

Easter 7  
8/5/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 22:12-21

Psalm 97

John 17:20-26

**That the world may know**

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I've been doing a lot of thinking over the last week about our meeting last Sunday, and what we have been doing as a community before and since then.

And I feel that I have to say... that You People are Wonderful.

Why does the preacher dare to declare such an unlikely thing?

We have committed to a once in a generation process, and it probably feels to some of you that it seems to be taking a generation to wind up!

Last week's meeting was kind of clunky. We made a clear decision or two, although not necessarily the decisions some thought we were making. We'll probably have to backtrack a little, which may become confusing or simply exasperating.

In the weeks leading up to the meeting, and even more so since, there have been some rather "frank" conversations in the working group and church council and other places on questions of procedure, content and interpretation, although no blood spilt.

It is all very time consuming, and there are other things we'd prefer to be doing.

And yet you're all back here again today, smiling!

In fact, as long as the process has been even to now – and as expensive – and as murky as the future seems at this point, there has been much encouragement and gratitude and understanding of what we are all confronted with. This has meant that there has been a strong sense that it is *we* who are doing this, working together, seeking a common mind.

And so I'm more than happy to declare that if I had a choice as to who it would be with whom I would be doing something like this, it would be you.

But it is important that that declaration not be heard as sentimentality. I'm not saying that I think that you are particularly nice (although some of you really are). I'm not saying that you are right in what you want to come out of this – some of you are probably quite wrong, if rightness and wrongness can actually be determined here.

Sentimentality sees only what it wants to see, or wishes to be seen only in a particular light. It mistakes the absence of war for peace, the lack of resistance for assent or consent. Sentimentality imagines that you want what I want. Sentimentality white-washes.

The wonder of the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, for the moment, at least, is not a matter of sentimentality so much as a theological wonder – something of a miracle even.

For we are in the process of choosing a future or perhaps, more strongly, of *creating* a future, and this has the potential to be very dangerous.

A safe approach to this would be to imagine the future to be much the same as the present. This is the sentimental approach: because it *is*, it is *right*; what we have and can carry over, is enough. It is the safest approach, if we can pull it off, because it is the least disruptive.

But I doubt that we can. Too much is up for grabs for sentimentality to win the day in the end, but it may still seriously cloud our vision and thinking if we are not wary of it. Shifting back to UMC will not be the same kind of thing as moving from there to here was. Refitting this place and continuing to worship here will not be the same as what we've experienced here in the last 6 or 7 years.

None of this is to predetermine which we should choose. The point is simply that we understand what lurks in the future, behind those choices. And I don't mean simply that the future is always unpredictable, and therefore potentially dangerous. This is the risk of the future as the proverbial bus, not seen until it is too late. We can't do anything about that kind of future risk, except decide that we will not fear it simply because it might happen.

The particular risks in the future which confront us as a congregation are we ourselves, the members of the congregation. The scariest thing about tomorrow is always the people we will meet there, or that some will not have come with us to that new time or place. It does not have to be the case that these threats are realised, but only sentimentality would deny their possibility.

If it seems that I'm getting a little overdramatic and pessimistic here, imagine ... a Thursday night. It has been a taxing week – more so than usual. But finally you can withdraw to a safe place, out of sight. It's the Passover again, and you need to focus. Jesus seems to have a little more to say than usual. "Love one another, as I have loved you". Yes, you think, as you look around the group. We can do that. Something which doesn't make sense happens between Jesus and Judas, but both Jesus and Judas often don't make sense. We can sort that out later; maybe Saturday or Sunday. Jesus continues, now praying: *As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

It's a nice prayer, you think, although you wish Jesus would pray in a nice straight line for once, from here to there, and not go on and around in circles like that.

When Jesus' disciples hear this prayer, the betrayals and denials and doubts – the crucifixion – are yet to happen; there is more than a little reality checking about to kick in. Prior to all these things, the experience of love in the community of disciples, and then the command to love, and then even Jesus' prayer for a united community, might just be more warm fuzzy sentimentality. The desperate *need* of Jesus' love command and love prayer is not felt until "it" all hits the fan.

The Futures Project small groups in April were asked about what they would consider "deal breakers" with respect to any option we might consider for our future. The two things most often identified were maintaining our theological, liturgical and communal integrity, and the preservation of Hotham Mission.

I think that these commitments will be a great guide to us as we think together.

But the question is: are these *sentimental* commitments? They don't *have* to be; but *do* they reflect a glossing over of what we really do and or really are as a congregation? In fact, we can't really say until we are confronted with the possibility of cutting Hotham Mission or the possibility of a fracture in the congregation if it seems we can't find a way forward.

It is one thing to be warmed on a cool spring Thursday evening by good wine, confident that because Jesus is on my side I'm on his. It is another thing, when that confidence is undermined and we have to deal with what has not yet come to the surface.

This is the marvel of what we have done to date. Minds are changing, visions are shifting, in all directions. We *have* done well so far, but there is still a long way to go, whichever of the many options before us we choose. Making the choice itself will threaten to consume us, let alone then acting on it.

How then to approach what still lies before us?

We can simply resign ourselves to the hard slog. This is a bad idea. Resignation and sentimentality are basically the same, in that both are without hope: the resigned are sadly hopeless because nothing will change and the sentimental are happily hopeless because nothing needs to.

This is not the outlook of the people of God.

We are seeking to act because we must. This "must" is not the something-must-be-done-about-the-church "must"; that's just resignation again, brightened up a little with a sense of responsibility.

The "must" which causes us to act is indicated in the snippet of Jesus' prayer we heard in our gospel reading:

*"that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

That is, the "must" is not the buildings question; the buildings are just the material – the object – around which we are gathered.

The "must" of what we are doing concerns the "we" ourselves who are gathered.

When we first began this process I proposed that we are not in the process of preparing for mission by sorting out such mundane things as buildings and budgets, positioning ourselves for some as yet unstarted missional push. We are, rather, *in this very process*, engaged in mission.

How is this this case? Because in this process we are "proving" the gospel, understanding "prove" here as much in its older sense as in its usual modern sense. To prove something – in its older sense – is to test it; consider how car manufacturers test their new vehicles on their "proving grounds".

We test: Will the gospel expose to us where we are being more sentimental than truthful in our sense of who we are and what is required of us? And, having so revealed who we are, will the gospel enable in us a step further into the unity for which Jesus prays?

We must prove – test – the gospel in this way, for it is only so that we ourselves are tested, proved.

In this proving of the gospel which is our testing of its capacity to work among us, there opens up the possibility of the second (more familiar) sense of proof, which Jesus also implies in his prayer:

*[...may they] become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

We are not “preparing for” mission in our difficult deliberations. If that were what this was about we would be in the realm of sentimentality again, happily bulldozing our way to what is – to me – the “obvious” outcome.

“Love one another” is our mission. That is so difficult that Jesus imagines that it requires even him to pray for it.

The gospel question to us is whether we believe that the unity of believers can communicate to the world that the Father sent the Son. Put differently, the question is whether we believe that gathering around the table each week “remembrances” – makes present to us and the world – Jesus himself, sent from God. These are the miracles God offers his people today.

You have done well so far. You *are* wonderful. If you won’t take my word for it, ask the God whose Christ thinks you are worth his prayer.

Continue to be such a marvel, that we the church and the world around us may know that the Father sent the Son.

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