

Dragons at the Edge of the Map  
John 14:25-27  
June 7, 2009  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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I have things somewhat backwards. The future is today and the past is next Sunday. Next Sunday is my last sermon and it will really be a goodbye, a look back over the past ten years of life and ministry with you. Today is about the future, your future. This is especially appropriate because Pastor John Dodson is here with us for the first time. His first sermon will be three weeks from today.

An interesting map is on display in the British Museum in London. It's an old mariner's chart, drawn in 1525, outlining the North American coastline and adjacent waters. The cartographer made some intriguing notations on areas of the map that represented regions not yet explored. He wrote: "Here be giants," "Here be fiery scorpions," and "Here be dragons."

Since the dawn of human civilization an unknown future has been a cause for fear. And when you spend enough time fearing a future sometimes those fears materialize into giants and scorpions and dragons. What are you feeling about the future of St. John United Methodist Church? As we near the beginning of uncharted waters do you see any giants looming in the distance? Are there any dragons about to rear their ugly heads?

As one who has captained your ship for the past ten years I have some hopes for where and how you will sail into the future. My first hope for your future is that you would choose grace over ungrace. Many people have the view that the Church is a place where grace is the language spoken, but in reality judgment is practiced. It may not be popular but I still believe that people can be loved into faith. I still believe that God's grace is so deep and true that most of us will only scratch the surface in our lifetimes. In a strange kind of way we are more comfortable with laws and rules and justice. God's grace is deep and I for one would rather err on the side of grace than on the side of law.

Your church council has blessed a conversation about how accepting St. John truly is of people whose sexual orientation is not aligned with the majority. While this conversation may or may not result in any action you have the opportunity to witness to this community that St. John is a place where not only are people welcomed, but their diverse views are welcomed as well. At St. John we believe in honest and respectful conversation. At St. John we don't believe in dragons at the edges of our conversations. We believe in the grace of God.

My second hope for your future is that you prepare yourselves for change. People have asked if I had a choice when the bishop asked me to be superintendent, and the answer is yes. I could have said no thanks. But part of my discernment was the good that could happen at St. John with new leadership. We know that sometimes leaders can stay too long even if everything seems to be going great. If our worship attendance had been moving forward perhaps it would have informed my decision in a

different way. But the fact is that we have been level in our average worship attendance of 450-480 for the past 7 years.

Something has to change to spark us to reach out to others. Pastor John and next year your new permanent pastor will bring a fresh vision to your ministry. So prepare yourself for some changes in how worship is done. If a new musical style happens in one of the morning services some may want to change to a different service. My hope is that you would do it with grace as you hold to the vision of new people having the same church experience that you enjoy. Let us remember that we all were new to the church at one time. And others made some changes to accommodate us.

My third hope for your future is to explore and improve your stewardship. Remember your membership vows: prayers, presence, service, gifts, and witness. How are you doing in praying for St. John? How present have you been in worship and education events? When it comes to our financial gifts I want to put in a plug for what our Stewardship Ministry Team led by Don Dunham is doing to help people get out of debt and put their financial house in order. There is a tremendous need to reducing debt leaving people feeling less anxiety and stress.

Our financial leaders are doing a great job managing St. John's money. They are paying our apportionments and working on developing a budget operating reserve. Many St. John members are giving sacrificially. For those who are in the habit of giving \$10 or \$20 only when you are here, and you have a healthy income let me say that you too can experience the spiritual growth that comes with giving more.

My fourth hope for your future is that you would nurture your desire for Love, your desire for God. In 1 John it says that God is Love and those who love are of God. Every time I see the word "God" in the Bible I like to substitute "Love." God has created us with a built in need for Love. The problem of course is that we fill that need, not with Love, not with God, but with things. We think we need that new truck or the newest big screen TV or more clothes to jam into an overcrowded closet. How can we tell if the things we want are really a desire for Love in disguise? How can we know if our standing at an open fridge door not really hungry but wanting something, is really a substitute for our desire for God? This is where a spiritual director or a spiritual friend can help you sort out your desires. Hunger for God comes and goes like our hunger for real food. When it comes we need to be ready for it and not fall into the trap of thinking we can soothe that ache with a substitute like alcohol, food, sex, or drugs.

My fifth hope for your future is that you would accept the reality that you are on the way to becoming a large church. There is nothing wrong or bad about being a large church. I think it's time that your perception of St. John catch up with reality. You need to give up your medium size church identity and think more in terms of large church. This means that you plan budgets that reflect the cost of doing business. For example, this church really needs a building plant operator to use the school district language. Asking for volunteers for every minor or major repair need is simply not working. But adding \$50,000 to the budget seems a daunting challenge as well.

Related to this is my hope that you would see yourself as a teaching church. Whatever new ministries you start, whatever workshops or classes you hold, think about including other United Methodist churches. Strengthening other churches is good for St. John and it strengthens our connection.

On June 4, 1783 at the market square of the French village of Annonay, not far from Paris, a smoky bonfire on a raised platform was fed by wet straw and old wool rages. Tethered above, straining its lines, was a huge taffeta bag 33 feet in diameter. In the presence of a great crowd, and accompanied by great cheering, the balloon was cut from its moorings and set free to rise majestically into the noon sky. Six thousand feet into the air it went -- the first public ascent of a balloon, the first step in the history of human flight. It came to earth several miles away in a field, where it was promptly attacked by pitchfork-waving peasants and torn to pieces as an instrument of evil!

We humans have this tendency to attack what we don't understand. When faced with change we allow our fears to lead us to destructive thoughts, words, and actions. The author of the map drawn in 1525 came to the edge of what was known. He allowed his fears to cause him to write, "Here be dragons and giants." Eventually, the map came into the possession of Sir John Franklin, a British explorer in the early 1800s. Scratching out the fearful inscriptions, he wrote these words across the map: "Here be God."

When Jesus prepared to leave his disciples, causing them to face the biggest change of their lives he said to them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." We are God's people. We are a people who go around scratching out fearful inscriptions. Because we have a God who lives at the edge of our maps and beyond. Wherever your journey takes you as a church, whatever uncharted waters you will sail, know at a deep place in your soul that **HERE BE GOD!** Wherever you are, wherever you go, **GOD IS THERE!**