependable. Strong enough to be the foundation of a movement that would change the world.

As he did throughout his ministry, Jesus believed Simon Peter into newness. Jesus saw the potential, the thing that was not quite yet reality, and made that vision come true.

Perhaps our so-called realism is not so realistic after all. Maybe immersing ourselves in calculating, hard-headed, practical reality simply encourages mediocrity. What we need is more dreams, more visions of the way things ought to be, especially when it is God who promises to be with us on the quest.

In “Man of La Mancha”, people made fun of the crazy old man Quixote with the impossible dreams. At first, the female lead, a prostitute named Aldonza joined in the jeers. Eventually, Quixote’s words praising her stirred a longing within. Gradually the dream of the person she could become began to grow in her.

Near the end of the story, Quixote had abandoned his quest. His energy was depleted, his hope was gone, and he was lying at home, disillusioned and fading from this life. When Aldonza heard of it, she went to his side and pleaded with him to become Don Quixote once again. She helped him recall the words of his song. He was stirred and arose from his bed. He imagined setting out again on his quest.

With excitement and a new energy he began to sing “I am the Man of La Mancha”. But the strain was too much, he collapsed and died.

Aldonza refused to accept his death. She says *"A man has died. He seemed a good man, but I did not know him. Don Quixote is not dead."* Just then, someone calls out to her "Aldonza." With a lift of her chin, she replies "My name is Dulcinea," and Dulcinea she became. Those who stood nearby were so moved that they began to sing...

*"This is my quest, to follow that star,  
no matter how hopeless, no matter how far.  
To fight for the right without question or pause,  
to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause;*

*And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest,  
that my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest.  
And the world will be better for this, that one man,  
scorned and covered with scars,  
Still strove with his last ounce of courage,  
to reach the unreachable stars."*

Amen.