

The Winning Ingredient Revelation 7:9-17
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV

Fourth Sunday of Easter (April 17) 2016

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great

tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;

the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Oh, Geez. It's from the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation. It's got all that weird stuff in it. Can you explain it all to me, Pastor?

In a word, “No.” There's a lot in this book of the Bible that I don't understand; the symbolism was so

rich and powerful to the people of the day that it was written. But it's not the same for us today. (*“Shave and a haircut...two bits.”*)

But here's a flash that someone taught me early on about reading the Bible: **I don't have to deal so much with the stuff I don't understand I'm the Bible. There's plenty to deal with with the stuff that I DO CLEARLY UNDERSTAND.**

Let's review where we are. This is the third Sunday after Resurrection Sunday. We are looking at what was going on with the disciples in the time between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension into heaven – in preparing them to be THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD. And, by our overhearing, it's the directions that we, too, need to hear today.

In the first Sunday, we got the very clear message: **God says YES!** Unconditionally. All are

accepted. All are welcome. We humans have no right to impose a higher standard than God does. It is our ministry to be one of **RECONCILIATION**.

Last Sunday, the message was **GOD CALLS ON US TO SAY YES!** ... just like Ananias did when called upon for the perilous task that he was asked to do. **We've been reminded all this week to think about what God might be calling us to say YES! to but have been hesitant.** My own Thursday experience

In last week's sermon, I asked the congregation sitting where you are sitting today to turn to their neighbor and talk about what makes the Church different from the Junior League, the Rotary, or any civic or fraternal organization. You answered the question, not me.

Part of the answer, I believe, is seen in the one panel of your Stewardship tri-fold bulletin insert. Nothing else is like the Church in **BEING THERE FOR YOU** in all of those life transitions.

Another part of the answer is the key word for today: **WORSHIP**. This is the winning ingredient in life.

Unlike any other do-good organization, our PRIMARY PURPOSE IN MEETING is to worship.

Your former pastor, who retired almost 17 years ago, once preached a sermon on this text from Revelation where he said: *What we do when we gather on Sunday morning is practice for what the last book of the Bible tells us we are going to be doing for all eternity.* (The inference from that was: *"If you want to go to heaven, then you ought to want to go to church. If you don't like what*

they do in church, you're going to be miserable for eternity. They may call it heaven, but it will seem like 'the other place' if you don't like to worship.")

But it's MORE THAN just a rehearsal for what we do in heaven. **WORSHIP is what empowers us to do all the other that we need to do, in order to be the BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD.**

- Some people come to church on Sunday morning for the **fellowship**.
- Some people come to church on Sunday morning in order to **be taught what the Bible means**.
- Some people come to church on Sunday morning to **ask others to pray with them for a concern that is very important to them**.
- Some people come to church on Sunday to **get their battery charged**.
- Some people come to church on Sunday morning to **get a hug, because this is the one place all week long where they know**

they will be hugged by people who love them.

- Some people come to church on Sunday morning to be entertained -- by the choir or the children's choir or the handbells or the steel drums or (*like going to a NASCAR race*) to watch the pastor crash and burn while they attempt to do a children's sermon.
- Some people come to church on Sunday morning to be told what is their duty, OR they come because somewhere along the way they were taught that it is their duty to come to church on Sunday morning.
- Some people come to church on Sunday morning so they can learn about how their church is doing so much in the community and through the world in terms of mission, and to be inspired to increase their pledge so that they can have a bigger share in the excitement of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I'm not going to argue with any of those benefits of coming to church. But did you notice **one**

commonality about all of them: **Me Me Me Me Me**
Me.

The main reason to come to Church on Sunday morning is TO WORSHIP.

Sometimes when I hear someone say, **“I just didn’t get anything out of worship today,”** I am awfully tempted to say, **“I’m sorry. What do you think God got out of *your* participation, if the litmus test is what *you* got out of it?”**

(A short aside, but related.) This is the primary reason that you won’t ever see nor hear me applaud after some act of worship. It’s too confusing, too misleading. We are supposed to be here offering up worship to God, and when the congregation claps, it makes it seem that the worship leaders are performers and the congregation is the audience. If anyone should be

clapping, it should be God. God is the audience for our praise, not the congregation.

And when people say, **“But shouldn’t you do it for the children?”** my response is, **“Absolutely not, why would we want to confuse them when they are learning what worship is about? Why would we want to teach children that they are performers on a stage for the congregation?”** I’m more than happy to say AMEN to the praise they offered to God.

(Aside ended; back to the sermon:) In ***Romans 1:25***, Saint Paul sums up the basic definition of “SIN.” ***They exchanged the truth for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the creator.***

SIN – a broken or impaired relationship between God and humans, between humans and humans, between humans and creation. It

all begins when we put ME in the center of our attention and put God somewhere else – serving US.

- WORSHIP is all about putting God back into the center of our attention.
- WORSHIP is all about remembering the proper relationship between the creature and the Creator.
- It's not about us. When we make Sunday morning about us, we have done the opposite of what WORSHIP is all about.
- In fact, part of the message we hear in this passage of Revelation is that pain and suffering are not eliminated by keeping God around like a lucky Rabbit's Foot. God does not ever promise to remove us from all hardship and suffering. GOD does promise to never desert nor leave us. But if you come to church just to get extra credit from God that entitles you to no suffering, you are sadly mistaken. AND you have made it all about you.

Secondly, let me note that WORSHIP also helps us to remember.

John had gone to pick up his mother for their usual Saturday afternoon get-out-of-the-house-and-go-to-a-restaurant ritual. His mother, Rachel was 75 years old. The government was in the process of taking Rachel's home of 50 years. She and her deceased husband had spent all of their married life there. She had no idea where she could go, at 75 years old, and with the little bit of money she was going to receive.

John asked her how she was doing. Rachel said, "I just don't know what I'm going to do, Johnny. But I've been talking to God during worship about it."

John, who was not a church-goer, asked how that was working for her. **"Has God given you a new house? Has God made the government offer you more money? Has God given you any answers?"**

“No, Johnny. That’s not how it works. I’ve been going to worship, and there I’ve been reminded of God has always been faithful in the past. Life has not always been easy. Some of it you know about; some of it you do not. But in all things God has always been with me. And in worship I am reminded of that. And in worship I am reminded by the stories in the Bible, and the stories of other worshippers, how God is always faithful with the people who will receive Him. So, I don’t have any answers to this problem. I just am reminded that *all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.* And when I remember that, I know that I can get through this, even though I don’t know how now.”

And with that she smiled at him, and Johnny felt his heart strangely warmed.

Finally, let me note that **WORSHIP which begins in community in the Church – is NOT limited to the Sunday morning experience.** Sunday morning OUGHT to prepare us not just for what we will do for all eternity, but also what we will do on Monday morning, and Wednesday afternoon, and Fridays during lunch ... or, in other words, all week long.

Brother Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of St. Francis of Assisi wrote this about the favorite saint of all time:

St. Francis praised the Artist in every one of the Artist's works; whatever he found in things made, he referred to their Maker. He rejoiced in all the works of God's hands, and with joyful vision saw into the reason and because that gave them life.

In beautiful things he came to know Beauty itself. To him all things were good. They cried out to him, “The one who made us is infinitely good.” By tracing God’s footsteps in things, St. Francis was following God wherever God led. Francis made from created things a ladder to God’s throne.

When we go on vacation to Hilton Head, we almost always late arrive at night – having left after church on Sunday morning. I go to bed late, tired and worn out. But at 6:00 a.m. Rooney is up and on my bed and his nose is three inches from my face. I open my eyes and there he is. He won’t leave. He wants to take his first morning walk on the beach. I have no idea how he knows where we are. Every morning I take him down to walk on the beach. He loves the smell the sand, the waves, the other

dogs. Everything about it delights him. It's a joy to see him so excited.

A few weeks back, when I was getting over a bout with a cold that had kept me inside, I took Rooney for the usual neighborhood walk. Perhaps it was because I hadn't been out with him for three nights, and his outdoor exercise had been limited to romps in the fenced in back yard. But on this night, I noticed how excited he was. He likes to run from one side of the street to the other. He does not believe that there should be a dry tall blade of grass anywhere. I began to pay attention to this for the next few nights that we walked. He was this excited every night. Every night he was as excited to go for a walk as he is every morning at the beach.

And it occurred to me that I have much to learn from my dog. Vacation provides him with a change

of venue but no more nor less excitement in his appreciation for the sights and smells and sensations of life all around him.

If each day, like Saint Francis did and like Rooney does, I were to be in an attitude of worship, of awareness, of looking for and finding expressions of God's Artistry everywhere I went, my whole outlook on life would change.

This is what worship does. Worship puts God and me and all the world into proper perspective. We do it here together on Sunday mornings. And here is great value in our communal aspect of worship-like Revelation tells us eternity will be. BUT It doesn't end with the benediction. The winning ingredient for living is to be **WORSHIPFUL** all week long.

So, this week, when you call or text, and when you are called or receive your text message, the reminder will be simple:

Did I encounter a “Worship Moment”
today?

The appropriate response to your reminder is to simply say **“Thank you.”** And the appropriate response to a Worship Moment will be the same:

“Thank you.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.