

“One for Sorrow...Two for Joy”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for February 11<sup>th</sup> 2018 (Transfiguration Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Mark 9: 2-13

The central section of Mark’s Gospel...the central section by which I mean, specifically the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> chapters of Mark...

...those two central chapters of what is presumably the oldest of the four New Testament Gospels, those two central chapters must surely be counted as one of the most powerful stretches of writing to be found anywhere in the New Testament. Truthfully: Mark lacks many of the things we cherish in the other Gospels: the challenging sermons of Matthew’s account, the beloved parables unique to Luke, the polished prose and exalted heights of John’s Gospel. Those shortcomings are more than made up, however, by the sheer sweep of Mark’s narrative and his instinctive way of juxtaposing episodes that thereby reveal the complex contours of the Christian faith. What I mean by that is Mark’s way of weaving together a succession of episodes that manage to reveal (almost in shot-gun fashion) both the exalted heights shown to us in Christ, side by side with the full depth of human anguish in which Christ chooses fully to participate. And so the first of these two central chapters—Mark, chapter 8—begins with Christ feeding the four thousand, immediately followed first by the Pharisees demanding a sign and then—this an even more painfully—a dialogue between Christ and his disciples in which it becomes clear that they are as clueless as the Pharisees.

With that, we then see Jesus’ healing of a blind man at Bethsaida—a two-step process which foreshadows the episode that comes next: namely Peter’s recognition that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. And yes: Peter’s intellectual healing is also a two-step process since Peter, within seconds of his insightful confession, seeks to divert Christ from his destiny on the Cross, eliciting from Jesus’ the famous retort: *Get thee behind me Satan!* What follows next is the chilling invitation for those who seek to be true disciples to take up their cross...as well as a prophecy that many of those gathered will not experience death without first seeing the Kingdom come is power. Reading these chapters is not unlike being on a roller-coaster: each new high is followed by a steep descent. And when we turn from chapter 8 to chapter 9, the same pattern is apparent, starting with this morning’s reading—Christ’s exaltation on Holy Mountain (what we now refer to as the Transfiguration)—immediately followed by that odd conversation about Elijah and Elijah’s suffering. Mark leaves that particular puzzle hanging; in Matthew’s Gospel, however, it gets spelled out explicitly, namely that the Elijah to whom Jesus refers is actually none other than the recently decapitated John the Baptist. And yes: had we kept reading, we would have come upon a failed attempt by some of Christ’s disciples to exorcise an evil spirit from a young boy, followed by a repeat warning that the Christ would suffer many things ultimately rising on the third day, having endured all of those horrors. Once again...

...once again we see the uncanny power of Mark's narrative. By general agreement Mark was anything but a great stylist; those who know Greek assure us that Mark's is lousy. Where Mark excels, however—and through his gift in this regard he clearly influences the entire Christian tradition—where Mark excels is his instinctive ability to reveal (through the ups and downs of his narrative), both the heights and depths of the Gospel: by which I mean the outrageous exaltation that is the promised ending both to Christ's story and to our story, set side by side with the horrific depths to which we human beings (including the one we call Jesus) will inevitably find themselves eventually ensnared.

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Let me speak about the title with which I have christened this sermon. "One for sorrow...two for joy." It's an odd title and yes, it's also a borrowed title: borrowed (and adapted) from a rather eccentric source, namely a book (entitled "Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy"/different numbers but in the same proportion!)—a book written by a Methodist pastor—who undertakes a theological and spiritual examination of the practice of saying the traditional Catholic rosary. How's that for a mouthful: the Marian rosary looked at from the perspective of a sympathetic Methodist. It's an interesting book, to say the least...and it's a helpful title, in my humble opinion. Because what that title refers to...

...what that title refers to is the fact that Catholics—as they say the rosary on a daily basis—are supposed to ponder 15 episodes in the life of Christ. (For what it's worth, that changed during the time of Pope John Paul II who added five more episodes; this book was written prior to that...or it would have needed a far more complicated title!). At any rate: at the time the book was written and published, Catholics would—on some days of the week—recite the rosary against the backdrop of 5 joyful mysteries associated with the **birth** of Christ. On other days they would recite the rosary against the backdrop of 5 glorious mysteries associated with the **resurrection** of Christ. And finally, on other days they would recite the rosary against the backdrop of 5 sorrowful mysteries associated with the **death** of Christ. Hence the title: 5 for sorrow...10 for joy. And yes: that's a title that somehow came to mind this past week, as I pondered...as I pondered the Transfiguration of Christ, against the backdrop...against the backdrop of Ash Wednesday, and the 40 days of Lent approaching just around the bend.

Because there is—especially in Western Christianity, which is to say within Catholicism and Protestantism—there is a tendency for the Lenten reality to define the heart and soul of the Christian Way. I realize full well that we Protestants much prefer the empty cross to the fully-loaded crucifix you will find here when Trinity Catholic is at worship. And yes: I realize full well that we liberal Protestants are indeed, sometimes guilty of the accusation one prominent Catholic theologian once levelled against us, namely that we Protestants are always seeking to cover up the cross with flowers. Nevertheless: what cannot be denied in the 500 year history of mainline Protestantism—what certainly cannot be denied in the history of this United Church of ours—is a seriousness of purpose that attempts to emulate the way of Jesus Christ, by

engaging and seeking to bring healing to those parts of our world that cry out for healing. Lent, properly understood, should have no truck with the cultivation of suffering for the sake of suffering. What Lent, rightly can do—on the one hand—is help us to break the chains of our addictions to the things of this world and—on the other hand—sensitize us to the pain of the world and the travails of those in whom we ought to see the face of Jesus, in whom we ought to see the face of the brother or sister for whom Christ died. In short....in short:

...Lent is a time for recalling that there can be no bypassing of the Cross. When we seek to have Easter Sunday without having first endured Good Friday, we are cheating ourselves of the full experience of the faith to which we have been called. When we seek to experience the joys of the Gospel, without ever tasting of the blood, sweat and tears that are so evident to us at Gethsemane and on Calvary Hill, we are cheating ourselves of the full experience of the faith to which we have been called. And yes: when preachers remind us that we are called not only to celebrate Christ, not only to worship Christ, not only to praise Christ—but to seek to follow the Way of Christ, to seek to follow the Way of the Cross—their is an uncomfortable word that we all need to hear, not least yours truly. And yet....and yet.

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**One** for sorrow...**two** for joy. As those words tripped through my psyche over the past few days, I found myself pondering what it means for us to celebrate the Transfiguration not in mid-summer, as the great tradition has generally celebrated it on August 6<sup>th</sup>, but to celebrate the Transfiguration roughly in the order suggested by the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. In other words: celebrating the Transfiguration at the midway point of Christ's ministry, just as the real heavy lifting begins, just as the promise of the Cross begins to loom larger, just as the conflict with those threatened by Jesus begins to heat up to the boiling point. Positioned here...positioned today...this radiant mountain-top episode shared with us through the testimony of Jesus' closest disciples (James, John and Peter)...positioned here...positioned today (with Ash Wednesday less than 72 hours away)...is it not the case that this joyful prelude to our somber Lenten observance serves as a warning and as a reminder? A warning lest we turn the Gospel into a tragic dirge...and a reminder that the Gospel truly can be characterized...and perhaps ought to be characterized...as an ultimately comic affair in which the one for sorrow will always be placed in the context of the two for joy.

And yes...while some may fear that such an approach will eradicate the serious side to our faith...will turn the Christian faith into some sort of light-weight "new age" religion, here's what I actually think happens when we allow the "sorrow" that is an undeniable part of our faith-story, to outweigh the "joy" that marks our story from start to finish. Because what I actually believe...is that the Christian faith, minus its joy at the start, its joy in the middle and its joy at the end...would produce nothing but despair. And I can illustrate that with a recent episode on one of my favorite TV shows.

In truth: it was a pretty bad episode...of a generally good show: *Blue Bloods*, starring Tom Selleck as the Chief of Police in New York City. Two Fridays ago, one of the story lines followed a couple of police officers called to quell some violence in a New York City High School. One of the characters—the High School Principal—was a man of high ideals, who yearned for his school to be a place of hope and renewal for the young people who passed through its corridors. Unfortunately, because of a handful of rough, out-of-control kids, the school was not even safe, let alone a place of hope and learning. Sadly, by the end of the episode—after repeat visits to the school by these two police officers—the idealistic High School Principal had gone off the deep end and had taken a handful of his students hostage, a twist in the plot that didn't work especially well, I'm afraid. Nevertheless: if the Christian Way is nothing more than an earnest attempt by earnest people to grit their teeth earnestly and make the world a better (and more earnest) place...well, then frankly I suspect it's a way of life that would ultimately drive all of us to the sort of desperation that might prompt a High School Principal to take his own students hostage. And my point is this:

Much as we preachers like to remind our congregations that you can't have Easter without Good Friday, we should also issue the occasional reminder that you can't have Good Friday without Easter: because Good Friday without Easter stops being good. The Way of Christ...the way of radical solidarity with the lowest and the least...is a way worth following not because we're meant to be masochists, but because the image of God shines brightly in every human soul, and the joy that has been promised from the Empty Tomb...the joy that was first promised on Holy Mountain in the radiant visage of the Transfigured Christ...is a joy that has been promised to each and to all.

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Permit a final thought.

This morning it was our privilege, here at Trinity, to welcome a handful of new members to our congregational fold. While it would bother me greatly to think that anyone would regard either them or us as a band of "happy idiots", it would not bother me at all—in fact it would delight me—to be informed that we were all being regarded as "fools for Christ." Which is to say...

...which is to say: those who are foolish enough to see their own destiny...to see the human destiny...as ultimately a good and kind and gracious destiny, all of the considerable evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Not called to deny, fools though we may be, the abyss into which human life all too often descends. Rather insisting that the abyss—the pain, the sorrow, the tears; the abuse, the cruelty, the neglect—foolishly or wisely insisting that the abyss will be given neither the final word nor the last hurrah: that the closing chapter of the human story will partake, will participate, in the radiance that we beheld on Holy Mountain...that we beheld, that you and I beheld...in the face of the One who has promised to wipe away our every tear.

May His joy be ours, and may his unquenchable light illumine our every step. This day...and forever more. Amen!