

**The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
December 24, 2009**

Christmas Eve

To dream the impossible dream;
To beat the unbeatable foe;
To strive with your last ounce of courage,
To run where the brave do not go.

This is my quest
To follow the star,
No matter how hopeless,
No matter how far.

So sang Don Quixote, the Man of La Mancha in one of the most memorable musicals ever written and in one of the most sung songs of a generation. Now, perhaps it was the ideals of a generation, a generation that had sought to exceed the barriers of the commonplace and the narrow and that sought to free stifled moral imaginations, that made this song so appealing, at least to them. After all this was a generation that was singing at much the same time John Lennon's song "Imagine," in which Lennon invited us to imagine a world without hatred, violence, prejudice, and even religion. But I don't think it was just a single generation; after all, even today "Dream the Impossible Dream" is still remembered and sung. That makes one suspect that it is not simply the ideals of a single generation to which the song appeals, but rather something deep in the human spirit itself. For, to dream dreams, to be unhindered by the lack of imagination is very much a dream, an ideal which we in our finest moments imagine to fulfill.

What greater representative for dreaming impossible dreams could there be than Don Quixote, that simple gentleman of La Mancha, who, before his adventures began, was simply known as Alonso Quijana the Good? For it was the good Alonso who, after having read too many stories of knights errant, took it into his head that a common farm girl was the Princess

Dulcinea del Toboso. He further came to believe that she had been enchanted by a wicked sorcerer and that it was his duty to free her by daring deeds of knight errantry. And, it was the height of his dreaming to take his barnyard nag and see in it the supernatural steed, Rocinante, and to take the fat and indolent Sancho Panza and see in him a noble's squire, and even to take a barber's brass washbasin and see in it a helmet of gold.

Now, clearly such a person as this may well be something other than a dreamer; he may simply be a person who has taken leave of his senses. That is exactly what his family thought as they tried various stratagems to get him back home. After all, what sort of noble dream is it really to come upon a windmill and take it for a giant with whom one must duel? It is madness, and of that we cannot doubt when the windmill wins, as windmills usually do, and Don Quixote takes some weeks to mend his broken bones.

Yet, in the course of reading of his misbegotten adventures, the character of Don Quixote brings us such relief from the ordinary world, and is so bold and pure hearted in his pursuit of disenchanting Dulcinea, and the people he meets are such rascals, that we begin to think that if this be madness and if all else is sanity, then let us bravely choose madness.

That is surely the depth of the dream, the depth at which it goes beyond madness and carries with it a sanity far purer than the supposed sanity that we normally encounter. That is the impossible dream – to accept no limits to our goals, not even the fear of being called mad. That is the impossible dream – to find the peace of real freedom.

So the mad Don Quixote becomes a hero, a man who never let his imagination be broken by any limits – not the circumstances of birth, not worldly position, not the supposed reality of a world that at times seems far too unreal.

Yet, for all those who believe all that, but who have read to the end Cervantes' tale of the

good Don, there seems something profoundly disappointing about the way that the tale turns out. For, at the end, there is no celebration of this hero of mental freedom. Instead, what we are told is that on his deathbed, the good Don came to repent of his enchantment with knight errantry. Indeed, he simply says, "I see through all the nonsense and fraud contained in all those books of chivalry, and my only regret is that my disillusionment has come so late." So it seems that even for Don Quixote, the dream truly was impossible, and could not be maintained. Both dreamer and dream seem defeated.

Or are they? May it not be that just perhaps Don Quixote actually achieved the impossible dream on his deathbed? For, in this world it is not actually such a difficult dream to see a princess in a milkmaid; after all a lot of milkhands who want to marry princesses do it all the time. It is a far more impossible dream to see a milkmaid in a milkmaid and to love her for what she is, instead of making her into something we would rather have than a milkmaid.

Oh, it is alright to imagine as John Lennon said, a world without hatred, violence or even religion, if that means to imagine a good world. But too often such imaginings get little beyond the stage of fantasy. Often the world of peace that we think we are boldly imagining is a world not in which the sick are cared for, the desperate consoled, and the oppressed freed; it is a world in which we, by fantasy, have conveniently snipped out the sick, the desperate, and the oppressed. In short, it is not a world populated by the full range of real human beings. For better or for worse, the human world is a world where we do suffer and where in the end we all die.

Far too often, it is fantasy and not moral imagination that is the stuff out of which our dreams are made. It is fantasy that covers up our insufficiencies. If we think that we have to have the most beautiful girl in the world, or the most beautiful guy, and if the one we love isn't the most beautiful in the world, we often resort to fantasy. Fantasy can makes us believe that she is.

But fantasy can also keep us from loving fully; it can make us wish that she were different than she really is. The proof that men and women do so fantasize is that often when technology offers a way to turn the duckling into a swan, and even to turn that whole process into a wildly successful television reality show, so many people leap at the chance and are actually applauded by their so-called loved ones. Why is it so hard to love her, though, if she isn't a swan? It is fantasy to tilt at windmills and to declare them giants; it is also fantasy to wave a technological wand and to make everybody look beautiful – and to make them all look the same, which is what usually happens. What is a far harder dream to dream and a far harder dream to realize is to see the world as it really is, and to care for it as it really is. That is to see and to create real beauty.

It is a far harder dream, too, because we so often believe that in order to see value in ourselves we need to see in the mirror the great scholar, the great athlete, the powerful one or the popular one, the truly good one. We develop fantasies about ourselves. Sometimes that is vanity; sometimes it is because we can't imagine why anybody might care for us unless we fit the stereotype. For the same reason, we therefore have a hard time caring for others unless somehow we can get ourselves to see them in the same light, unless we can believe that there is something unique or special about them. Thus anybody who can get people to believe that they might possess these qualities can get the benefit of love, rather like the emperor who gets everybody to believe that he is wearing the finest clothes when he is actually naked. How many times has the supposed class mouse, previously ignored by the whole class, become the truly popular one just because she suddenly starts dating the most popular guy in the class?

But that is not how God looks at us. Not at all. That is why we actually have a chance at real love.

St. Athanasius summed up the Christian religion in this phrase: "God became a man so

that men and women might become God.” That is to say, in the first instance, that by God having become human in Christ that we now have life in God. But what that means goes very deep, for it is also to say that because in Christ Jesus that God is a man, that we are most like God when we accept our humanity and the humanity of others, weak and frail as it is. For it is that humanity, all of it, the humanity of the sick and the oppressed and the depressed that God honors and loves. It is that humanity that God by becoming the son of a carpenter and his young bride makes godlike.

Understand what all that humanity includes. I have spoken so far about a contrast between so-called beautiful people and the rest of us. Humanity, to be sure, includes both. But it also includes some rather extraordinary people as well – Down’s Syndrome children and adults, deformed and bent people, injured people and eccentric people.

There is the impossible dream. It is an impossible dream to love that sort of humanity as it is. We would prefer to dream it away, or perhaps find ways to “cure” it. But to see the light of God in everything ordinary, to see things as they are in the light of God, that is the impossible dream we need ever to dream. That is the impossible dream that God in the birth of Jesus has made truly *possible*.

And, now in these ordinary elements of bread and wine, let us see God’s own promise and presence, and in these gifts that God gives us to unite us to himself, let our most impossible dreams be fulfilled.