

“COGITATE OR EMULATE?”

Mark 1:14-20; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet

January 21, 2018

Many times over the years people have inquired of me, “How do you think of something to say every Sunday?” “How do you come up with a new sermon every week?” I remember sitting in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church in York, Pennsylvania as a high school student feeling called to become a pastor but wondering the same thing. It was a stumbling block for me for a while.

But doing it almost every week, I can tell you the process of creating a sermon is regularly one of the more profound and mystical experiences of my life. It is, in some ways, like giving birth to a baby every week. (Even as I say that, I know most of the mothers here are saying, “No, Tom, it definitely is not!”) I do not mean at all to minimize the pain endured by women in childbearing or to think I can understand the ecstasy of holding for the first time a child that one has carried in the womb for nine months. But the sermonic process, too, engenders both birth pangs and elation.

There are more than a few sleepless Saturday nights I suffer from what I call “the Jeremiah complex,” when, like the prophet, I am skittish about preaching in the morning because the words are excruciating, hard to speak and hard to hear. But, not unlike Jeremiah, they smolder within me and it is as if my insides are on fire and there is no choice but to speak those difficult words into our lives¹ lest I hedge on my pastoral call. Thankfully, there are other times when my insomnia is of a happier sort, akin to a child waiting for Christmas morning, because what I have to say I hardly can wait to share with you.

¹ Jeremiah 20:9

I try to bring to the process each week the best of my abilities and a plan to address the sermon's focus. But with great regularity I am surprised at the sermon that emerges. It is as if I have an Unseen Partner showing me the way. Actually, I do have several partners. You, for one. Sermons arise out of the lives of congregations. The contexts and circumstances of congregations are the soil out of which every sermon grows.

There is also the great cloud of scholars and commentators from previous generations as well as ours who weigh in on the biblical texts via their books and writings that is many times a part of my preparation. Contemporary experience, both my own and whatever is happening in the larger world, also exerts its influence. And poets, artists, and musicians uncover angles on life that evoke fresh ways of seeing.

But it is that Unseen Partner I experience as my primary writing and preaching partner - the Spirit of God confirming, correcting, pointing me in one direction and not another. The Unseen Partner who is indispensable in the process gets much of the credit for whatever life and wisdom my sermons convey and none of the blame when they fall short.

I say all of that because the path to this week's sermon was especially winding and unexpected. The lectionary compilers suggest that along with today's gospel passage from Mark about the call of the first disciples and, by extension, us, we should also consider the First Corinthians passage that begins with St. Paul writing, "*Let those who have wives be as though they had none.*" My first thought was, "Now there is a no-win text if ever there was one!" There are those who will be spitting mad at the passage and others for whom it raises false hopes! So let me say quickly that Paul is providing neither spiritual warrant for polyamory nor authorizing the discard of marriage vows. But what *is* Paul talking about?

Here is where my Unseen Partner took me on a circuitous, but ultimately fruitful, route I had not expected or intended. As I was working on this sermon, I was directed in the unlikeliest of ways to a *tour de force* written by a now-deceased Jesuit priest with the awkward name of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It is called "*The Mass on the World.*"² Teilhard, as he commonly was called by his friends and admirers, was so ahead of his time the Vatican did not allow him to publish his writings in the areas of religion and philosophy (though his friends published them after his death). In addition to being a priest, Teilhard also was a paleontologist and one of the discoverers of the Peking Man.

² "The Mass on the World" by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin" is a fifteen page devotional prayer mass best accessed in Thomas M. King's [Teilhard's Mass: Approaches to "The Mass on the World"](#) published by Paulist Press in 2005.

I had read several of Teilhard's other works including *The Human Phenomenon* and *The Divine Milieu* but not until recently his "*Mass on the World*." Were it not for its length, it might have become itself the sermon today. It was in the Ordos Desert of Asia in 1923, after excavating with a colleague the first traces of humans ever found in China, and under the mortal threat of bandits and warlords, that Teilhard began "*The Mass*" by exclaiming to God,

*"Since I have neither bread nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols...I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world."*³

Integral to "*The Mass on the World*" and all of Teilhard's writings is his understanding of the apostle Paul. Paul wrote that the community of the faithful is the present-day incarnation of the body of Christ and, being as far ahead of the times in his day as Teilhard was in his, went on to suggest that indeed the whole universe can be considered Christ's body.

There is a great stream of Christian thought, with Paul a part of it, that argues the incarnation of God did not first happen two thousand years ago in Bethlehem but at the creation of the cosmos when God began to self-reveal.⁴ The psalmists agree. Psalm 8 exclaims, "*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!...When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*"

Imagine what considering the physical creation to be an incarnation of God would mean for our care and protection of the earth. Would we so cavalierly desecrate and pollute God's body? Apostles of this school of thought say wryly that the birth of Jesus is when we began to take the incarnation of God seriously because it took on human form. Following Paul's lead, Teilhard in his *Mass* pictures the cosmos as being the body of Christ with Jesus as its soul. Yes, oh yes, oh yes!

More: Teilhard rhapsodized about his love for the world which is also his love for God when he wrote, "*Now the earth certainly can clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into her dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast...But her enchantment can no longer do me harm, since she has become for me, over and above herself, the Body of him who is and of him who is coming.*"⁵

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Several of the psalmists represent this school of thought, too. For instance, read Psalms 8, 148, 150.

⁵ From Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "*The Mass on the World*" available in Thomas M. King's *Teilhard's Mass: Approaches to "The Mass on the World"* published by Paulist Press in 2005.

Teilhard envisioned all of life to be one, all enfolded within the living and loving God. Therefore, he could insightfully write that *“the age of nations is past. It remains for us now, if we do not wish to perish, to set aside ancient prejudice and build the earth.”* And then, he said, *“Someday, when we have conquered the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, Man will have discovered fire.”*⁶

With Paul, who wrote that *“to live is Christ”*⁷ and that *“our lives are hid with Christ in God,”*⁸ Teilhard perceived that the scientific, social, and economic development of the earth and our human efforts to build a just and loving society all are parts of a single cosmic process - the process by which Christ is continuing to develop his body, with Jesus as its soul.

Do you see what that means for our lives? That we are, in everything we do, involved in sacred work and so what we do and how we live matters extravagantly and exceedingly. That more than having faith in Jesus we are to emulate the faithfulness of Jesus - a fidelity to love, to justice, to God. That we need never to feel lost or adrift in the cosmos for we are, always, at home in the Christ who calls us and bids us to follow him. It means that we are a part of the great cosmic movement toward our final destiny in God which is, as Paul writes in Colossians, to be a part of the loving union and unity of all things.⁹

Presbyterians like to cogitate. For those of you who are newer to Market Square, I bet one of the reasons you are here is because you are cogitators. We value the life of the mind and that is great. Both church and world have been well-served through the years by the thoughtfulness and scholarship Presbyterians bring to the Christian faith. Our church father John Calvin, for instance, was *the* great theologian of the Protestant Reformation and affected significantly not only the church and spiritual life but civic life as well. The university and hospital movements came into being primarily through the minds of Presbyterians. Historically, Presbyterians have stocked the United States Congress and the presidency out of all proportion to the number of us. Presbyterians are leaders and thinkers and cogitators.

But cogitating, thinking, is not our end game though it is a challenge for us to remember that sometimes. Sometimes we think that cogitating about something is the same thing as doing something about it. When we think that bigotry is wrong, that is not the same thing as actually

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Philippians 1:21

⁸ Colossians 3:3

⁹ Ephesians 1:10

doing something to eradicate or erase it. While we know we are to pray, that is not the same as actually praying.

When we think we should invite the new person at church to dinner; when we think we should advocate in the public sector for better arrangements for people who are homeless; when we think that as people of faith it is a good thing to write to our representatives in outrage over the shutdown of government or proposed inhospitality to immigrants and refugees or to protest the growing income inequality or to express our disdain in Christ's name for the institutionalized racism built into our criminal justice systems against our black and brown sisters and brothers, it is not actually doing anything about any of them.

Cogitating is good and necessary. It is hard to live responsibly, well, and creatively when we do not think about our lives. But, we cannot confuse cogitation with emulation. First we cogitate and then we emulate. We do both but doing the former without the latter is incomplete. St. Paul may tell us to *"have the mind of Christ,"*¹⁰ but Jesus goes farther and says, *"Follow me,"*¹¹ and, in the book of James in the New Testament, he says, *"Be ye doers of the word and not hearers (or thinkers) only."*¹² First, we cogitate but then we emulate Jesus the Christ in our day and world. That was the call by Jesus to Peter, James, and John and it is our call, too.

It is in the context of Paul's exuberant confidence in the continuing development and destiny of the Cosmic Christ that Paul writes to the Corinthians the passage we earlier read. Though they mourn and rejoice, he said, and buy and sell, marry and stay single, none of these experiences is to be the ultimate shaper of one's life. As members of the body of Christ, a body that transcends Christian dogma to include all lovers of the cosmic soul, our lives are rooted firmly in our everyday concerns and experiences, but not in a way in which we are controlled or overwhelmed by our worldly circumstances. For though we now may see as in a mirror dimly,¹³ we live in this world fully confident in the providence and promises of God. Thus, beyond all our cogitating, we may spend our days emulating the Lord of all.

Beloveds, hope abounds and hope will not disappoint us.¹⁴

Amen.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:16; Romans 12:2

¹¹ Mark 1:17 and many other places in the four gospels

¹² James 1:22

¹³ 1 Corinthians 13:12

¹⁴ Romans 5:5