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Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

SERMON: Counterfeit Christianity “Don’t Dig Too Deep” 2 Timothy 2:14-17, Exodus 20:1-10

This morning we are again considering something that was prompted by several comments I received when doing some homework prior to this series. What is something you’ve been told by the church you later found to be incorrect? The response was that there is no such thing as interpreting scripture. In other words, take it literally at face value. I agree that while this is the company line for many Christians, it is both incorrect and to be honest impossible to actually do.

This is something key. Honesty. No one truly takes the Bible at face value in every way. You’ve heard my “go to” example of this. “God knit you together in your mother’s womb.” No, God did not. No one believes that God sat on a little couch in mom’s belly with some needles and yarn to stitch us together. But the idea is far more significant than this kind of illustration.

There is a kind of bumper sticker expression that sums the truth of the Bible and our interaction with it up. “We don’t come to scripture as it is, but as we are.” In other words, it is inescapable that we bring our own baggage to the reading and understanding of the Bible. This is honest. The honesty is also what helps us come to scripture in a way that is more faithful. We have to be humble enough to realize the reality so we can engage scripture in a way that allows us to hear God speaking through it. That we come to it as we are has both potential gift and potential cost. The cost is that if I’m not honest about what I have going on in my life, I can fall into the trap of imparting my own meaning onto the scripture. The gift is that because we come as we are, and God meets us where we are, this explains why we can read the same scripture at different points of life and walk away with a different message. The word is alive, and relevant if we open up to what God is saying to us.

The history of this sense of face value and literalism sheds light on both the why and calls us to honesty in understanding it. Centuries ago Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic church. At the time, one of the root issues he had was that the church’s message was rooted in church tradition and the message of the priests and Pope as much as, if in some cases more than, scripture. Most folks couldn’t read themselves and if they could were instructed that the average person wasn’t competent to interpret it. Therefore, let the church tell you what it says and means.

Of course this kind of message is very susceptible to human nature and corruption creeping in as there is no quality control. “We say it, you believe it.” Seeing the damage this was doing to the message, when he parted ways Luther adopted an attitude of “sola scriptura”, or scripture alone. Let the Bible interpret itself. This is an understandable reaction that goes to the far other side. Use only the Bible so there’s less chance of the traditions of people creeping in and twisting the message.

First, scripture alone doesn’t mean face value, nor does it mean literalism though that’s where it has evolved in some cases. Second, Luther didn’t really only interpret using scripture alone. It was impossible for him. He as a highly educated man who had studied history, tradition, and far more fully the Bible. The wealth of his knowledge didn’t leave him just because he broke with the church. It still informed his understanding.

The same is true today. In fact our scripture in Timothy points to this directly. The sense here is that we need to be diligent in our faith. We need to discern and sort out our lives to be approved before God. We also need to be diligent to rightly manage or handle the “word of truth” which we understand to be scripture and certainly the message of the gospels. Diligence suggests that we go more than face value. We search scripture for what it is and says, not what we’d like it to be.

All of us search for meaning in scripture. All of us have had scripture that is puzzling, confusing and disturbing...This is the face value. How do we sort it out? Most of you have heard between messages and Bible study some of what I’m about to share in snippets. This morning we’re going to pack them into one message. Understanding scripture has to recognize and work through many factors that separate us today from when it was written.

First and foremost, scripture was written in Hebrew and Greek, which don’t necessarily play well with English. Particularly in passages that are difficult or seem to be controversial, sorting out the language can be incredibly helpful. What are all of the meanings of the translated term? How many times has the term been used in scripture, particularly if we know who wrote it, how many times did that author use it and how? This can shed much needed light.

We are separated by thousands of years of culture and history. What was happening that inspired the writing? What were the prophets prophesying? Why was the letter written? What was happening in their lives and living that help make sense of the direction, correction, or instruction? Last week we saw how dangerous it can be to take something that is time bound and use it as timeless. This helps us discern what is what.

Not everything is written in the same style. Letters, poetry, history, prophecy, parable, and so on. If the Word is inspired, then the way it was written is also inspired. If we want to find meaning, we regard it enough to read it as it was written and intended, factoring in the various devices that pertain to a style of writing such as illustration, allegory, hyperbole, metaphor, and such.

I have heard people literally say that thinking about scripture too much or digging too deep risks missing the meaning. I suggest the opposite. Not digging runs the risk of convenient interpretation that in the grand scope of things can’t honestly sort out without doing some incredulous scriptural gymnastics to make a point. In fact, in my experience the whole “don’t think about it too much” is really code for “don’t think about it too much because then you might not keep believing what I want you to believe.” It should come as no surprise that I honestly don’t care what you want me to believe. I care about doing the best diligence I can to believe what is correct.

In fact, Face value freezes the text in time. If we are applying scripture today in brand new contexts, we aren’t talking it at face value. And this is a necessary thing as scripture continues to inform us in new times with new circumstances.

Let’s look at this in light of some scripture. We’ll look at three commandments, and then jump into two of Paul’s letters.

Have no other Gods before me: Face value acknowledges the presence of other deities. If we only take it here, there is conflict with the notion that God is the only one true God. HOWEVER, interpreting in light of culture, and language sheds some clarity. Culturally, they were living in a world and had come from a place, Egypt, where multiple deities were common and expected. To Acknowledge where they had been and what had been in many ways pushed upon them only makes sense. "I know where you've been there's been other gods in the mix, do not bring them with you." Linguistically, the phrase "before me" might also be translated "beside me", or more significantly "in addition to me". The expression may be a Hebrew idiom that means in its fullness "Recognize that I am the one exclusive God."

To try to play gymnastics with the translation on face value does a discredit to the legitimacy of claiming this is a monotheistic claim. Interpreting deeper in the end helps us understand the command not only for what it says, but why it is stated as it is and reinforces it with hard, real evidence. Don't take the name of the Lord in vain. This is often limited to using God's name in cursing, or swearing falsely by God. This sense deprives us of the depth of meaning in this command.

In fact, if we're honest we've literally made a public institution of breaking this commandment. Jesus Himself warned against taking oaths and vows in God's name. "Let your yes be your yes and your no be your no" is what he advises. Yet what do we see in the courtroom? Swearing by God to tell the truth. When public officials are sworn in, think about just our presidential inaugurations, hand on the Bible swearing by God to fulfill the oath of office. In the buildings where we want the 10 commandments displayed we literally have in place a consistent practice that breaks at least one of them.

If we look at the language and culture, we have a much deeper grasp of what this is getting at. Culturally and historically, the name of God was considered to carry with it great power. Not the fluffy, saccharine power we hear in many modern praise choruses, but true, dangerous power. To swear by God was a weighty thing because it was understood that you now were bound to that oath under penalty of divine retribution for breaking it. God's name wasn't to be trifled with.

The language is much broader as well. The NIV is closer to what it's driving at than the King James. This is about not letting the name of God be on our tongue for frivolous, reckless, careless, or dishonest purposes. It applies to public speaking, and even to the most common conversation. If we speak God's name it should be with a reverent, measured consideration.

In some pockets of Christianity, this has been flipped upside down. Those who constantly use the Lord's name; "The Lord told me this", "The Lord spoke to me", "The Lord gave me this message for you", are seen as hyperspiritual and given elevated regard. Yet often what I personally hear on the end of the "The Lord said to me" falls into the category of unbiblical, self-serving, or simply wrong. This isn't to say that God doesn't speak to us through others, God does. The issue becomes when we encourage and embolden speaking that 1) peppers God's name through everything and 2) is never checked for the authenticity and scriptural integrity of the message.

This has played out in damaging ways when preachers invoke God's name recklessly or in manipulation. Sadly there is no shortage of people willing to believe something if the message is delivered with enough passion, charisma, and attaching God's name to it.

This command is so much more than about cursing. It is about a depth of reverence and appreciation for God. It is about humbly recognizing our own limitations, and so being cautious to speak on behalf of God. It is about a condition of the heart that seeks to honor God, knowing that it is out of the heart that our words flow.

One final commandment and then we'll finish in the New Testament.

The command to honor the Sabbath has become very "face value", meaning superficial. For many of the same reasons we've seen interpretive fault with the other two. In many ways it has become "go to church on Sunday." Once again, to fall into this understanding misses the fullness behind the words on the page.

The tradition of the Sabbath is deep and rich in meaning and practice. I would actually argue that this sense of equating it to going to church is why we have so many unhealthy practices, attitudes, and even bodies in our country. Let's not even dive deeper, but simply read on to the explanation given for the commandment.

Essentially God says "hey guys, I'm God, and even I needed a rest after six days of work. Here's a gift, take it, take it seriously, and know it's my way of keeping you close and well."

Sabbath in the observant Jewish sense is taken incredibly seriously. There is ritual to begin and end the Sabbath formally. There is preparation to ensure that nothing construed as "work" will need to be done on it. There is intentional communing with God, going to synagogue, and intentional communing with family. The day is to be truly set apart from all the busyness of the world so one can recharge physically, undo any emotional knots that sprung up from the week, and connect with God to stay focused in the coming week on what matters.

This is a cultural sense of what it means to observe the Sabbath, and Christianity in many ways has lost this. The day gets filled up with shopping and sports and games and all other manner of things. We get upset that the world has encroached on our "Sabbath" but participate in all of the things we're complaining about, often to the exclusion of worship and rest.

The result of a face value, superficial understanding of Sabbath can easily result in a face value, superficial relationship with God, with life, and with one another. Sabbath is about a deep and intentional, weekly practice intended to recharge us in every part of our being. Even if Sunday can't be yours, the practice of setting a day apart during the week, is a Godly, Biblical practice far beyond the words on the page.

Sabbath is intended to bring us life. But it only does so if we understand it in its deeper, genuine form. This takes some digging.

Galatians 5: Castrate themselves. Passage is all about circumcision. Not an issue today. Paul's outburst, not a call to castrate people nor to be taken literally. It is about freedom from the Law and an exhibit of Paul's humanity. Sarcasm perhaps. What today are those "rules" we put up for people to enter the faith? Do we take Paul's outburst as an excuse to do likewise, or simply a comfort that like us Paul was all too human. We trust that God works through all of us despite our flaws, even as God calls us to overcome them.

Understanding the intent behind the letter and the culture in which it was written cuts to the deeper meaning of the letter which than then be applied in today's context. It's not memorizing the technique, but understanding the idea.

Titus: Name calling. No, warning to Titus not necessarily intended to be read aloud to the people Paul was warning him about.

2 Kings 18

Galatians 5

1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

4 You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

5 For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

8 That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

9 “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”

10 I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.

11 Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

12 As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

Titus 1

10 For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group.

11 They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

12 One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.”

13 This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith

14 and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth.

So What?

This is the question. Why does this matter? We’ve unpacked multiple scriptures this morning, and I hope doing so is of benefit to all of us. What can’t get lost is why we unpacked them. Don’t confuse the 5 or 6 pieces we looked at for the overall message. The message is that as we consider the most sacred text in our faith, it deserves to be treated with great respect and diligence.

When we do this, there are many gifts and benefits as a result. I’m going to simply note three: witness, depth, and clarity.

The first is one that is a common thread through all of this. When we dispense with the counterfeit and embrace the genuine, we draw nearer to God and in so doing our witness grows in scope and power. Our light shines brighter the more we understand scripture for what it is saying and not what someone else tells me it says or what I want it to say.

Depth. So much of what the Bible is telling us isn’t intended as a suggestion or mere rule to follow. We are offered life changing witness and words. As we’ve seen, if we flesh out the fullness of the message it calls us to relationship and values that are powerfully affected. The regard we hold for God and God’s desire for us becomes a lifestyle, a way of being. This is depth.

Put differently, I think of something I recently heard about the difference between instructing, coaching, and teaching. Instructing is about the “how” something is done. Coaching is about the “what” of what path is most effective in helping me reach a goal. Too much faith falls into one of these categories. And there is shallowness to it.

If I see the Word as instructive in this definition, I’m likely to see it as a book of expectations and rules. How am I supposed to live? According to these rules. We call this legalism. In truth legalism is often the enemy of grace both for ourselves and others.

If I see the Word as a coach, it becomes all about getting from point A to point B. For most Christians this would look like getting from here to heaven. The fallout from this becomes relegating faith to a creed or prayer, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as an attitude of “cheap grace.” It’s all about me getting where I want to be. There is a superficiality to this.

But teaching is different. Teaching is about the “why?” Why does God call me to certain attitudes and actions? Why is this the path to redemption? The “why” informs the how and the what. It gives purpose and meaning to otherwise surface level ideas and practices. The “why” brings depth to our faith. The why is rarely as simple as face value.

Finally, we gain clarity. Clarity of purpose in our own lives. Clarity of understanding. Clarity of how we are to relate to both God and one another so that our witness is compelling. It’s completely fair to recognize that the Bible can be confusing sometimes and even seem unclear. It’s completely fair to recognize that there will be things in scripture that may be a mystery for the entirety of our lives. It’s unfair to simply throw up our hands and settle for where we’re at. We can always go deeper. We can always understand more fully. We can always gain a little more clarity and that clarity is one of the keys to the peace of mind and heart we all look for.

I want to acknowledge that digging deeper can be uncomfortable sometimes. Our long held assumptions may be challenged. We may be forced to recalibrate a long held belief. We also become all the more in action, word, heart, and spirit the people God calls us to be.

I encourage us this morning that not only does this grasp of interpreting scripture yield a deeper, clearer, brighter faith, but it also turns Bible study into a lifelong adventure. I think Rebekah will confirm that sometimes in the office through the week as I prepare for Sundays and Bible studies, I get downright giddy doing the homework. I read things I didn’t know or hadn’t considered before. I get to learn and get to pass that along to you all. It pushes me, stretches me, sometimes provided more questions than answers. Even the things I come across that I don’t see eye to eye with serve to push me deeper into asking the “why” of what I DO believe and the reason something hits me as incorrect.

All through the process, we get a better understanding of God, and of our place and purpose in the world. I know many of you have already taken the plunge into this sense of diligent study so we can rightly manage the Word of truth. Keep it up. Encourage others to do likewise. If our witness to the world is living like Christ, part of our witness to one another is encouragement to engage the practices that will help us live that kind of life.