

JANUARY 31, 2021

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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



SERMON Jan 24th, Counterfeit Christianity: Cult of Personality Numbers 16:1-35, 1 Corinthians 3:1-14

This week we begin a series called “Counterfeit Christianity.” As we go through what is happening in our current times, the level of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories have taken hold more than any time I can personally remember. This kind of foolishness is often written of as just part and parcel to politics. Personally, I don’t accept that, but that’s not the intent of this series. This series is honing in much closer on people of faith, because sadly, rather than simply preaching Jesus and the gospel, there are pulpits all around the nation that have repeated the misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories as gospel truth.

Again, sadly, this isn’t necessarily new. The content may be new, but the practice is not. For centuries, poor theology, twists of scripture, and attitudes and values that are plainly the opposite of Christ have been preached by the church. The degree to which these things go against Jesus certainly have varied, but some of them I would argue risk a bridge too far apart from an authentic faith. The impact of this can’t be overstated. When we see the decline of Christianity, there can be no doubt that the further we get from Jesus, the more our witness degrades and fails to inspire others to follow Him. If we attach our redemption to the authenticity of our faith, not only does this risk our witness to others, but also the genuineness of our relationship with Christ.

As we go through this, some of the material may be uncomfortable. How we understand our faith is dear to our hearts as it should be. Challenging held beliefs may be downright scary as many hold fear that to question what we believe is to risk shaking our faith to the breaking point. What we are about is not faith shaking but faith building. Cutting through incorrect suppositions and assumptions to get to the core of scripture may change what we believe. That’s fine so long as our belief changes to something more closely tethered to scripture. To make the point, let me point to scripture itself.

2 Corinthians 11:14 tells us that “Satan masquerades as an angel of light.” We often forget this in the day to day. Satan, the name meaning the adversary of God and by extension the people of God, is shrewd. Evil doesn’t appear as evil. If it did, I’d like to think we’d run the other direction immediately. Evil in its most insidious form appears as good, as “light.” How does this happen? It happens when the true message of God and Christ is twisted just enough to misdirect, yet have a sheen of truth. This sheen appeals to our convenience, comfort, and more base desires related to pride and ego. The more we embrace these misdirects or lies, the further afield we end up from Christ. Remember, even a small deviation from a path, if travelled far enough, takes us a long distance away from the destination we are seeking. What is truly tragic is that when these twists are offered in the church, those believing them think that they are following Jesus. This adversary convinces that the antichrist is Christian.

I am convinced this is a necessary track to follow as a series after putting a request out on social media asking “what lies have you been presented with about the Christian faith that were presented as truth?” The immediate response was greater than I’d ever received from any other question looking for input for a sermon series.

In this first message, we are going to look at the people we entrust with directing our faith. Who do we listen to? Who do we follow? How rabid is our devotion to our pastor or preacher? In other words, do we follow a personality in a pulpit, or do we follow the actual person of Jesus Christ?

Looking into scripture, we see examples of the consequence of whom we choose to follow. In Numbers, the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram is a cautionary tale of what happens when we choose poorly. Moses had been leading the Israelites through the desert and having to deal with squabbling, griping, and dissent. Here the dissent reaches somewhat of a fever pitch with a group of men inciting a degree of rebellion. They were angry with Moses and Aaron and it seems looking for some sense of a power grab. 250 men followed them. To sort out the issue, Moses challenged them to stand before God along with himself and Aaron so that God could make known who was in right standing. As a result of their insolence, Numbers tells us that:

“But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.” As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions. They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.” (16: 30-33)

Moses had been faithfully delivering, leading, and interceding for the people, yet some rose up posing as men who were seeking to overrun Moses and Aaron in God's name. They appeal to the crowd when they say "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" This message was appealing enough to persuade a following. The consequences for following people falsely claiming to be on God's side was dire.

This becomes the story through the history of Israel. Time after time there are both genuine and false prophets. The false prophets tickle the ears of kings with falsehoods in God's name, leading to the decline and punishment of the nation. Authentic prophets were persecuted and executed because their message, though correct, was inconvenient and challenging to the attitudes and preferences of the rulers. Yet over and over again, we see that ultimately the truth prevails even if it's in hindsight once events have unfolded.

On the other hand, Paul gives us a sense of what it looks like to have a Godly leader that demonstrates the genuineness of faith in his preaching, or in this case writing.

The church in Corinth was having some arguments amongst themselves that seems to be jockeying for who is "better" or "more correct" in their faith. There is division between those who came to faith under Paul and those under Appollos. Paul addresses the conflict by reminding them to whom they really belong. None are better than any other because all are equal under God. Whatever Paul or Appollos did, God is where they turn their attention, and God is where they find true direction. Both of them had their role to play. One planted, another watered, but the transformation belongs to neither. That credit belongs to God and God alone.

Paul's intent is to humbly point them heavenward. It isn't about him nor has it ever been. It's all about those ministered to and their subsequent relationship with God through Christ. Contrast this with Korah and his crew. There is a clear sense that their outrage was less about God and much more about themselves. Whether it was jealousy, aggravation, distrust, or some other motivator, they targeted Moses and Aaron. In the doing they were considered to have held God in contempt. If they were genuinely concerned with the Israelites, they would have simply leaned on the authority of God rather than their own base agenda.

Moses and Paul on the other hand were reluctant leaders. Moses did everything he could think of to get away from his role. Paul literally persecuted Christians until he was struck on the road to Damascus with a powerful and divine wake up call to be won over by and win others over to Jesus. The humility inherent in their calling and agenda made for reliable and trustworthy leadership.

Similarly, Moses and Paul were not too big or boastful to take and help with questions. They were willing to grow. Moses fielded so many questions and arbitrated so many disputes it exhausted him. His father in law wisely gave him the idea to form a group of trustworthy men to deal with less significant questions and situations, freeing Moses to handle only the more significant ones. Moses leaned on Aaron, his father-in-law, and his protégé Joshua. He wasn't too big for questions and concerns, and he wasn't too prideful for some assistance along the way.

Paul's letters themselves are a testament to his willingness to field questions and even dissent. The letters weren't necessarily written without provocation. Word arrived about circumstances, questions and issues in Christian communities. He loved them enough to provide direction and answer as best as he could. In fact, not only was he thoughtful enough to answer the questions and issues at hand, but often as we read his works he is providing answers to questions he anticipates arising in the reading or hearing of the letter. We even see Paul's tone change over time. At one point he is harshly critical of anyone preaching any gospel other than the one he passes on, yet in Philippians he has softened. He says that even though motives for preaching Jesus may vary, as long as Jesus name is being preached that's a good thing.

Moses and Paul are examples of what reliable leader look like. Humble, and open while at the same time having a strong and ardent faith in what they believe.

If this is what reliable leadership looks like, what about unreliable? Specifically when it comes to discerning the validity of what truth is being purveyed about scripture, what are red flags that should at least make us question or think about the reliability of the message?

We must approach this humbly. As we examine each other, we need to remember to examine ourselves. None of us have it all figured out. Every one of us is mistaken in some fashion. This includes every priest, preacher, and pastor. This reality is precisely why we need to be free to give one another honest feedback and criticism. The ability to receive such is critical to any leader seeing blind spots and sorting out those places where we are in error.

Worth noting is that not all misleading is intentional, some is not. Intentionally misleading is simply twisting scripture for the purposes of manipulating those listening for one's own ambitions and ends. Unintentional doesn't necessarily have that same malicious motive. This is the kind of thing that happens when an individual has been misled for perhaps their entire life, and has not challenged what has been taught. What is counterfeit is genuinely believed to be authentic, and so this is how they lead others.

While motive matters, particularly for the one doing the leading, the end result is the same for whomever buys into the message. Misled is misled.

Discernment is still a necessity, judgment is not.

One of the first things we need to dispel is a misrepresentation of a famous incident between David and Saul. David is on the run and Saul goes into a cave to relieve himself. David is in the cave and has every opportunity to kill Saul. Rather than doing so, he sneakily cuts off a piece of Saul's robe and after Saul exits produces it to show just how vulnerable Saul was, and displays a sense of grace that David's men can't comprehend. When confronted about why he allowed Saul to escape, the response is that he will not "stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed." In some strains of our faith, this "anointing" is thought to rest on the preacher, pastor, priest, etc. Along with it comes teaching that to speak against that individual is improper at best and deserving of discipline at worst because it is "stretching out one's hand against the Lord's anointed." This should pose some red flags. "Anointing", or being selected/blessed by God in a role certainly is Biblical. If an individual is claiming to have this anointing, that is a self-proclamation and potential power play to tamp down any dissension or disagreement. Even another declaring this "anointing" should be approached with wariness, particularly if the one proclaiming it is close to or a firm acolyte of the preacher or pastor.

Any of us claiming to be guiding others by proclaiming the Word of God should be taken to task if we promote a status that implies we are above questioning or criticism. Humility rather than arrogance should be the state of any preacher. Shielding ourselves from honest feedback is a sign that a counterfeit message in some way is being offered, or at the very least will be hard to ferret out if offered unintentionally.

Even devotion to God isn't offered blindly. We seek the Holy Spirit to help us discern what scripture reveals about the nature of God so that we can follow faithfully. If we as imperfect creations approach a perfect God with discernment, how much more do we need to approach one another with discernment? Blind devotion to any person has profound potential to lead us away from God and down another path.

In other words, if there is a lack of willingness to be genuinely questioned, and an air of superiority, beware.

Counterfeit or false humility is also a warning sign. Disguising ego and pride with a false sheen of spiritually jargoned humility should make us wonder what else is being glossed over or a half truth.

This leads to a sense of consistency. Is there a consistency of personality that spans across all areas of one's life? If there is inconsistency, this is a warning. It is a sign that personality is a matter of convenience to reach personal ends. There is no reason to not suspect convenience slips in to how scripture is interpreted and used.

An example comes from a friend who spent time in the circles of some of the big name pastors in the country. In this case, the message is on point, but the example raises some eyebrows. The message put out is that rest is a holy and necessary practice for people of faith. Prioritizing family is part of our ministry before God. All accurate. Unfortunately, the way they treat their staff puts this into question. Staff are run into the ground, and made to feel guilty when family concerns affect their ability to be overworked and often underpaid.

Is the message overly politicized, particularly leaning hard one way or the other? When God is assumed to attach to only one party, and scripture conveniently toes the party line, something is wrong. There is a vast difference between addressing Biblically issues that have become politicized and politicizing the Bible to conveniently address these issues.

Does the message include sacrifice? Is it sometimes convicting and uncomfortable? If the answer is "no", something is amiss. Sacrifice and being called to account are foundational to the Word of God.

Am I hearing only things that I agree with and happily support? To be told one already has everything figured out and the interpretation magically fitting in perfectly with the way I've already attuned my life is a warning. None of us are perfect.

Finally, if the one we're considering listening to has a following, what does that following look like? Are they overly fawning fans that won't allow any nay saying, or are they faithful followers of Jesus Christ, taking their own time, as scripture says, to "rightly divide the Word of Truth?"

As an example, years ago I was in conversation with someone and dared question the faithfulness of some statements made by an individual's favorite televangelist. I was immediately turned because how dare I question this person.

Which leads us to a last note that is important when we approach what we hear and from whom with discernment. To question the interpretation is not to necessarily judge the individual it came from. To allow ourselves to observe warnings that should cause us pause before simply swallowing what we are being fed isn't accusatory. To doubt what another is telling me about the Bible isn't doubting the Word of God. What we are doing is carefully guarding our hearts so that our faith and belief is authentic. It is based and rooted genuinely in scripture, not some counterfeit posing as genuine scripture.

Who and what we believe have consequence. On one hand, those who followed Korah, and likely believed they were in the right before God, met with a dismal consequence of destruction.

On the other hand, Moses got the Israelites to the Promised Land. Only two of the original group that left Egypt made it, a strong testament to choosing wisely whom to follow. The faithless or the faithful, even when both may be claiming to speak for God. Paul's work established the Gentile church, spawning generations of faithful Christians that continued to put forth the gospel of Jesus Christ. Leaders worthy of a following. When we have to choose a voice. Choose wisely. When we have the privilege of being that voice for another, use it humbly, openly, honestly, and with a healthy dose of grace. It matters here and now, and it matters eternally.

January 31, 2021

Prelude

Greeting and Announcements

Opening Prayer

Hymns

#381 Savior Like A Shepherd Lead Us
#363 And Can It Be That I Should Gain

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Scripture

Deuteronomy 7: 3-4
1 Corinthians 5: 11-14
Matthew 9: 9-13

Sermon

Counterfeit Christianity:
Exclusive Deals

Closing Hymn

#672 God Be With You Til We Meet Again

Benediction



Giving

Offering	\$1,662
Improvement	\$100
Tom Catlett memorial	\$375
Human Relations Day	\$5

Received	\$12,870
Needed	\$16,268

FIRST RESPONDER APPRECIATION MONTH

Send a card,
Arrange lunch delivery

Bake a cake,
Drop off donuts -
This month's
mission project is to
find a way to let police,
fire, and EMT folks know
their efforts are appreciated.




by donation

Drive-Thru Meal

Tuesday
February 9
Quarter Chicken
5:00pm until gone