

Optimistic
John 17: 6-21

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I'm not sure whether I'm an optimist or a pessimist. I like to think I'm an optimist, always looking on the bright side, but I do tend towards catastrophic thinking, where I play out all the worst-case scenarios and then fret about them.

I recently read a helpful definition of optimist and pessimist, one that reinforced my thinking that I'm an optimist. A pessimist says, things can't get any worse. An optimist says, sure they can!

Now that's my type of optimism.

I thought of this type of optimism this week when I read Farhood Manjoo's op-ed piece in the *New York Times* entitled, "The Worst Is Yet to Come."

Manjoo writes that he's always thought of himself as an optimist. Not long ago, he was optimistic that with concerted effort we as a nation could improve our health care and educational systems, address climate change, and create a fairer economy. It wouldn't be easy, there were lots of obstacles, and lots of resistance, but it was possible.

"Things weren't looking good, exactly," he writes, "but if you squinted hard, you could just make out a sunnier future."

"Now all seems lost," he laments. The coronavirus, and our disastrous national response, has smashed his optimism to pieces.

We need to consider the possibility, he warns, "that every problem we face will get much worse than we ever imagined. The coronavirus is like a heat-seeking missile designed to frustrate progress in almost every corner of society, from politics to the economy to the environment."

I must confess, I share Farhood Manjoo's concern, though not his lament.

He laments that "all seems lost." I don't feel that way.

If I squint hard enough, I can still make out what could possibly be a sunnier future for the people of this country and planet earth. The sunnier future is way out there, we're not getting there anytime soon. But I can still see it as a possibility. It's not completely lost.

Though I don't share his lament, I do share his concern that every significant problem we face as a nation, and a planet, will get worse. In some cases, much worse, worse than we imagined.

I think our economic, political, social, and cultural conflicts will get worse. I think economic injustice and wealth disparity will get worse. Racism and racial tension will get worse. The effects of climate disruption and eco-system destruction will get worse. I'm pretty optimistic about these things getting worse. To folks who say, things can't get any worse, I say, sure they can!

Yet I also know this my catastrophic thinking at work, my own worried brain spinning out worst-case scenarios, my hypothalamus and sympathetic nervous system on overdrive. So I've learned to put some distance between myself and my optimism. I've learned how to prevent my optimism from overwhelming me and getting the better of me.

I take a deep breath. I sit on my meditation cushion. I lift weights in my garage. I ride my bike through splashes of green. I watch the birds in the garden.

And I tell myself, don't be attached to your optimism. You don't know what's going to happen. Some things may get worse, and some things may get better. You don't know. Life is contingent, complex, and complicated. You couldn't have predicted this pandemic would happen four months ago. Who knows what the future will bring?

I appreciated Mark Lilla's piece in the *New York Times* on Friday, entitled "No One Knows What's Going to Happen."

"The public square is thick today," he writes, with "prophets claiming to foresee the post-Covid world to come." People are asking him what the pandemic will mean for "the American presidential election, populism, the prospects of socialism, race relations, economic growth, higher education, New York City politics, and more."

And the only honest answer he can give is, "I have no idea."

"The post-Covid future doesn't exist," he writes, so we shouldn't waste our time asking what the future will be. Rather, we should be asking ourselves, what kind of future do we want? And how do we bring that future into existence, even with all the constraints and resistance we will face?

What kind of future do we want? And how do we bring that future into existence?

Asking and answering those questions is far more productive than fretting over how things are going to get worse, or comforting ourselves with reassurances that things are going to get better. It's far more productive to name the future we want, and to marshal all of our resources, and unite with all of our allies, to work for that future.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, what kind of future do we want?

Here's one possible answer—that we all may be one.

In John's Gospel, that's Jesus' prayer for us, his future followers—that we all may be one. As intimately one as God and Jesus are one. All of us abiding deeply and fully in one another's love. All of us living in peaceful accord with one another. All of us willing to give our life for one another.

That depth of love. *That* intimacy of unity.

That's what Jesus wants for us, and from us—that we all may be one.

So that God can send us into our polarized and conflicted world as a people united by love, as a people who seek to unify the world through love, as a people who work together with concerted action to transform the world with love.

That's what Jesus wants for us, and from us.

Imagine the future we could help bring into existence in our nation, on our planet, if we actually embodied *that* depth of love, and *that* capacity for unity and unified action. Imagine the future we could help create for our children and grandchildren if we brought *that* transformative power of love and unified action to bear on our nation and planet today.

And imagine what the future might look like if we don't bring *that* transformative power of love and unified action to bear on our nation and planet today. The thought of that throws me into a fit of optimism.

What will the future bring? I don't know.

But I do know what kind of future I want—that we all may be one.