

FEBRUARY 28, 2021

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

SERMON: “Right to Impose” Deuteronomy 7: 1-4, Mark 12: 28-31, Galatians 3: 23-29

This week we continue our Counterfeit Christianity series. I again want to remind us why the title. There are fewer areas of life where something counterfeit does more damage. The genuineness of our faith affects our witness and to some extent, I know not how far, our redemption. The insidiousness of counterfeit is that it looks close enough to the genuine article that we can be fooled into accepting it as true. One of Jesus repetitive refrains in John is that the sin of the people didn't believe He was who He said He was. They wouldn't accept Him for who He truly is. When we accept something counterfeit and attach it to Jesus, we cease to worship the genuine Jesus, and instead some false misrepresentation of Him. The more counterfeit the creeps in, the further from the real Jesus we wander.

Today we will look at something that may be uncomfortable. It's also necessary because it is an attitude that in various ways has been bred into Christianity for centuries. In fact, particularly today, we typically aren't even aware of it, or if we ourselves exhibit it. This attitude, I believe, is one of the reasons we see the decline in Christianity in this present day and age. So we do well to point it out for the purpose of correcting the counterfeit. I honestly didn't think I would be preaching on this during this series. Like last week's message, this one came from a comment shared with me. We won't tackle the entire comment, but rather just what comes at the end. However we can't understand the attitude without the context. The comment was the problematic notion that a “living, loving deity would order the slaughter of every man, woman, child, and beast in a territory by invaders, and that this sense of ‘manifest destiny’ continues today.”

What is being referred to is this passage we read in Deuteronomy where God orders this very thing to the Israelites. They had been freed from Egypt, wandered in the wilderness, and were ready to claim the Promised Land given through God's covenant with Abraham. This passage is troubling and uncomfortable. Often we read over it without too much thought because it is uncomfortable and quite difficult to explain away. If God is the same today as yesterday and will be tomorrow, how do we reconcile God revealed in Jesus stacking up against this order? Jesus, who often said that what He speaks comes directly from the Father, who tells us to “love our neighbor as ourselves”, to “love our enemies”, to “pray for our enemies”, who calls us to self-sacrifice on the part of another, and to not destroy those who don't yet believe but befriend them for the purpose of bringing them into relationship with Christ.

This is sticky, and not something best handled in one way communication. It requires time, and conversation. Still, we can't discuss the attitude of Christians feeling there is a right to impose our will on others without referring to this passage. This passage is where it starts.

Literally, here the Israelites are given permission to suspend anything we might regard as mercy or community with the inhabitants of the land, and instead engage in wholesale slaughter. By God. Why? Two reasons. First, they had divine claim on the land. Second, for fear that mingling with the inhabitants would lead them away from God. They were God's people, the folks in the land were not. Therefore they were allowed.

This claim to divine right, or, as I refer to it in today's less violent form, a right to impose ourselves on others, has led to atrocities throughout history, and the double standard it represents destructive to our witness in the world. And, of course, this makes sense. It's awfully convenient to claim a high moral compass for everyone else across the board, and then get to drop it for ourselves if we believe God has called us to something or given something to us by divine right. This is one place where the word hypocrisy is actually appropriately used.

Some instances of what this has looked like from history through present day.

A couple weeks ago we noted the Crusades, of which there were multiple. Divine right or mandate to “cleanse the infidel” and occupy Jerusalem. A murderous rampage across multiple countries.

The Inquisition was a divine calling to convert the infidel, and because of that mandate using horrific torture and even execution was perfectly on the table as options.

I remember when I was in school and we learned American history, we were given a romanticized and very cleaned up version of the settling of the new world and the westward expansion. The reality of it was darker.

Yes Europeans travelled across the ocean to be able to worship freely, however it was more than that. Freedom of religion was for them, but no one else. Their towns and settlements were largely theocratic and if you lived there you did it there way. To not do so carried with it consequence, sometimes as severe as being exiled or even executed.

Many who came over saw themselves as a “new Israel” with a divine right to claim the “new promised land.” Keep in mind, they made this claim, not God. If the curiosity ever crossed your mind as to how so many God fearing Christians could commit the atrocities against the native Americans, this is why. Claiming the same promise as the Israelites green lights by any means necessary. The native American was the heathen to be converted, suppressed, or culled. In fact, each time there was a successful settling or taking territory, those who held to this believed it to be a sign from God of their divine right.

During the time of empires, Christian nations conquering others sent soldiers and missionaries. The short of it is that there was a sense that their culture and faith were superior, and thus allowed to be imposed on whomever they conquered. In a more useful sense if one is the conqueror, one of the quickest ways to stamp out a peoplehood is to take their culture, and their religion.

Here's one of the main issues with this line of thought. If we take at face value scriptures like we see in Deuteronomy and others in the Old Testament, uncomfortable as they may be, we also have to respect that they were given at a specific time to a specific people in a specific circumstance. Most importantly, they were NOT given to us today. In fact, if we want to know what commands we DO have, we need to look no further than the commands of Jesus of love, mercy, and to inspire the world to know Him, uniting us all under God.

Going back to the initial scripture and the entry into the Promised Land, we see further evidence of dismissing bad acting when we attach divine right to something. The story of Israel beyond occupying Canaan, is that they did in fact form a nation. Scripture also tells us that they were later exiled from that land by God for their unfaithfulness in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivity. After this exilic period, the people of Israel were never quite the same. Some returned to Judea, some stayed where they were, others were scattered elsewhere. This scattering we call the diaspora.

This scattering also brought about great persecution and scapegoating. Very clearly the “other” wherever they landed, they were easy targets. Their country was never again fully theirs truly. They became a province or protectorate of some larger empire through the years.

In the modern era, we understand arguably the worst tragedy to befall the Jews was the Holocaust. At the end of the war, the international community deemed it correct to once again grant Israel their own state and the nation of Israel was formed. At the time and since then this was celebrated by Christian and Jews as they finally had returned the land God gave all the way back in the story of Abraham.

It is here that we need to hold in tension a both and. It is possible and necessary to believe there is a divine calling or rite to something, AND to call for accountability when that rite is misused or abused. A simple way to put it might be that if I buy property, most would agree I have a right to that property. However if I choose to put a meth lab on that property and sell drugs, I would be rightly criticized and likely prosecuted because I was using that property incorrectly and in this case illegally.

Which brings us to the last decades. The narrative of the formation and what came next with Israel is largely one sided, Pro-Israel. Which makes sense as so much of the more public voice comes in the western world from sources that in some way reflect a Judeo Christian sensibility. But we have to be honest about the fullness of the story.

In order to make room for the state of Israel, the people who were already living there, the Palestinians, had to be displaced. They were quite literally kicked out of their homes and given land to settle in in another area. Through the years, even the land they were given has been squeezed out by Israel, and many times through unsavory, sometimes violent means.

When I was in seminary, a Rabbi I took a class from was actually very articulate in holding the both/and in tension. He said that never would he apologize for the Jews having a homeland. Part of why the Jews had been victimized through history was that they were not centralized and able to form defenses to protect themselves. The nation of Israel affords the chance to do just that. At the same time, he was also very frank and honest that Israel had not necessarily treated the Palestinians properly.

My class took a three week trip and spent time in both Israel and the Palestinian territories where we saw the circumstances with our own eyes, and heard stories with our own ears. This is important, because when we returned home and shared our experience, these are things that couldn't be refuted. What was interesting was how most of the Christians I spoke with responded.

Hearing stories that otherwise would have frustrated and maybe even outraged them, because of their understanding of divine right, the wrong that had been done was dismissed, ignored, or simply swept under the rug with a “well, it's their land to begin with so they have a right to it.” In other words, if that means some people need to be mistreated, so be it.

Divine right to occupy, in other places in history divine right to subjugate, in others still, divine right to kill.

Through history this sense of imposition in both subtle and explicit, sometimes violent ways, has followed the faith imprinting a sense of arrogance that because we are correct in our worship and faith, we sometimes get a pass on genuinely loving, or doing the actual hard work of evangelism. Imposing is a much faster and easier road, though widely ineffective.

Today, it's different. I'd like to share three ways in which the attitude of imposition flares us to the detriment of our witness.

First, we see it around the holidays. Most Christians would like a nativity scene in the center of town I think. Some Christians get irritated or angry when that space has to be shared with symbols from other traditions that have holidays that same time of year. We want the right to ours, but are happy to squash the rights of others to theirs. The message? We're right, you're wrong, we're better, you're worse. Intentional or not, this is what is heard.

Second, we hear it time to time when a non-Christian, particularly a Muslim, is elected to public office. The assumption is that the Christian will have a higher, better character than the other. But is this true? No. All of us have come across people claiming to be Christian yet exhibiting callousness, dishonesty, cruelty, selfishness, unfairness, and so on. In other words Christians failing to display Christ like character. On the other hand we also know non Christians who are loving, merciful, just, honest, and have a very keen sense of serving the other and pulling for the greater good. In other words non-Christians displaying Christlike character. The question for all of us should we ever have to make this decision for ourselves is what would we rather? The label “Christian” or the actually Christ like character?

When Christians get themselves ruffled about this kind of moment, the message is that what one labels themselves, if not Christian, makes them inferior.

A final big one actually breaks down even if we apply it to other Christians. Many Christians continue to push for Bible and Prayer to be reinstated as a regular part of the school day. We want religion back in schools. Except we don't want any religion. We want our religion, and we want it done our way. Again, this stems from a long held Christian attitude that we are correct and therefore able to impose or force feed our correctness. The questions are many. Do we want a non Christian teacher leading a prayer they don't believe or teaching a book they consider at best a fantasy novel rather than a book of spiritual truth? Is it fair or right to make someone who doesn't believe do something that goes against what they do believe? In a country where we have freedom to embrace or not whatever religion we want, is it even legal in the public sphere to force any one religion to the exclusion of all others?

If we allow every teacher to express whatever religion they ascribe to when we put religion back in schools, then it's luck of the draw as to what our children will be taught depending on what teacher or teachers they have.

If we only allow Christianity, we still have an issue. I don't want my kids starting their day with someone praying in tongues and telling them they don't have a full experience of the Holy Spirit unless they do too. I don't want a teacher telling them that they aren't “real Christians” because of the way they were baptized. I don't want a teacher who devoutly believes as part of their Biblical interpretation that the world is flat teaching my kids to be flat earthers. I don't want the class pet of a teacher who believes in taking up serpents to be a copperhead, and sharing that part of proving devoutness is taking a sip of strychnine from a mason jar. I don't want my kids who may have a friend or relative in the LGBT community hearing that God hates them.

These may seem extreme, but they are all expressions within the Christian faith that I don't want pushed on my, or any, children. In today's culture, opening the door to forcing religion, this is the possibility.

Which brings us to a truth. Most Christians don't even want Christianity taught, at least not broadly. They want THEIR Christianity taught. I would wager that were children to come home sharing any of what was just laid out there would be a ton of Christian parents who would be outraged.

I want my kids to be taught at home and in a community of faith of my own choosing.

And this is what it boils down to in a sense. Look at most nations where Christianity was imposed and forced. Most of those nations in the long haul are now in a place where Christianity is declining. We've come to an era where it's no longer acceptable to aggressively and coercively force people to worship in any particular way, and I believe it's proof that when something is imposed, once the consequence is removed so often is the motivation to continue on with it.

Imposing our will on another doesn't make for honest conversion, it makes for bitterness and resentment even if the outside actions match what we want to see. Making people feel less than because they don't agree doesn't draw them, it repels them.

This is so because to impose or coerce violates one of God's greatest and oldest gifts to us. This gift is present in the earliest story of scripture, the Garden of Eden. It is the gift of choice. Without it, Adam and Eve could never have broken the rule and ate of the fruit. God knew and knows that obedience and more importantly love not freely given mean nothing. Only when love and obedience are chosen freely do they carry significance, because they are then genuine. Not counterfeit.

Remember also what God's response was when they chose to disobey. Yes they were ejected from the Garden. Also remember why. The damage they could have done were they to then eat from the tree of life would have been immeasurable given the proof now that they would disobey God. In other words, they were ejected for their own protection and the protection of all that would come after. God also made clothing for them. Even in an act of discipline, God showed compassion. Even when we choose to disobey, God never stops looking out for, loving, and caring for us. We need to do likewise for one another.

Part of understanding why Christian witness has become less effective over the ages is that we have forgotten the God given right to choose rather than have something imposed. Overcoming this spirit is difficult, it's been present as we've seen throughout most all of history. I suggest a few things to pave the way.

Paul gives us a couple very solid starting points. In Galatians he reminds us that through Christ, there is no longer any points of division among us. Each and every one of us is loved by and equal before God. We are united in being reconciled, one and all, by Christ and Christ alone. In this unity, we need to see everyone, especially those who don't believe, as God does. Beloved children of God in need of relationship with Jesus. We need to see ourselves honestly and remember that we too have a journey we've been on. If we've been Christian all our lives, we may have had a privilege others didn't. People who grew us from birth in the faith. Those who haven't need someone to walk alongside them and guide them towards Jesus. And even there, if we've been on this journey for a lifetime, how much have we grown? Who did we used to be but aren't anymore? The patience God has had with us and others as well who have walked with us are inspiration for us to have that same patience and grace, particularly with those who don't believe.

He also has this wonderful expression. I become all things to all people that by all means some might be saved. Paul understood that he needed to meet people where they were at, not where he wanted them to be. Compromise his faith? No. Be humble enough to speak to people on their terms, and in ways they could understand? Yes. Throughout the New Testament, if there is any definitive "you must do thus and so" coming from a point of authority, it wasn't directed at the non believer. It was directed at those who had already made the choice to follow Christ.

This is an incredible distinction. When we choose to follow Jesus, it also means we are choosing to give up choice in some fashion. We sacrifice our right to choose cruelty, bitterness, selfishness, callousness and so on. Before faith, however, people are under no bounds to sacrifice those choices. They haven't made the commitment. As such, Paul meets them as they need to be met, seeking to inspire them to faith. If he can inspire them to choose, the faith is real and so is the commitment to Jesus.

This method of evangelism has its roots in Christ Himself. I don't recall Jesus forcing or imposing Himself on anyone to get them to faith. He healed, did other signs and wonders, preached, taught, spoke, formed relationships, all of this. But He didn't coerce. He spoke in parables, all things to all people, in ways they could relate to, hoping to inspire them to a more perfect faith. His offer "follow Me" to the early disciples was just that, an offer. They had to choose to accept it.

In Acts, we are told there were many people who came to faith. Why? Because of the witness of the Christian. Not the imposition, the witness of love, community, and grace.

Our job, given by Jesus, is to go into the world making disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If this is our common call, getting it right how we draw people to faith must be at the top of our priorities in our relationships. Understanding that it happens not imposing or coercing by the power of our authority, but rather inspiring others by the power of our witness is paramount.

It's also difficult. It's much easier to use authority to force something than it is to do the painstaking work of inspiring someone to want something. The more difficult one is worth it. Relationships take time and a lot of effort. They are filled with joy and heartache, ease and frustration. They don't produce results quickly. When results come, however, they are the real deal.

We often say things like "the world needs Jesus". That's true, without question. If the world isn't accepting Him, and it's our job to inspire that, what's going on? We have to do something better. And understand, what we've considered today is important whether someone has a "right to impose" attitude or not. If I have it, I need to work on it. If I don't, I need to be aware that this sense of Christianity is thick in the water and for my witness to inspire I have to know that this is a barrier to overcome.

Working through this concept, the question at the bottom line becomes "so what?" What benefit is this to me, the world, and to the Kingdom of God?

The greatest benefit is that our witness expands in both scope and power. When we present the gospel to another as an equal, listen to their story, meet them where they are at, we earn the right to be heard rather than demanding it. Our words, especially when congruent with our actions are credible and deserve at least attention. Our ability to inspire someone to faith in Christ, or to plant the seed that will bear fruit when another waters increases dramatically.

For ourselves, we lower our own angst, and increase our own contentment and peace. If I feel I am correct and with the right to impose, I often also feel the need to impose. If I am ineffective in changing those around me, it is easy to grow in frustration and aggravation. Too often this angst turns outward, blaming and accusing those who won't knuckle under rather than inward reassessing how I am going about things. In effect, this angst serves only to compromise effectiveness, not improve it. Releasing this right and need allows me to offer what I have freely, and knowing they have the right to make their own choice, release it to being between them and God.

The more we are able to come to each other on our own terms, understand one another, and see one another equally before God the broader our circle of friends and acquaintances becomes. This is part of what builds our witness as we are allowed into relationship with those who need Christ but might otherwise be resistant to even a conversation with us.

To put an exclamation point on it, let me give voice to something I trust many of you have heard yourselves.

For those alienated from our faith, it is frequently the result of how they have been treated or addressed by those who are in the faith. When they come across one who defies their assumptions, it can take them off guard. What I've experienced and seen is that the response frequently sounds something like "I wish more Christians were like you" or "you're not like the other Christians I've been around." Not because we're more permissive or condoning of a "free for all", but because of another sentiment that I've heard uttered.

"Lots of Christians say they love people, but don't really seem to, I believe that you really do actually love people."

When we hear these kinds of responses to those who have been alienated, and have now been given pause and reason to reconsider in even the smallest way, what I believe we are hearing from above are the words we long to hear. "Well done good and faithful servant."

BIBLE STUDY John 18

This week will be a bit different than typical. We won't make it all the way through this chapter. The reason is our Tuesday and Wednesday studies only got so far as Jesus coming before Pontius Pilate, however we didn't make it through that exchange.

As we look at John 18, something becomes evident. John has flipped the priority and pace of the Last Supper and the experience in the Garden from the other three gospels. Where Matthew, Mark, and Luke relatively speed through the Last Supper and take more time with the Garden and trials before the Jewish leadership, John does the opposite. At the Last Supper he slows down, taking great care to share Jesus' instruction and encouragement with the disciples. The Garden and trial are sped through, though not without purpose.

This is telling regarding what John feels is important. Throughout the gospel, John has been repetitive, reinforcing the same ideas over and over again. Jesus' identity, His expectations for what it looks like to follow Him, and the foundational notion that He is one with God and the beginning of faith is to believe that He is who He says He is. The culminating moment on the cross is paramount to Jesus' mission at this point, and so rather than take extra time to share details of what transpires between the Last Supper and the cross that might be distracting, John almost rifles through the scenes.

Worth noting is the difference in the arrest scene compared to the other gospels. Where in other telling, Jesus' humanity comes to the forefront as in agony He prays for the "cup" to be taken from Him, here He boldly corrects Peter embracing the cup that has been "given" to Him. This bold, steadfast divinity is what John wants us to see and recognize. Inserting the extra narrative of the agonizing prayer might distract us from this.

As the detachment of soldiers and the representation of the Jewish leadership approach, there is an interesting hint of irony and strange sense that at the same time both the disciples and the ones coming for Jesus have something in common. They come bearing torches and weapons. The torches, artificial light guiding them in the darkness, come to arrest and seek to destroy the true Light of the world, Jesus. Having rejected the Light, as John says earlier in the gospel even in the very opening of the gospel, they have false light leading them through the darkness. One might even say that the false light sought to lead them through physical darkness can be understood as spiritually following a false light leads them even deeper into darkness.

The weapons let us know that they may be anticipating a fight, completely misunderstanding that Jesus has no intention of putting up a fuss. Peter, on the other hand, reacts violently. The disciples are still under the misunderstanding that this is some kind of militant Messiah, so naturally a fight is anticipated in some form or another. The disciples, the soldiers, and the Jewish leadership are similarly mistaken that the confrontation is physical rather than purely, graciously spiritual.

There is also a very active, tangible reality punctuating Jesus' statement that He will lay down His life willingly. As they seek to arrest Jesus, it reports that twice they fell backward on the ground. At this point, there can be no question that Jesus goes of His own accord. This is significant. No one can say He was forced. No one can claim He resisted. If sin is disobedience to God, and Jesus is sinless, and God's direction is for Him to go to the cross, willingness is essential to His sacrificial role.

One further note in this arrest scene is Jesus' choice of words. Translated, we read His response to whom they are looking for "I am He." In English, this is grammatically more correct, however in truth His response is simply "I am." For the Jewish contingent of this group, once again they hear reason to take Jesus out of the picture. He identifies Himself with the divine expression "I am."

They take Jesus to Annas, which once again is a far cry from the trials we read in the other gospels. The high priest Caiaphas is mentioned by name, but holds no place in the questioning. For John, these trials aren't necessary to convey, and once again, might distract from the straight line being drawn from Jesus' identity, Farewell Discourse, and to the cross. Essentially, the trial has already taken place earlier in the gospel with Caiaphas and the other priests met, discussed Jesus, and determined that Jesus needed to die. It's unnecessary to rehash all of that. Nevertheless, Annas provides a transition and an authoritative "ruling" driving the story to Pontius Pilate. Of interest is why Annas was a sufficient character to make this call. Annas is referred to as a high priest, even though Caiaphas is also noted to be the current high priest. Annas himself had been high priest some fifteen or so years prior, and his sons and grandson were also high priests in succession. As the eldest in the family, Annas even in "retirement" still had tremendous influence and sway, which helps us understand why John simply refers to this interaction rather than going the distance describing the full back and forth of Jesus being tried in various places.

John also intersperses Peter's denials into the telling of Jesus before Annas. Rather than the escalating tone of Peter's denials that we see in the synoptics, where the third denial includes angry cursing, here the denials are presented as all on the same level. A simple "nope, I'm not" is all we get when he is asked if he follows Jesus. This may, once again, be because John doesn't want us focusing on Peter's emotion over a bigger picture he is trying to paint. The interactions with Peter and those around him and Jesus with Annas are an exercise in contrast. Jesus sacrifices self boldly for the good of all. Peter in fear sacrifices his integrity for the good of self.

This becomes a mirror for all of us. When we are confronted regarding the exercise of our faith and identity in Christ, are we the image of Jesus or Peter?

We'd like to think we'd all fall in line with Jesus every time. Often we can be very critical of Peter in this reading for his perceived cowardice. Still, would we truly be so bold? The compromise many of us have experienced in our own lives should temper any judgment we might render against Peter, as it is easy to cave under pressure and set our faith aside for safety, comfort, and convenience.

We also have to recognize that in life circumstances are complex. If we remember the Columbine shooting, we recall a girl who was asked if she was a Christian with a gun pointed to her head. She bravely said she was and it cost her life. At the time, churches around the country rightly pointed to her courage, however some went further using her situation as a kind of "guilt trip". Anyone unwilling to truthfully say that they would do the same needed to examine the genuineness of their faith, because to not do likewise was a sign of a cheap relationship with God, and a weak, potentially unredeeming, faith.

This is unfair.

The surface of it is true. Bold faith exercises itself courageously and sacrificially. The guilting, however, is unfair. What circumstances are around the moment? What about a single parent with a small child and no one to care for that child in the parent's absence? This single instance should give us all pause and create space for grace. Putting ourselves in such shoes, if we are honest, I believe conjures a truthful response to what we'd say of "I don't know." Considering the farther reaching consequences might even call into question the qualifier of "I'd like to think I would". None of us know for sure, even those with the most grounded, founded faith. In truth, does a single moment define the fullness of our faith? Most would say it does not, though we do have moments that define experiences and seasons of our lives. I don't even know we can say truthfully given our present day and age, and lack of honest persecution at least in America, that we can say for certain what God would have us do given the complexity of life and circumstances.

What we do know for certain is that in our failings, it places us in good company. Both Judas and Peter spent a LOT of time directly with Jesus. They walked with Him, lived with Him, sat under His direct teaching, and witnessed first hand the miracles He performed. Proximity to Jesus does not insulate us from the possibility of sin and temptation. When we give in, the key is to change course back towards Jesus, and know that His love welcomes us and covers our mistakes. In Peter's case, he moves on from the denials to become one of the great apostles of the early church.

Another honest question that jumps out more clearly given John's streamlined presentation of events, is who is more confusing in their sin/betrayal, Peter or Judas? On one hand the severity of what comes on the heels of Judas' betrayal might point the finger at him. What we can't forget is that Judas at this point had already detached himself from Jesus. His mind was made up, and he actually exited the Last Supper before the Farewell Discourse where Jesus gives comfort, assurance, and instruction to the disciples. Peter, on the other hand, was there for its entirety.

What this means is that perhaps only a half hour or so after hearing this, and being warned that he would deny Jesus three times, he does precisely that. This is confusing. How does this make sense? It doesn't. In fact, in some ways it may even indict Peter in the moment more harshly than Judas. Still, we need to have grace with both him and ourselves. How many times do we sin right after leaving church or a Bible study? How many times are the cautions and advice of others still ringing in our ears and we still do the thing we shouldn't do? No, we don't accept this as just another part of life and do nothing about it. We strive daily to do better and be better with the help of God. At the same time, we recognize that this is the struggle of every human, and throughout each of our lives this struggle will endure.

Finally, we have one more question in the line of Judas and Peter. Judas goes on to hang himself, Peter goes on to become the apostle as mentioned earlier. We know both of them were filled with regret. Judas returns the silver he was paid and was distraught. In the other gospels we see that Peter wept bitterly after the rooster crowed. Why the difference in how they reacted to their regret?

I would like to suggest that it is directly connected to their attachment to Jesus, and perhaps even to drinking, or not, in Jesus' words of the Farewell Discourse. Judas' distancing himself had a heart effect that likely left him out in the cold. How could he return to the disciples after what he'd done? How could he look at Jesus? In alienation, despair far more easily overtakes us. Hopelessness thrives in isolation.

On the other hand, Peter had never detached his heart from Jesus. He was in the room as Jesus love is expressed to himself and the rest of the disciples. Even in his failure, he had the others to return to. He had others to support him. Knowing the love Jesus had for him, there was hope. As opposed to alienation and isolation, hope and assurance thrive in loving community.

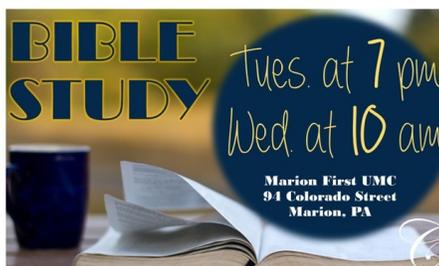
The Judas/Peter lesson is a critical one. The more we cling to Jesus, and the more we connect to our community of faith, the stronger and more hopeful we are likely to be. Even in our failures, we have support, forgiveness, and grace freely offered. This can make all the difference not only in the moment, but to also be fuel to grow and perhaps even follow in the footsteps of Peter to shake the world with the story of Christ.

Calendar

Mon, Mar 1 - Council Meeting

Tues, Mar 9 - MEAL 5-6pm

Wed, Mar 17 - BLOOD DRIVE @ Marion Fire Hall
Our turn!
Volunteers needed! (no food, thanks)



Special Offering Weekly Focus

The Council has expanded the "Special Offering" calendar.

1st Sundays: Improvement Fund
2nd Sundays: Building Fund
4th Sundays: Missions

On these Sundays, the Sunday School offering will go toward these collections, and folks are encouraged to make a special donation to these



Prelude

Greeting and Announcements

Opening Prayer

Hymns

#601 The Word Is A Lamp
#393 Spirit of the Living God (2x)

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Scripture

2 Timothy 2: 14-17
Exodus 20: 1-10

Sermon

Counterfeit Christianity:
Don't Dig Too Deep

Closing Hymn

#666 Shalom

Benediction

**RED CROSS
BLOOD DRIVE**

Wed, March 17

It's our turn to host.
Volunteers are needed!
Contact Ken & Betty Baker

Giving

Offering	\$5,331
Improvement	\$375
Postage Donation	\$100
Kitchen Donation	\$100
Received	\$29,185
Needed	\$32,536

Thank You

sermon series
Pastor Brent Stouffer

counterfeit

Christianity

FAKE

LENT 2021

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and contrite heart, O God,
You will not despise. Psalm 51:17

*"In repentance and confession,
we learn to understand one another."*

-Ash Wednesday Meditation



Meditation One

This past year has been hard. There has been conflict and passionate disagreement. There has been violence and vitriol. Christians have been part and parcel to this tension and aggression that has torn our nation and our tradition. Where have our attitudes fed and fueled these flames? Where have we missed the mark? Where are we called to repent? The word repentance simply means to change direction. To turn from what has been. What does the world need us to turn from in order to see the fullness of Christ presented in us? Where do we need to repent?

Meditation Two

In our repentance we experience confession and awakening. Our own sins are laid bare, and the wonder of reconciliation and glory of redemption are all the more apparent and humbling as we kneel before the throne of a merciful, loving God. Our God desiring a right relation with creation, that the creation would resemble all the more the Kingdom of God, and that the creation would rise above itself to embrace and live into the image of God most clearly and perfectly exemplified in Christ. We see the "other" as God sees them. We see the "other" not just for where they are off the mark, but also where the Holy Spirit is speaking through them. We see the "other" as brothers and sisters, loved and desired by God. As we acknowledge our own imperfection, the grace we have for the imperfections of others expands and tempers how we see and treat one another. We learn to love the other as we love ourselves.

Meditation Three

In repentance and confession, we learn to understand one another. Hearing the Holy Spirit speak through one another we are capable of reaching understanding. We see both where we are right, and where we are wrong. We are able to grant mercy to another because we are so grateful for the mercy granted to us. Understanding, humility, and mercy give us what may be a commodity more valuable now than ever. Unity. This season of Lent, may we find not just our own sense of Christ, but the genuine reality of Christ. May we humbly concede to the genuine witness of Jesus. May we together find a consistent, congruent, honest witness of who Jesus is, and in our contemporary lives, who Jesus expects us to be. This has always been the aim of Christ. We come to faith and repent. We strive to live as Jesus calls us to live. We humbly recognize our own limitations and allow the Spirit speaking through others to guide us to a more complete understanding of who Jesus is and who He wants us to be. And in finding Jesus in ourselves and recognizing Jesus in another, we become one under God.