

AUGUST 23, 2020

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



SERMON Aug 16: “Me and We - It Takes a Village” Acts 6:1-7, Matthew 18:15-17

-According to the Internet source Wikipedia, the famous African proverb: ‘It takes a village to raise a child!’ originated from the Nigerian Igbo culture and proverb ‘Oran a azu nwa’, which means it takes a community or village to raise a child. The Igbo’s also name their children ‘Nwa ora’ which means child of the community. The same sentiment is echoed in proverbs of various other African cultures, such as the Swahili proverb “One hand does not nurse a child”, the Sudanese proverb “A child is a child of everyone” and the Tanzanian proverb “One knee does not bring up a child”. The Afrikaans proverb ‘Jou kind sal sy geleerdheid nog by die skool agterlaat; sy opvoeding sal hom vergesel tot in die graf’ by the famous Langenhoven, reflects not exactly the same sentiment, but it also affirms the lasting impact of a good upbringing and the role of the family and community in educating a child. However it is the IsiXhosa proverb ‘Umuntu ngumntu ngabantu’ meaning: ‘A person is a person because of other people’ that truly echoes the spirit of collectivism so aptly envisioned by the proverb ‘It takes a village to raise a child’.-

This week we continue our series Me and We. We are taking a scriptural, faithful look at the relationship between our individuality and at the same time being part of a greater group or a collective. How do we honor God in recognizing that both of these are very real parts of our journey and experience? The first two weeks we considered the “me”. What does my individuality have to do with my faith and my relationship with God? We noted that our individuality and our freedom are gifts to be celebrated and embraced. Our uniqueness and giftedness gives us the ability to pursue these things as far and wide as we can. We have the freedom to develop our individuality in ways that are unique to ourselves. We are able to pick and choose the roles we will fulfill in our lives in a way that fits our individual personalities and skill sets. Beyond talents and gifts, we also require the ability to stand out as an individual in order to have and grow a truly deep and impactful faith. Using Jeremiah as an example it becomes clear that when the crowds and tides of culture would try to sweep us away from Christ, only if we are willing to embrace and live out our individuality can we stand strong against that current and temptation.

However also incredibly important, this freedom and individuality is not given without direction and purpose. Galatians tells us that all of this is given to us not to indulge ourselves, but to love one another. Colossians tells us to do all things “as unto the Lord”, and we noted that this is more than just striving for excellence in all that we do. It is also approaching what we do with reverent humility, recognizing we are all equal in God’s eyes, and intentionally working to preserve and honor the individual worth and dignity inherent in each of us. Today, we move to the “We.”

In truth, the Galatians and Colossians passages already started to do that for us. Essentially telling us that the point of our freedom and individuality is to love one another, to serve one another, is making that point that the usefulness of our individuality lies in making the whole better and greater by how we treat one another. The sermon title “It takes a village” starts us out. This is part of an African sentiment that was made popular some years ago. “It takes a village to raise a child.” This expression comes from a tribe in Nigeria, but is connected to similar proverbs in other tribes throughout Africa. The idea is that while we may be individuals, we are also all part of a community, and in that we belong to one another.

The reality that as much as we like our freedom and individuality, we are bound to one another and inevitably interdependent and interconnected has become sharply clear over these last 5 or so months. Yet we see individuality and freedom being used almost as a weapon to target, insult, or offend large parts of the greater whole at the same time.

We've already noted that often people using their freedom to stand out as an "individual" rarely is actually individuality. It's just another voice in a much greater group all saying the same thing to rile up or insult the other group that they disagree with. This is where individuality and freedom are destructive to our common need to lift one another up. It is indulging the self that says "I'll say or do what I want, especially if it offends you, because that's my freedom as an individual. This as opposed to perhaps a more Biblical sense of acting and speaking in a way to communicate and build a bridge, knowing that whatever we do we're called to do it in a way that shows love for neighbor, as unto the Lord, and regarding the innate worth and dignity of the other.

COVID and the resultant separation we've felt drives deep to the heart of our interconnectedness in several ways. The first and clearest is in the frustration, sadness, and hardship experienced when we can't be around one another. This cuts into the sense of community we've taken for granted. We notice that we are diminished when we can't be actively together as a whole. We've learned just how much we rely on one another for our energy, spirit, and health. We can not live as sole individuals and be complete. We need one another.

Getting to come back together, even with restrictions, has been helpful to us. We can see smiles, feel one another's presence, and converse in person. This matters and for many has begun the process of healing whatever felt like it fell away in the more isolated months prior. Yet if you're anything like me, there's still a hole that needs filling. I see you on Sunday mornings, but am also reminded of all the other things that are presently on hold and were vehicles for deeper conversations and opportunities to grow our relationships with God and with one another. I miss it, and deeply hope we get to a place where we can return to it. We are also keenly aware that the pain of staying apart for some continues to be even more sharp. There are those who can't gather even still because of concern that they may become infected. Some whose doctors ward them away from church and other gatherings because of how at risk they are. We understand why they can't come together, and it is another reminder of how important the "we" is

in our lives as we try to stay connected in some fashion until the danger passes. For others, coming back together with restrictions is a tease. It brings up aggravation and frustration, honest pain at what is still missing from our lives. Missing the honest, intimate sense of community. Rather than allow what should be a life giving time with God and the community of faith to stir up painful or harsh feelings, the choice is made to wait until we can gather typically so that the fullness of community can be embraced. This is understandable as well. And it is a very clear reminder of the impact we have on the whole of the community, and the community has on each of us individually.

Even the aggravation shared by just about everyone, though for different reasons, is a sign pointing to the necessity of honoring the greater whole of society, and being a nation. There are several different takes on how COVID should be addressed and why. Some people weigh heavier on health, others on economics, others no on school, and certainly other considerations as well. What I find in common conversationally is that the frustration comes because we all grasp that the only way to move forward is not only to find the correct solution, but ALL of us must agree to participate in that solution together. We only rise above the circumstance truly when we all pull in the same direction. It is clearer than ever that we need one another. As much as we are individuals and unique, we are also individuals that belong to each other. Whether or not we care about one another, whether or not we are willing to become sacrificial and selfless for the bettering of the larger whole matters. And that message rings loud and clear today.

The church in Acts 2 very clearly had this notion. It tells us they came together as a community that ate, studied, fellowshiped, prayed, and served together. That they shared all things in common and supported anyone in their circumstance of need. This made them stand out. Individuals who also found a way to both honor their uniqueness, yet come together as part of a greater group and embrace bettering that group through their participation in it. Acts 6 sees that this example and attitude was effective in making new disciples for Christ. The growing crowd offered up new challenges beyond simply sharing the good news.

This brings us to the more narrow focus for today. That we can not pursue our individual strength of faith alone. We need to be part of something bigger to do it. The Acts scripture shows us something about the need for community. If we are people of true faith, we know that part of that involves caring for others and serving. We also know that there are other aspects in the faith community that need attending. Preaching, teaching, administrating, and so forth and we'll pursue these more next week. But what should be true of all of us is that we desire to see all of the aspects of being a Christian attended to. And even if someone were able to perform each and every one of those tasks, no one person has the time or strength to do so. This is where we find the apostles in this passage. They saw needs that needed met, but they simply didn't have the time or strength to do it all themselves. By necessity they had to share the load and they asked for help from the community of faith. So why is this so integral to our able to individually deepen and strengthen our faith to stand against the tide of crowds and culture that would lead us away from Jesus?

The apostles weren't asking for help because serving food was beneath them. It was because they needed their strength and time to do something else equally as necessary. Were they to try to do it all they would quickly find themselves overwhelmed, burned out, and weakened. What does it take to be able to hold fast to our faith in pressured and difficult circumstances? It takes strength and focus. The times we are most prone to depart from our faith, or even give it up, perhaps become hopeless are when we are weakened. When we are overwhelmed.

Discipleship is not an easy road. We need strength and endurance, and if we are trying to do too much on our own, we will sap that strength and become vulnerable. How do we maintain our strength? We rely on one another to handle what needs handled. We ask for help. We lean on the larger whole for support. And then, when we find ourselves feeling very alone against the larger wave of culture pushing against us, we have the strength to stand strong. Not only do we have our individual strength, but we also have the collective strength of the others in the community of faith that we know are praying for us, and have our backs. Without the support of the whole, the individual is always at risk of crumbling. With the support of the whole, the individual has a much greater ability to weather hardship and keep their faith strong and rooted in Christ.

This leads us to the second reason that community is a necessity for individual faith to grow and stay on track. Accountability. This passage in Matthew is all about accountability and accountability in love. We've often noted the danger of trying to fly solo as a Christian. With nothing and no one to act as a sounding board or give us guidance, it can become easy to simply go my own way and claim God's will for things that are really just my own

personal preferences. We all need others to pull us up when we are out of line. We all need others to ask questions and make us think when an idea starts simmering that may not be of God, or may be a warped twisting of scripture. We need others to help us know when we are doing something, even well intended, that may actually be causing harm. While this passage is about accountability, the opposite of it is also true. We also need people to encourage us. When we're on track, it's important to let one another know where things are going right and well. It's important to show gratitude to one another. It's important to let one another know that of all the things we are, one thing we are not is alone. Once again, this is a significant

source of where our strength comes from. When we have to make a stand that may be unpopular in the moment because of who we happen to be around, we know that there is a greater and larger group that is quietly cheering us on, and when we meet up again will appreciate the story and testimony. What is amazing is how sharing the story works on both the teller and the receiver. The support the group gives uplifts the teller, and the story itself inspires and uplifts those who receive it.

We can't escape the presence, nor the necessity of the larger group or groups of which we are apart. We have responsibility to ourselves, and at the same time a responsibility to one another. Cain famously asked God "am I my brother's keeper?" God famously said "yes." Our scriptures this morning highlight that even further in the New Testament.

As we close, we also need to note that there are larger wholes that we are part of by choice and those we are part of by circumstance. In the ones we can choose, we must choose carefully. The groups we are part of hold sway over us. They are influences in our life. So we choose the ones that will exert the best possible influences. In those groups we find ourselves in by circumstance, we must be aware of how they are influencing us, and be discerning on what we allow. In fact, the groups we choose are a tremendous help in that discerning process regarding the groups we are forced into.

Ultimately, in matters of faith, we can say something similar to what we noted about the "me." When we incorporate into a community of faith, the stronger, more loving, and more faithful the "we", the stronger, more loving, and faithful the "me."

BIBLE STUDY August 19: Zephaniah 1

This week we follow Habakkuk with the very next book in line, Zephaniah. A little background about Zephaniah. Not a lot is known about this particular prophet. One thing that is clear about him is that he was stationed in Jerusalem. The timing of this book is roughly similar to Nahum and Habakkuk. Zephaniah lived in Judah, and his prophecy comes before the exile to Babylon occurs and likely during the early years of the reign of King Josiah. Coming off the heels of several kings that had led the nation down the road of idolatry, as Josiah's reign moved forward he became one of the most positively reviewed kings in Judah's later history. He tore down shrines, destroyed anything related to the worship of Baal, and got the nation back on track with their worship of Yahweh, the one true God.

Josiah began his reign at a very young age, and it was during these early years where he hadn't yet re-established the worship that this prophecy ushers forth holding to account the people of Judah for their falling away. Because of Josiah's faithfulness, scripture tells us that God allowed a time of peace during his reign, however after his death punishment would fall on the heads of the people. And so it happened this way. There was relative peace during his time. Sadly, the kings that followed him fell right back into the idolatry and evil that Josiah had overcome, putting Judah back into habits that required disciplining. This detail just about the background of the book give us a window into the longsuffering of God. King after king has led the people away from God, and the people fell into behavior towards one another that are inevitable when the larger part of a nation falls away from God directed behavior and into human nature and self-centeredness. The punishment is poised as Zephaniah states in this book.

Then Josiah steps up in his reign. The story goes that someone "discovered" the book of the law and offered it up to Josiah. Upon hearing it, Josiah reforms the nation and does away with the idolatry. As a result of his faithfulness, God gives a reprieve. The punishment still looms, but not in the moment when the nation repents. Why? I would suggest that this is the longsuffering of God, and that nature of God's grace. What is abundantly clear is that the direction of a nation is tied to the direction of the one who leads it. When the ungodly leads, the nation follows suit and ultimately judgment awaits. When the godly step up, if the nation follows suit, that judgment halts for a time. In this case, we see in the prophecy over Josiah by Huldah the prophetess, that this judgment will come to pass. While Josiah has restored the faithfulness of the nation, hindsight suggests that it won't be long before another compromised line of kings will arise, and they did immediately following his death.

But don't miss the grace here. God sees the faithfulness of the leader, and that faithfulness brings relief and a stay of sentence. It is a bright spot of God's attentiveness to our repentance and willingness to give us chance after chance if we're willing to be responsive to God's will and direction. This makes sense. If abandoning the design of God means we become more and more self centered and willing to follow our own desires and means of getting what want, naturally we tear ourselves apart from within. We divide, step on one another, and fail to uplift the greater whole, which means over time the greater whole will erode. On the other hand when we come together before God, we uplift, we unite, we love, we strive for the betterment of all of us, and the natural outcome of that is that everything improves, strengthens, and all are elevated.

Ultimately, eventually, Judah falls back into their ways and eventually they are defeated by Babylon, another exile happens, and the Temple is destroyed in the process. An interesting benefit occurs in the exile though. We've noted in the past couple studies that not everyone was exiled. Some remained in the homeland. In large part, the ones exiled tended to be more elite, those in leadership or upper class. The ones left behind were the ones who were the average citizen. People who worked the land for a living. Many of these people had fallen victim to the greed and oppression of the upper class, which meant that when those folks left, the average person was once again empowered to regain land, resume not only their honest work but likely reap a better result from that work. So the exile in and of itself began the work of dampening the problems that brough about the consequence to begin with.

In preparing for this study, there was a note that Zephaniah doesn't tend to get as much attention as other prophets. This is not due to any deficiency in the book. Rather it is because in many ways after reading the prophets that came before his words are somewhat redundant. Nevertheless, we'll take some time over the next few weeks to see what Zephaniah offers us.

Right off the bat, the message is harsh and clear. The image of the Genesis flood comes into view as God makes the sweeping statement that the people of Judah will be wiped from the face of the earth. As Habakkuk lamented and demanded justice, so in Zephaniah we see that God isn't blind to what's been going on and makes a big statement that judgment is coming and it will be broad and far reaching. It gets more specific then, citing Judah and Jerusalem. The reason for this is that this is where the seat of purest worship was or at least should be. Judah is the Davidic line, and the Temple is located in Jerusalem. As such, one might think that this would be the last, best holdout for a true faith and genuine worship of God. Yet even here, idolatry has taken over. The priests and leadership who should be guiding the people correctly have veered well off the path and taken the nation into paganism. As such they may be even more deserving of the coming consequence.

The worship of Baal is mentioned here. Baal has been an issue for Israel from way back in the Old Testament. It still presents a problem. The fulfillment of this worship getting wiped out actually begins with Josiah, which as we saw earlier grants a short breathing space before the prophecy comes to pass, but even Josiah's intentional campaign to erase Baal didn't necessarily hit each and every corner of Judah. After his death idol worship resumes, and God here is letting it be known that when God is through, it's all going to come crashing down. The prophecy then also identifies other gods and idols that Judah has fallen away with, cementing even further how far from God they have turned.

Then comes the condemnation of the royalty, upper crust, and even merchants in Jerusalem. The line about “foreign clothes” suggests that the priests and leadership has become so enamored with the nations around them, their gods, and their style that they have adopted them in their apparel. There is also the suggestion that not only have they adopted the foreign customs, but they also may have actually become ashamed of their own national identity, throwing it away in favor of this other influence. Again, Jerusalem should be the one place where worship of God is strongest, yet it has starkly chosen the wrong path.

The sense as we look at verses 8 and 9 is that they have rushed to do wickedness and to serve their new “masters”, their idols, their desires and wants. They have pursued their temptations with aggression, violence, and vigor. They are warned now that they will be taken down from their high position and punished for the evil they have done. Note that they are told that they won’t enjoy the fruits of their wickedness. They will not live in their own homes nor drink from their own vines. This comes to pass eventually as the higher class and royalty are carted off to exile in Babylon. All that they had is left behind.

Also of note is the searching for those who have grown complacent, who doubt that God will do what God promises to do. Seeking out these people with a lamp, this image suggests that the righteous may be few between, and noted clearly by God. Those who have turned away God will ferret out and bring about their due consequence for their sins. The chapter winds out with very expressive and harsh imagery that simply conveys that no one will be able to escape the judgment of God. It will be fierce, and it will be terrible to experience and endure. The chapter ends with a note of certainty and impending doom for a nation that has dismissed and discarded their position as God’s chosen people by running into the arms of foreign gods.

This message is one that is rooted in ancient history, yet echoes of it still exist today. We sometimes wonder why the church in America is floundering in many ways. Here we see parallels that translate into our modern era. In many ways, the church has fallen victim to “foreign influences”. Over the last decades, many churches have relied less on the genuine community of faith and humble living of the gospel to drive ministry and evangelism. Instead the worldly models of marketing have come into play as the primary attractor. Modern facilities with all the bells and whistles. Production value of worship is just as important as any spiritual content that has integrity. We have Christian apparel lines that make us look “holy” even if we don’t feel the need to actually be holy. Contemporary Christian music often pushes personal faith, individual connection to God to the exclusion of the truth that faith is expressed and by necessity includes a larger community of faith that we participate in and lean on.

Often there seems a permissiveness for Christians to have a buffet “take it or leave” it experience, carving out our own sensibilities rather than having the accountability of corporate discernment. “Feel good, self-help” theology takes the place of sacrificial, selfless, Christ modeled living. All of these kinds of compromises, tailoring more to style than substance, to self-indulgence over self-sacrifice is hauntingly similar to what Judah was going through. It may not be worship of Molek or Baal, but it is diverting the spirit of how we craft our ministry and worship away from reverent humility towards satisfying the whims of trends and personal preference. When we do this, the message gets watered down because it is so similar to worldliness it loses its punch and teeth.

I was recently at a baptism, where the explanation of what baptism is took a markedly odd turn. Baptism, as it was explained, is a rite of giving oneself publicly to Jesus and declaring Him Lord of one’s life. It was also, however, something that could be done as many times as desired. It could be that I feel I have fallen away and want to renew my commitment to Jesus, and the baptism gives me that clean slate once again. It could be that I feel a new direction in my life and I want to wash away whatever needs washed away to embrace this direction in line with God. It could be that I just want a general cleansing of spirit. In other words, it can mean whatever I want it to mean. This sounds great if what I want is something that I can use to clear my conscience whenever I want. It’s great if I want to publicly claim my direction is God’s direction. It’s great (when each person was baptized there was loud applause and vocal cheering from those spectating) if I want public affirmation and ego stroking.

What it also does is cheapen the Biblical purpose of baptism. Never in scripture do we see rebaptizing. All we see is that this, in the church and even before the church with John, is an act of humble repentance before God that leads to a devotion to Jesus. All that is required to be cleansed from sin down the road is simple confession and repentance before God. A new direction in life in Christ is a wonderful thing, but its content in terms of faith is not born out in a rebaptism, but rather the authenticity of how it is pursued. When we go the “it can mean what you want” route, we have departed from the genuine Christian intention of the moment to the cultural indulgence of preference and self.

Ultimately, what we see in this opening chapter is a warning to all of us. Departing from the genuineness and worship of God, and the resulting life choices that occur, carries with it consequence. In Zephaniah, the consequence is foretold as an impending day of wrath and heavy consequence, though it may take time to unfold.

Over the last 40-50 years we have slowly seen Christianity’s willingness to compromise its message in an effort to be “relevant” reap the results of that compromise by, in many ways, becoming irrelevant. The good news is that, like during the reign of Josiah, we can together put a halt to the problem. It begins with ourselves, each and every one of us. We return to the basics of faithfulness before God and Christ. We rely on the power of both individual faith and the influence of community genuinely centered on the love of Jesus. We worry less about what works in the world, and more about what makes the world notice the difference that is made when we, together, follow the mandate of Christ to love God and love our neighbor. Indeed scripture tells us that we can not love God unless we love our neighbor. As we do these things, we trust that the church will be renewed and restored, praying that those that follow will continue this work.