

SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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



SERMON : Getting Well at the Well, Scripture: John 4: 4-15; 39-42, Matthew 26: 31-35, John 21: 15-17

This week we piggyback off of the series we've just finished last week. Just to quickly recap, we considered the relationship not only between our individuality and being part of a greater whole, but also how that combination and balance accumulates over time to determine the future, or for those living presently, our present for good or bad. We also noted that if things are going poorly, we are not lost. We can choose to be uncompromising in faith, to be unapologetically Godly, and exemplify Jesus to our very utmost. When a critical mass within the greater whole decides to do this, it can, and often does turn things around.

One of the exercises we did was to craft an Old Testament style prophecy about our current state of affairs. What I noted was a good majority of agreement on things that are dividing our country right now. What we're going to do today is look less at those specifics and more at an underlying issue to much of it. When we look at division that becomes heated, there is something at work in both sides. Both sides feel they are clearly correct. Moreover, they are frustrated at the inability to persuade the other to come over to their way of thinking. Ideas fly back and forth and bounce off one another like bullets off of Superman's chest. Not only is there disconnect, but there is anger that grows. Sometimes it grows to rage, sometimes it grows beyond rage to violence. When this happens we look at the symptom, but miss the problem.

When we feel we have a good sense of what is necessary for all of us to move forward correctly, and a large contingent isn't responding, we feel unheard. More than unheard, we may feel like we are being told we're incorrect or worse, invalid. When problems are widespread, this is compounded because not only do we feel like others see us as invalid, but there is fear that if they don't come around, the greater good will be forfeited to more widespread destruction. All of this is a volatile combination of thoughts and feelings, and when there is a larger group rallying around us and stoking those fires, it's easy to have our hearts, our words, and our actions become more aggressive, more us vs. them rather than "in this together" mentality, and more entrenched division.

So what is at the root? At the root of all manner of what we may call wickedness, or evil, or sin, is brokenness. Unless we see this in one another, we become hard pressed to bridge heated differences. Unless we see this in ourselves, we become hard pressed to be healed and freed from whatever our brokenness is drawing out of us. It could be brokenness over feeling unheard, or fearful for the future. Over feeling dismissed or discarded. Over feeling lost or confused. Over feeling hurt or degraded. Over tragedy or seeing something happen to a friend or loved one.

Whatever flows from this. Anger, rage, despair, hopelessness, aggressively acting out or passively holding up and avoiding the world, all of this is just symptomatic of brokenness. Brokenness isn't just something we feel. It's something that resonates in our very soul. Too often we're taught to hide it or minimize it because broken means "weak". It doesn't, it means human. Every one of us experiences it through our life. Some seasons of life are more intense than others. Some much lighter. Nevertheless, it happens to us all.

One of the dangers of not addressing or acknowledging the condition is that it stacks up on itself. Over time it can build like a pressure cooker until something explodes. Because it touches us deeply, it's also very personal, which is also why many of us hold it in. This still doesn't change how we are affected by it. Brokenness is as real as the sun, or the rain, or the wind. Whether we acknowledge them or not, they are real and will impact us. What we need to understand is that our faith isn't just about pushing us to serve and love one another. It's also about allowing others to serve and love us in our brokenness. I am not responsible for being only a person to lean on, I am also privileged to lean on others when I am weak or broken. In this we are all built up, healing can occur, and we as partners, families, congregations, and communities are elevated.

In the office this week we were joking about ways to play with the sermon title, particularly the word "well". I thought about having us do the hymn "It Is Well With My Soul", but this message is really about what we need when it's not well with our soul. This is a question all clergy are asked in our yearly meeting with the District Superintendent. Like I sense with many today, my honest answer was that my soul is troubled by the unrest around us and what it draws out in my heart as a pastor, a father, and a Christian. Fortunately, we serve a God who as part of God's center is to be a healer of our brokenness.

All of this I say to frame up our scripture for today, because in them we see Jesus addressing brokenness. We don't often see these passages this way. Usually we equate the "broken" moments with Jesus healing someone physically. In these moments I offer that healing is happening as well.

The woman at the well is a well known story. What is often brought out is the social position of this woman. First, she is a woman, how dare she speak to a man like she did to Jesus. Second, she was a Samaritan, despised by Jews, so not only how dare she speak to a man, how dare she speak to a Jew. Then it is revealed that she's had multiple husbands, and the man she's with now isn't her husband. Some people suggest that her husbands had died and she'd been passed on from brother to brother as custom demanded. However, often it feels more like she's expecting some kind of chiding or scolding for her past.

These details are important. They describe her circumstance and her history, but they don't describe her condition. Her circumstances mean she is dismissed, despised, likely carrying a dose of shame. This is her brokenness. Then along comes Jesus. He sits with her at the well. He acknowledges her. Converses with her. Offers her the gift of grace, and makes His identity known as the Messiah. He offers her healing by showing her she has worth. When he reveals he knows her history it isn't with the intent to shame, it is with the intent to draw her closer as she recognizes who He is.

We know healing took place because she tears off into the town spreading the word of who is at the well.

We see that Jesus sees something that the disciples do not. They look at her circumstance and actually indicate they share in the attitudes that contribute to her brokenness. Yet Jesus, rather than scolding her in a fashion scolds them for their lack of understanding. As with so many of Jesus'

interactions, He stands with the broken, not the ones doing the breaking. What an amazing dual message in this story. When we are broken, know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is there for us. Jesus sees us, and wants to heal us.

He wants us to drink from that well of grace that never runs dry no matter what. All we need to do is embrace him. At the same time, when we see another's brokenness, we too are called to come alongside of them, and stand with them against the ones who have hurt them to their core. Uncomfortably, sometimes this may mean exactly what we see here. Showing grace to a stranger while pulling friends up for an un-Christlike attitude.

Note the result of it. Not only does the woman tear off, excited and empowered by the Messiah, but she brings a crowd back. Jesus adds to the believers that day. Why? Because he did what he does best. He healed, accepted, and inspired someone who likely felt forgotten, and that joy was too much for her to contain. Let's cut over to this famous story of Jesus and Peter.

Jesus is letting the disciples know what is about to come about in His journey. Peter does what Peter does, he reacts brashly. "Of everyone here, I won't let you down! I'll go to the end with you! I alone will remain by your side!" Jesus response. "Just so you know, before morning you'll deny me three times." I want to note something here. Jesus response about denial and how we understand it depends largely on how we hear Him saying it. Sarcasically it could be "aren't we a little too big for our britches?" In a scolding way it could be "you're the biggest chicken here!" But what if it's neither of those. What if it's compassionate, and I think given the scripture we'll look at in just a few moments this is actually the tone that makes the most sense.

Peter is indignant and angry. Why? He's indignant and angry because he's afraid. He's afraid of losing his friend and his Lord. What do you do when

something threatens someone you love? You protect it. Peter brashly reacts to this vocally not once, but twice. What might be the brokenness that lies behind this fear? I would say it might be the sense of broken pride, lostness, and the potential of wasted years with a fraud. Remember, it's very likely at this point that the disciples still see Jesus as the conquering Messiah, the great warrior savior. He hasn't done anything like this yet. If He dies without accomplishing it, to Peter's present understanding he's put all of his eggs in the very wrong basket. That possibility is breaking to a

committed, fervent heart. How does Jesus react to this brokenness?

If we read his prediction of the denials through the lens of compassionate, here is what he is communicating. "Peter, I know you're afraid. I know these next days will be terrible for you. I know what you're going to do, and when it happens know that it's no surprise. I love you anyway." I believe this is exactly what was happening because we see the passage in John that is widely thought to be connected to the 3 denials. 3 times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him and asks Peter to care for the other followers. Once for each denial. Not as penance, but perhaps hoping Peter will connect that declaring what his heart feels now in a clearer light of understanding of just what kind of Messiah Jesus is, he can forgive himself for actions in the midst of misunderstanding and weakness.

What is Jesus doing? Both in the prediction and the restoration moments Jesus addresses Peter's brokenness. What is Peter's response to a Redeemer who even in His darkest moment thought enough to express grace? He becomes one of the boldest and most influential apostles. He proclaims Jesus until his martyrdom. Seeing Jesus in action is incredibly instructive. His strategy is always to go to the root of whatever is happening. This is even true when he scolds the religious leaders, but that's for another time. Today we are addressing the much greater majority of interactions he has with those around Him. Even His famous words on the cross show that even and especially among His enemies He sees their brokenness. "Forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."

He sees the brokenness of a lost, confused, and fearful world. Believe it or not, sometimes people are afraid of love. Love that asks to trust, to give, and to sacrifice. This love for some means fear of what will happen if they let someone into the innermost parts of their heart. What will happen if they break down a wall of bravado, and treat people with true dignity. What will happen if I see everyone as my equal? What about my status? My power? My influence? For many these questions are hard, and the fear comes from real places of hurt. If I've been hurt in the past, it makes it harder to open up in the present and future.

What Jesus shows us is that yes, loving radically carries with it risk, but it is also the most powerful force for change in the world. He demonstrates this time and again in scripture. It's His love that heals the brokenness all around Him. It's that love that changes the lives of those who follow Him. It's that love that continues to change lives and hearts even today, 2000 years after his death and resurrection. His love still touches our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Even more imminently, Jesus love touches us as we care for and see one another. The love of Christ is shown in how we treat one another.

I want to encourage us this morning, that if we want to see the things that sadden and disappoint us change, we must lead the way by example. When we see the symptoms of anger and aggression and disrespect, ask the question, what is broken here that needs healing? How can I add to the healing without causing more hurt? When we can do this, we become more like Jesus. A little at a time lives change, and the world changes with it.

This morning we're going to jump out of our standard study box and do more of a devotional or reflective piece. We'll get back to more standard Bible study after we take next week off and sort out how we'll handle those who want to get back in person again. For today, we're going to consider the common Christian statement that faith is "all about a relationship with Jesus". This statement is problematic, and doesn't fully reflect the honesty of scripture. In scripture we are told to "believe on Jesus", to "receive Jesus as Lord", to acknowledge the resurrection, and things of that nature. The command isn't to have a "personal relationship."

First, before unpacking relationship, let's look at what it means to truly "believe". The term isn't the lighter English sensibility of acknowledging something is what it is or that something historical happened and we accept that the report of it is true. It is something much deeper. It is a term of conviction to what is believed, or in whom we believe. It is a sense of faithfulness to the fullness of what is believed to be true. In other words, it's more than lip service, it is life service.

This is important in a world where TV commercials will tell us all we need to do to be saved is pray along with the sixty or ninety second slot that appears alongside and advertisement for dish soap, call a number on the screen, and congratulations, you're redeemed. The foundation of our faith is something rooted in honest and authentic commitment.

The notion of relationship is also significant, as it's not in scripture at all, at least not in the form that it's used today. If we look to the disciples, we see the nature of genuine relationship. Genuine relationship is intentional back and forth. They literally, physically walked with Jesus. They asked Him questions and got direct answers in real time. They felt the warmth of his embrace. They saw meaning in His eyes when He spoke beyond just the words. Jesus called them friends. Friendship is a genuine relationship of mutual affinity for one another. It happens in real space, real time, and mutual interaction. Note here, it isn't transactional. It is mutual. It is unconditional.

We aren't those original disciples. We pray, we sing praise to Him, we study Him, etc., but we don't literally, physically, walk with Him. Even our understanding of Jesus is not unified because we don't all interpret what we know of Him Biblically and historically the same way. If your Jesus and my Jesus are different people, how do we know which one is correct? How do we know even who we are "relating" to is the real Jesus? How do we hold a relationship without true conversation, or interaction?

No, a "relationship" with Jesus isn't in any fashion the kind of relationship as we understand it within our own experience and lifestyles. Not our person to person exchanges. Often I hear the canned answers of why someone loves Jesus as "because He first loved us", or "because He died for my sins." Unfortunately, this is transactional thinking. I love Him because He did something for me. Kind of like "I love so and so because of the great birthday gift they gave me." This doesn't constitute the fullness of relationship, but rather is superficial. That we "love because He first loved us" is less about us transacting our love in return, and more a humbling statement that our capacity to love is due to the love of God being given to us and as we open up to it, it opens our ability to share that love to and with others. That Jesus redeems us isn't a transactional offer, it is the unconditional expression of Jesus' love for us. We accept that redemption which may grow our love for Him, not because we owe it in order to earn the redemption, but because we appreciate what was done.

Yet still, none of this is about the kind of relationship that we associate with a friend, or family, or co-worker, etc. Even Jesus, when He talks to His disciples in the book of John around the last supper doesn't say "when I'm dead and gone, phone me up so we can keep this relationship going." Even as He calls them "friends", He reveals that their call when He is gone is to demonstrate that they belong to Him by loving one another. When Peter is restored before the ascension, he asks Peter "Do you love me?" When Peter affirms this, face to face, Jesus' request isn't to keep "in touch". His response is "feed my sheep." In fact, Jesus actually encourages them to let Him ascend, and embrace another person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit.

If we are called to have any kind of ongoing dialogue, according to this command in scripture, it is with the Holy Spirit. And even this is a squirrely idea to wrap our heads and hearts around. We pray, and listen for the "voice" of the Holy Spirit. But it's not a relationship as we understand it. Rarely if ever do any of us hear that audible voice, and if we do it's generally not one that is conversant for an afternoon chat. We feel it in our heart, in our "gut." We understand that the Holy Spirit may speak through the advice of a friend, or by opening our eyes and hearts to something in a book we are reading.

Beyond conversing, we have more sensing or feeling a presence or experience. A sense of comfort through the Holy Spirit when we lean on God in times of trouble. We have peace of heart and mind over a difficult choice when we choose in God's will. We feel accomplishment when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, progress is made in serving one another or seeing the Kingdom come to bear in the world. In times of weakness we tap a strength, or perhaps a better word is resolve, to carry on in life, relationship, and ministry.

All of these aspects of the Holy Spirit we may associate with relationship, but it isn't the relationship as we know it. Which perhaps explains why people who aren't part of the body of believers have trouble grasping that Christian turn of phrase. We call it "relationship", and in a form it is, but not in the way that it is often stated or portrayed as being equivalent to relationship from person to person.

Moreover, the idea of relationship often implies something more familiar or intimate. The song "He Calls Me Friend" is an example of this. "I am a friend of God, I am a friend of God, I am a friend of God, He calls me friend" are the lyrics. I don't mean to be offensive here, but God didn't call me friend. Jesus called those first disciples friend. I can understand the language that we are heirs with Christ of the Kingdom. I understand the sense that we are all God's children. But for me "friend" is a bit too familiar.

Our relationship with Jesus today is one of the redeemed to the Redeemer. Our more imminent relationship is with the Holy Spirit. If we break down the Godhead into Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our relationship to the Father is one of child to parent or subject to sovereign. And yet all of these are still trying to connect the infinite to the finite, the visible to the invisible, the omnipotently strong to the humanly frail.

The term "relationship" as it pertains to the way it is often used doesn't begin to capture all of these layers. It doesn't scratch the surface of the deservingness of God for our praise and gratitude nor does it plumb the depths of humility, sacrifice, and service that exist between us and a mysterious triune Godhead.

All of this I flesh out because so often when the concept of "personal relationship" is at the center of our faith, it translates into my praise and my prayer to cultivate my relationship with God. This isn't what Jesus charged the disciples to, at least not solely what he charged them to. Getting wrapped up mostly in the "me and God" aspect leaves out what is actually the larger scale command Jesus gives at the last supper and before he ascends. What Jesus speaks to is the response. He talks about His expectation as to what our response to His grace and sacrifice will be. He speaks about sending the Holy Spirit. Why? To comfort, to counsel, to console, to carve out a path before us to follow. The Holy Spirit comes to assist us as we respond to our redemption.

The response is simple. To love. To serve. To inspire others to faith in Jesus. Grasping this difference is essential to a full and fulfilled expression of faith. Yes, there is the layered, unique relationship we have with God through the Holy Spirit, but it is the response that demonstrates the genuineness of that relationship. The world can hear us talk about how close we claim to be to Christ, but that doesn't mean much in a world where there are so many who talk a talk but don't walk the walk. Suspicion is natural and many times necessary. What they want to know is whether or not the relationship we claim is real. That is measured in who are and what we do.

"They will know you love me by the way you love one another." "Go into the world and make disciples of all nations." "Feed my sheep." "Whatever you have done (or not) to the least of these you have done (or not) to me." All of these are actions. They are the intended result of our gratitude and understanding of what Jesus did for us on the cross and what he modeled for us in his ministry. Understanding the nature of our relationship with God helps us put into perspective our response to that relationship. The sovereign Father became incarnate in the redeeming Son who demonstrated what a faithful life looks like and sent the guiding, sustaining Holy Spirit to help us as we respond to all of this.

In more modern times, the world has become littered with voices touting their own relationship with Jesus and telling everyone else how much they need that same relationship. Too many of those voices are demonstrating in action that whatever relationship being conveyed doesn't have the authenticity that has cultivated any response. The result is many see a faith that is a lot of show and no go. We are all called to do more and to be real. Let our connection to God be seen at least as much and often more as heard. Let what is inside of us in relationship to God be so overflowing with desire to see the world transformed that we can't help but respond with lives of love, grace, and mercy.

When we do this, the personal spiritual connection to God fits tightly with a life exemplifying Christ that transforms both the individual as well as the world. Do you love me? Feed my sheep.